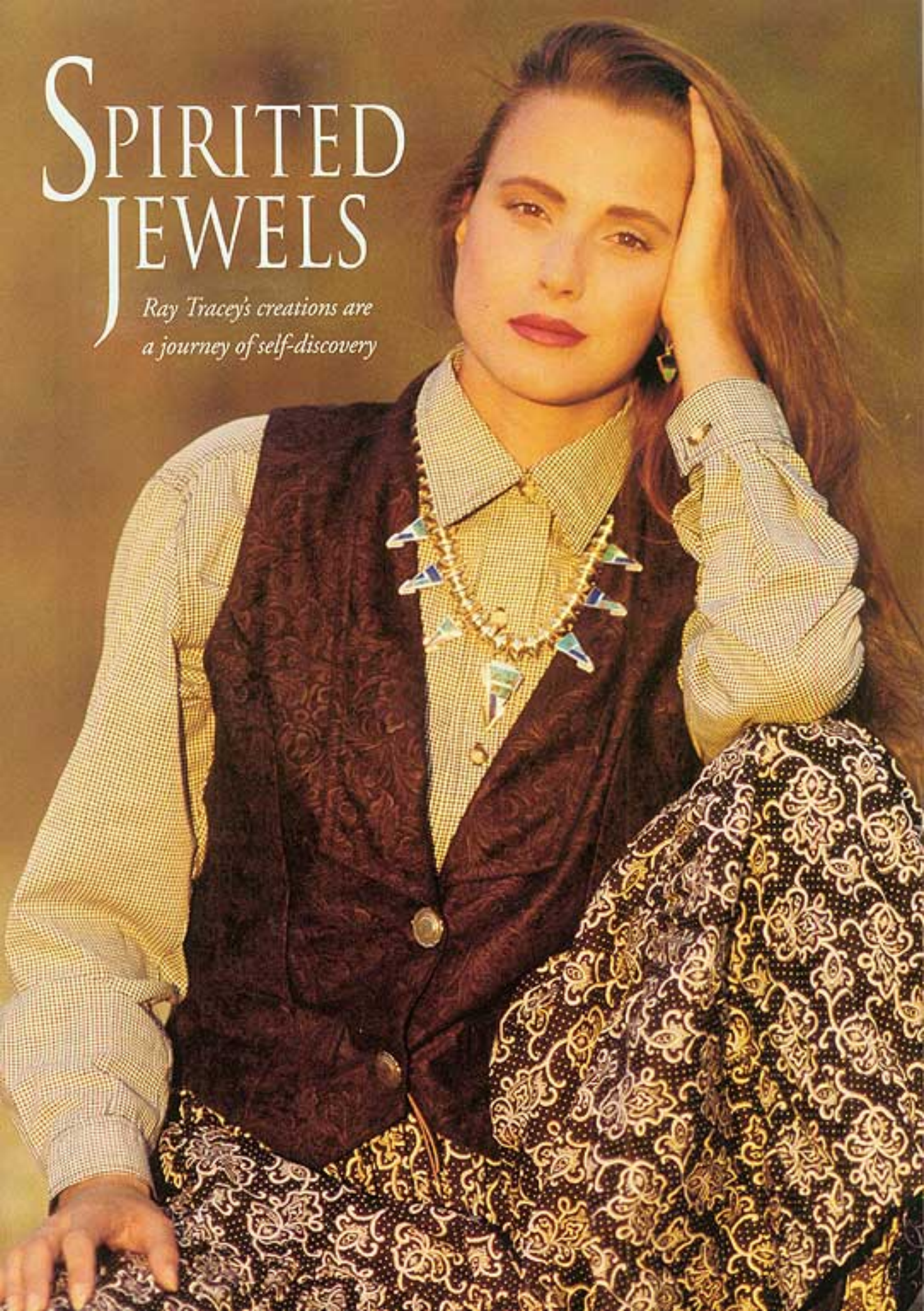
# SPIRITED JEWELS

*Ray Tracey's creations are a journey of self-discovery*



THE HANDS ARE ROUGH, calloused from the practice of his craft. A mane of black hair frames dramatically chiselled features. The blue jeans and denim shirt, a uniform of sorts, admittedly come from a mail-order catalog.

Ray Tracey presents a picture of Western style as authentic as his Navajo heritage. But neither the West nor the Navajo nation has ever before seen jewelry to compare with his creations of the past seven years: streamlined contemporary pieces in silver and gold, inset with complex mosaics of turquoise, malachite, lapis, spiny oyster shell, pink coral, and a world of other semi-precious stones; jewelry equally at home in the chic boutiques of Southhampton, New York, as in The Plaza at Santa Fe.

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TRACEY IS WELL ON THE WAY to establishing a design and sales empire unprecedented in the world of American Indian jewelry. But he'd never admit it. With a casual, soft-spoken voice that echoes the Arizona reservation where he was born 40 years ago, he offers a more self-effacing explanation for his artistic vision and business success: All credit goes to "the Great Spirit."

