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## Banker finds therapy in jewelry-making

Submitted By: [Heather Leszczewicz](#) | Staff Writer[Enlarge this Image](#)**LeAnita Ragland-Brooks wears one of her own designs.**[Enlarge this Image](#)**All of Ragland-Brooks' necklaces are made from semi-precious gem stones and sterling silver.**

By day, LeAnita Ragland-Brooks balances billions of dollars with her team of six employees. By night, she's stringing beads on wires with only her thoughts to guide her. The Winnetka resident has two passions that span two worlds: one corporate the other artistic.

She's a vice president at JPMorgan Chase and a jewelry designer, which she said are two distinct careers.

"When I first started, I would introduce myself as a banker who happened to design jewelry," Ragland-Brooks said. "Now I'll introduce myself as a jewelry designer who's also a banker."

Of her two passions, one was a hobby while the other happened on a whim. A Fine Arts major at the University of Maryland, Ragland-Brooks took a detour after graduation that led her to banking.

"I actually was going to pursue my masters in Fine Arts," she said. "I was on my path. It was odd, the day I was supposed to start class I just decided I didn't want to pursue that route at that time."

Ragland-Brooks took a chance and sent her resume to the chairman at IBM, launching a corporate career that included positions with Xerox, Citibank and American Express and now at JPMorgan Chase.

Jewelry-making became a form of therapy for her high-powered life in the financial world where it was once solely a hobby during the summers while she was in school.

"I started designing again for myself. This was very therapeutic," she said. "People would compliment me on my pieces."

Questions about her pieces and where to buy them were constant and made Ragland-Brooks start thinking. The therapy turned to what she describes as a second career, one that she's very passionate about.

"I know jewelry for some may seem very circus and ornamental, an accessory, but for me it's more than that," she said. "I'm helping to bring a piece of joy into someone's life."

Her jewelry design is focused on necklaces, which she said are the most important pieces of jewelry a woman can own.

From turquoise to topaz and onyx to amber, all of her pieces, are made of semi-precious gem stones and sterling silver. Her necklaces range in price from \$125 for smaller pieces to \$275 to \$350 for larger designs. At the prompting of her sister, she's also started designing a line of Judaic jewelry.

Rikki Ragland, her sister and director of public relations at Evanston Northwestern Healthcare, calls herself a "walking mannequin" for her sister's work. Ragland said she thinks it's amazing how people are responding to her sister's jewelry designs, with many locals offering to host jewelry shows in their

homes.

"The last show I went to was supposed to start at 11:30 and there were women knocking on the door before 11 o'clock to get first dibs," Ragland said.

Winnetka's Marla Bagan is proud to own a piece of Ragland-Brooks' jewelry. She owns a few of Ragland-Brooks' pieces and feels that there is a lot of thought going into them.

"I've been to different events where women made their own jewelry and her things are much better than I've seen, more interesting," Bagan said.

Bagan said that Ragland-Brooks knows what her customers want. She especially appreciates a piece that she purchased that has an easy to use clasp. She also appreciates the fact that she can wear the jewelry with a multitude of outfits.

Hearing "I love your stuff," is what Ragland-Brooks said makes jewelry making most rewarding. She hopes that people get the same amount of joy from her jewelry as she has in making it.

"My neighbors have known me as a banker or a Greeley mom or through my organizations, this is so personal, such an extension of me," she said.

For Ragland-Brooks, the biggest challenge is balancing work and the other parts of her life.

"Typically in the banker role, it's not a nine to five. There's no clear distinction that says 'Now you can stop,'" she said. "It's trying to weave those other pieces that are important to me with jewelry design and then balance family needs at the same time without feeling overly taxed."

She knows that she's in for the long haul and she keeps her mantra in mind: "It's a marathon, not a sprint."

Approximately 50 pieces of Ragland-Brooks' jewelry line will be on display in the February exhibit at [Gallery 659](#), 659 Vernon Ave. in Glencoe. Anyone interested in commissioning a piece of jewelry or asking questions can contact Ragland-Brooks at through e-mail at [leanita02@yahoo.com](mailto:leanita02@yahoo.com).