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Objets d'art from hardware

ARCHITECT TURNED JEWELER: Lisa Monahan used to build college campuses. Now her creations can fit in the palm of your hand.

For seven years Monahan served as director of architecture for the Massachusetts State College Building Authority, overseeing design and construction of apartments at the Massachusetts College of Art and of a dining hall and dorms at Bridgewater State College.

Before that, she worked in the private sector on projects such as designing interiors for department store chains.

Two years ago, Monahan stepped off the fast track.

"When you write a couple of eulogies within six months, you sort of take a look at your life and know it doesn't last forever," Monahan said. The eulogies were for her parents.

"My two sons had been going to afterschool since they were 3 months old, and my work projects were getting in the way of the important things at home," she said. A weekend metamorphosis for nearly a decade, Monahan decided to spend her weekdays designing jewelry instead of buildings. The effort paid off: Monahan's work was chosen to launch the Artist of the Month program at The Store @ DeCordova.

Her jewelry series, entitled "Chain, Chain, Chain," is being shown through the end of June at Lincoln museum shop.

The 47-year-old Newton resident creates contemporary jewelry and objets d'art out of chains, spring coils, sheet metal, and materials she finds on the street and in hardware stores.

Her talent for crafting extraordinary items out of ordinary materials can be seen in a keepsake she made for her husband, Andy Levine.

She took an oval piece of sheet metal the length of a key, rolled an impression of her hair into the hot metal, and made a key ring.

"He has a little piece of me that he carries around," Monahan said.

As a thank-you gift for her dentist, Monahan made an impression on metal of toothbrush bristles and dental floss. The result was a pair of earrings. Monahan's studio is on the second floor of her 1871 Federal farmhouse. About the size of a walk-in closet, the studio is filled with memories.

A cup contains large knitting needles that belonged to an aunt who "was like my lady godmother," Monahan said.

She uses them to make "jump rings" or connectors, by wrapping metal wire around the narrow cylinders. Next to the knitting needles is her mother's old cake tester.

"I like having this here and remembering her using it."

When she needs a clamp, Monahan uses the pipe vise that belonged to her grandfather, a master plumber.

"It's sort of nice to have these things around," she said. "Even though [my family] is not with me, I feel them here."

Monahan is reveling in her new career, in which the only boss she listens to is Bruce Springsteen.

"It's like working in a no-calorie candy store."

For more information on Monahan's exhibit "Chain, Chain, Chain" at The Store @ DeCordova, see decordova.org or call 781-259-8662. Have an idea for People? Email Letters@globe.com.



Jewelry by Lisa Monahan, Lisa Monahan Metal Works is available at **The Store @ DeCordova**, DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Lincoln, MA

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One of her earliest works incorporated a hole-filled round metal form that she had found in the dirt near Newton's Crystal Lake.

Enchanted with its shape and texture, she placed it on a necklace. Meeting with a builder seven years later, she discovered what it was.

Puzzled, he asked her what she was doing wearing a plaster button, a tool used to repair walls. After the meeting, she headed to a hardware store and purchased 100 of them.

She gives her works quirky names. “Chain of Fools” incorporate s three chains braided together; “Spring Chain” is made of spring clasps. One jewelry series is called “Fang.”

Monahan has turned preserving memories into a specialty.

“My mother had Alzheimer's disease,” Monahan said.

“Before she died I took her back to Green Harbor Beach, where we used to go together. Though she had no recollection of ever being there, she thought it was beautiful and walked around picking up stones.”

Monahan encased one of the stones in a pin and created a pattern of waves on its silver back.

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