He makes such statements

with utter sincerity. But it soon becomes evident that Ray Tracey, the savvy businessman, marketer, and promoter hasn't relied solely on otherworldly forces to parlay his passion for making jewelry into Ray Tracey, Ltd., a booming Gallup, New Mexico enterprise that now employs more than 75 craftsmen. No surprise, then, that he also takes inspiration from the Navajo myth of the Monster Slayer, the hero of the tribe who defended the People from its enemies. "We slay monsters every day, especially in the business world," he explains. "We must learn to tame our environment, even if it is in a totally different way from my ancestors."

Combining ancestral Navajo ways with other Southwestern and contemporary influences, Tracey's signature jewelry style reflects a lifetime of experimentation. To quiet nine-year-old Ray's complaints of boredom, his mother signed him up for a summer arts-and-crafts class on the reservation in Ganado, Ari-

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zona. After silversmithing his first ring, which his mother still wears 31 years later, he knew he wanted to pursue a career in jewelry-making. Family pressures and fate, however, first led him down different paths. Following in his father's and grandfather's footsteps, he studied engineering in college–until a filmmaker spotted his exotic good looks and invited him to

Hollywood. But eight years of shirtless roles as TV and movie Indians only served to strengthen his passion for his native craft.

Since he moved home to set up shop, Tracey's style has evolved through several distinct phases. Traditional Navajo turquoise-and-silver bolo ties and belt buckles first occupied his attention. Though not particularly polished or refined, those designs nevertheless attracted the trader at the reservation's Hubbell Trading Post, whose encouragement Tracey credits for launching his career. A rebellious period followed, during which Tracey produced only modern designs without a trace of American Indian influence. His current style blends the two aesthetics into a unique Southwestern style of today, widely acclaimed for its craftsmanship and versatility.

Subtle and superb though his work may be, Tracey never knows where, when, or how inspiration will strike. He always keeps a pen close at hand, and when paper isn't available he'll

scribble ideas onto the palm of his hand. A keen observer of nature, he lets the colors and forms of the Southwestern landscape, plants, and animals gently enter his designs. Totally secure in his talent, he even welcomes–and acts upon–comments offered by customers and collectors he encounters across the nation.

With so many sources, de-

sign ideas often come to him in bits and pieces, upon which he gradually elaborates. He turns over final sketches to his production manager, accompanied by specifications of dimensions, gauges, and the stones to be used. He now reserves for his personal handcrafting the more challenging one-of-a-kind collectors' pieces that command prices of up to $6,000.

Fans of more modest means also can afford to own a Ray Tracey creation, thanks to two lower-priced lines forming the core of his business. The mid-priced Tracey II collection is designed by Tracey but produced by his team of Navajo craftsmen. Tracey Ltd., designed by others but inspired by Tracey's own distinctive style, sells in the $100 to $350 range.

All these lines grab attention with their strikingly modern design. But sprinkled throughout are such traditional motifs as the naja and squash blossoms originally adopted by nineteenth-century Navajos from

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Spanish designs, sleekly reworked in Tracey's own inimitable way. A stylized eagle feather, also the company logo, expresses the Navajo belief in the eagle as the Great Spirit's messenger. And though the traditional combination of silver and turquoise may predominate, Tracey's lively compositions gain tremendous appeal from a variety of stones gathered worldwide. In fact, the only indigenous stone Tracey now uses is black jet from New Mexico's Acoma Pueblo.

Though the world may be both his source of materials and his marketplace, Tracey believes the key to his success lies in knowing his limitations and remaining a thirsty student of people, places, and things. When his fledgling business looked ready to outgrow a one-man operation, he recruited two business partners–a marketer and a stone supplier–so he could concentrate on design and production. He still strives to perfect his skills, even now following a home-study course on stone identification.

And while Ray Tracey increases his own knowledge as a craftsman, the empire that bears his name continues to grow. Two of his own retail galleries in Santa Fe feature his works, along with those of other contemporary American Indian designers, artists, and sculptors. A gallery in Atlanta's Phipps Plaza mall recently joined the chain, adding apparel and gift items to its merchandise mix; touchingly, its decor is patterned after the Hubbell Trading Post that helped give Tracey his start as a jeweler.

Without a doubt, Ray Tracey is both an artistic and commercial success. But real success, the artist believes, lies in fulfilling more personal goals–chief of which is being the best father he can be to his six children, aged four through 16. In that pursuit, Tracey strives to follow his grandfather's sage prescription for a life well-lived: to make a name his family takes pride in wearing.

Ray Tracey is a happy man. He has every reason to be. Not merely having fun, he's having the time of his life. "It's the journey that matters, not the arrival," says the contented craftsman, successful businessman, fulfilled father, and lifelong student. "Every day I'm learning something new. I hope I never arrive."