



Longtime owner  
Anthony Antonelli.





# HIDDEN TREASURES

A holdout in the jewelry business that's still going strong, Wolf E. Myrow's beads and baubles have inspired generations of artists and jewelry designers.

By Paul E. Kandarian | Photographs by Michael Cevoli





**Anthony Antonelli**

doesn't know how much inventory he has. But he knows exactly where all of it is.

Need a little plastic Texas flag? He'll find it. A tiny, pipe-smoking walrus? Not a problem. All manner of beads, baubles, buckles, bows and stones of every conceivable shape, color and size? Give him a minute, he'll put his finger on whatever you need.

Antonelli, his wife, Irene, and their two grown children, Tony and Robin, are the lifeblood of their company, Wolf E. Myrow, which for more than sixty years has been a huge presence in the jewelry-fitting industry, those little doodads that are the embryos of future bracelets, earrings, necklaces, artwork and everything in between. Ask what each does, they'll smile and say, "whatever needs to be done."

Their business, known on the Internet as Closeout Jewelry Findings, is located in ancient buildings that once were Atlantic Mills on Providence's Aleppo Street, a company that processed wool for Union soldier uniforms in the Civil War.

All around are shelves crowded with well-worn boxes; attached to the outside of each is a sample of the contents within. In the massive warehouse just beyond are rooms of tall metal shelves heavy with boxes, manna from heaven for jewelry makers and artists who make their way here from around the world in search of goods and, more often than not, inspiration for what to create from them.

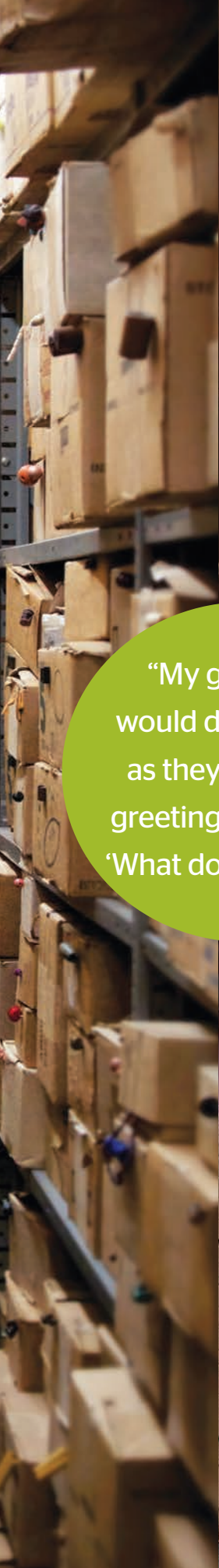
How much stuff?

"Someone once said that if everyone in China walked through here, they could give each of them a present," Anthony Antonelli says. >>



This page: One of Myrow's many hallways of boxed-up treasure. Facing page, top: A phone is surrounded by old photos of Atlantic Mills and Olneyville Square. Facing page, bottom: The exterior of the Providence company.





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## The company

dates back to the 1940s, when Wolf E. Myrow started his jewelry-finding business out of the trunk of his car. “He’d go to different shops, look for excess merchandise, repackage what he bought and find a buyer for it,” says Antonelli, who at seventy-three has gray hair, a small moustache and a gentle face that looks much younger. “He was a go-between. He started in downtown Providence, on Washington Street, then moved here in the early ’70s.

“He was a businessman, a smart business guy,” Antonelli says.

By the mid-1960s, Myrow was busy and needed a partner, finding one in Mike Spagnole, Antonelli’s father-in-law. Together, they ran the company for about twenty years. Myrow died in 1980. Antonelli got involved thirty-three years ago, and later, so did his kids.

“I worked here part time, on vacations through college,” says Tony Antonelli, forty-eight, of his stint at URI getting a teaching degree, which he found no demand for. “My grandfather said: ‘I’ll make you an offer. Come work for the family, you’ll have a job, business is booming, you won’t have to worry about security and I need the help. But you have to commit, not stay two or three years.’ I’ve been here ever since.”

Robin did the same, working through college and never leaving the family business.

“My grandfather would sit in a chair and direct people as they came in,” says Robin, forty-seven. “His greeting was always ‘What do you want?’ And I remember him saying to my father, ‘Stop buying,’ because he thought the inventory was getting too high. But it’s a good thing we did. No one could foresee China.”

“That changed things tremendously,”

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Facing page, top left: Longtime employee Carol helps keep tabs on the merchandise. Lower left: Tony Jr. at work. This page: The warehouse attracts an array of customers.





Anthony Antonelli says of Rhode Island's former status as the jewelry-making capital of the world. "The way we're dealing with imports rather than local manufacturers. There are still some here, with the idea of making things with the 'Made in USA' label, but they're most likely the higher-priced items."

Here at Wolf E. Myrow, people are looking for something different than everyone else has. And they'll find it. The Antonellis buy in bulk, by the box, bag or bin. They'll sort thousands of pounds of stuff into those smaller boxes that line the towering warehouse shelves. Goods start out in bigger boxes, and when sold off are put into smaller ones, some just plain, some reflective of Rhode Island roots; old Blount Seafood boxes serve as geographic evidence.

"We look for deals, not trends," Anthony Antonelli says. "When it's popular stuff, you can't get enough. When it's not, it's like it fell off a cliff."

But no matter, what goes around comes around. Plain chains were huge, went cold, and now for the last few years have gotten hot again. Ditto plastic beads, he says. And they've got it all.

"You can find it all under one roof," says son Tony. "Imported chain or rhinestones, beads, plastics, you name it."

Remember mood rings? Anthony Antonelli shows me a dusty box, pulling one out and rubbing it with a thumb. There's no noticeable change, perhaps age contributing to its loss of mystical, moody powers.

Virtually none of it is valuable, at least individually, though they have a department upstairs where the more expensive stuff is, such as Swarovski crystal. Other than that, you want to make a haul here, you'll need to do it in volume.

**Walking through the darkly lit aisles of** the sprawling Myrow warehouse can be chillingly historic. Here are the occasional boxes marked "West Germany" and stuff from pre-war Japan. Customers are free to walk about and find what they may, bringing along a snack or juice or cup of coffee, provided by the attentive Irene Antonelli, who'll happily make a fresh pot just for you.

Here is a bunch of Egyptian-themed stuff, scarabs and the like, plastic, cheap and plentiful. Over there, a box with a fuzzy ball with plastic eyeballs attached to them. The



pipe-smoking walrus is here, as are tiny old perfume bottles pasted to a wall near well-worn wooden stairs that dip in the middle from more than a century's worth of foot traffic. Some items have prices: old wooden buttons that look like those on my long-deceased grandfather's coat go for fifteen cents. If you need a price on anything, someone will find it — or know it — quickly.

It's not all as willy-nilly as it may appear. Things are located by category, be they beads, finished jewelry, glass stone or random baubles.

Jewelry designers and makers and artists roam the aisles, all looking for just the right thing. They come from all over — Europe, Canada, Japan, America — and locally.

Christine is one, looking very much the bohemian artist, dressed in comfortable, ratty attire. She declined to give her last name for fear of being robbed, though none of what she makes — largely earrings — have high theft value, she says. She lives in western Massachusetts now, but started out in Rhode Island.

"The earrings I make from material here have paid my mortgage," she says. "People put down glass, but this is stuff that will never be made again."

That's a huge part of the Myrow lure: a countless inventory of material, ideas and inspiration, much of it made long ago, never to be made again, that allows designers to create one-of-a-kind, limited lines of goods that greatly boosts their value.

"This place is a gold mine," she says. "It allows you to come in and be creative with what you see. And I never, ever leave empty-handed."

### George Kirk says the Antonelli family

"has saved my ass, oh, I dunno, about 3,000 times in the last thirty years."

Kirk, of the Kirk siblings who own Kirk's Folly in Providence, which according to its website creates "fantasy jewelry," is funny, blunt and upfront. His company sells big on the QVC home-shopping network, he says, adding "when I can't get what I need, in my last-ditch efforts, I see Anthony with my hair on fire. Nine out of ten times, he saves my ass."

He calls the Antonellis "a great family, and they all get along."

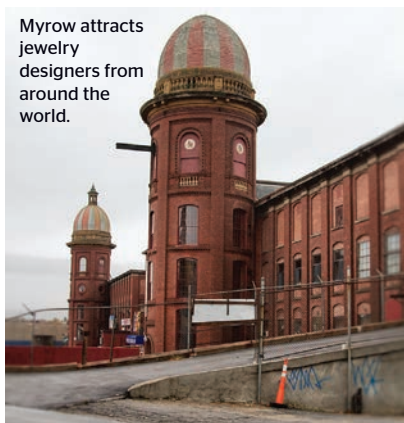
Kirk usually finds what he needs in the towering shelves and "if they don't have it, they'll give me a lead on who does. In this business, that's rare. If someone doesn't have what you need, they won't tell you who does. Anthony does."

Coral Bourgeois is a Pawtucket artist whose creations hang all over the world, and locally in restaurants, hospitals and schools.

"How much do I think of them?" she says. "Well, I just made a piece called 'Ode to Wolf Myrow,' which will be in a one-woman show at Cade Tompkins Projects [in Providence] this spring."

It's not just the beautiful stones, she says, but also unusual findings that inspire her creations "that are taken from parts of history: Persian designs, Italian florals, hand-painted materials. I had lived in New York City and had a jewelry company and would come here to get findings. When my kids were little, I'd give them bags to pick up pieces they'd find on the floor." >>

Myrow attracts jewelry designers from around the world.



The first time Yasmin Kuhn, a jewelry designer in Providence, went there, “I was blown away. It’s like a treasure chest for things you want to make, aisles and aisles of beads and things you need. I run into friends there, the family is terrific, and I love that you never know what you’re going to find.

“The fun part is discovering something new,” she says. “What I find has definitely inspired my work. Sometimes I go for something specific, sometimes not, but as a New England hoarder, if it’s not something I’ll use right away, I will in the future.”

In Myrow’s dark basement hang “miles and miles of chains,” says Kuhn, a RISD film grad. “They should make a horror movie down there.”

Alex and Ani owner and designer Carolyn Rafaelian doesn’t shop Myrow anymore, though she wishes she had time to. She has design teams that do it now, she says, as do jewelry makers from all over the world.

“It’s iconic in the industry,” she says. “They have material there not in catalogues anymore. It’s great in that you walk in and can look, feel and touch it, and then walk out with it.”

Anyone can, it’s open to all. Walk in, browse with a cup of Irene Antonelli’s coffee, and buy. There’s a \$50 minimum, but Anthony Antonelli says, “it’s a liberal minimum. Sometimes they don’t have \$50 worth in the box.”

Goods are weighed on digital scales (gone but not forgotten are the old clunky hand-operated machines that are still there), and out the door people go, as they have for more than sixty years, with their inspirations and creative visions in hand.

“I have to say it’s the most unique place ever,” Kuhn says. “I’ve been to New York, where they have businesses like Myrow, but on a much smaller scale. There is nowhere else on earth that could possibly have a place like this.”