

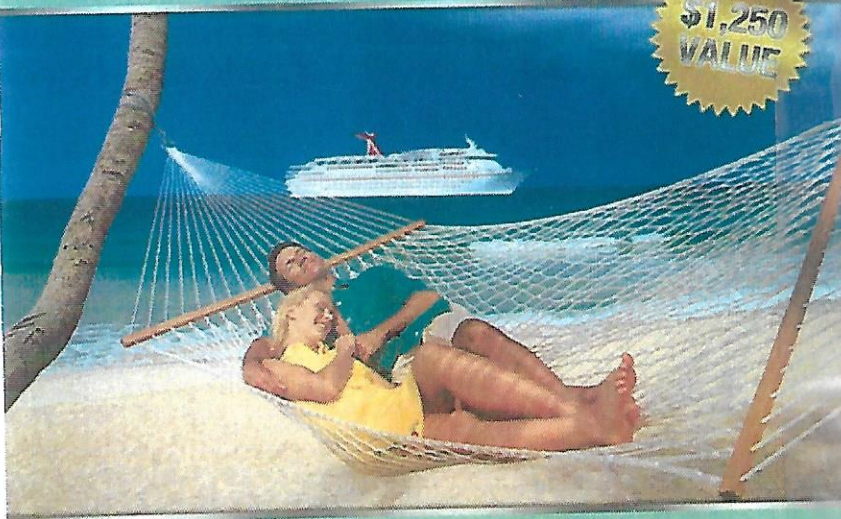


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PHOTO BY JOEL CAIRO

Sally Barish, left, tries on a necklace with help from Marie Richards Jewelers owners Maria and Richard Reitano at their new Walt Whitman Mall store.

Jewelers take personal touch to mall

BY KEIKO MORRIS
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The economic downturn has dealt several blows to the jewelry industry's national players, but today's financial climate has offered Maria and Richard Reitano a chance to expand.

The owners of Marie Richards Jewelers are opening a second location in the Walt Whitman Mall in Huntington Station. Traditionally the territory of the large national or regional jewelry chains, malls rarely considered leasing space to small independent jewelers, Maria Reitano noted. But the recession has changed that.

"We're taking advantage of these times, because you can sign leases pretty cheap," said Richard Reitano.

For years Marie Richards Jewelers has run a single store, first in Port Jefferson and more recently in Stony Brook. The business has seen sales growth year after year, Richard Reitano said, and it continues hiring.

The couple said their recipe for growth has been a combination of personal service, custom jewelry and fair pricing. "We are very particular with our staff," Richard Reitano said. "They have to be very personal. If they have a corporate mind-set, it won't work."

Advertising is also crucial in this economy, the couple said. One campaign they launched this month is an offer of a free five-day trip — two nights on a cruise ship and two nights in a hotel — with any purchase of \$1,999 or more.

The business evolved out of a hobby that started 13 years ago when Richard Reitano's daughter suggested they sell jewelry at craft shows. Richard Reitano, a contractor at the time, also was a shop teacher and had taught jewelry-making classes. They bought a camper and a truck and began making their own jewelry. That hobby evolved as they attended high-end craft shows and incorporated precious stones into their designs.

The Reitanos opened a store in Port Jefferson, expanded their inventory to include bridal jewelry, outgrew that space in six years and relocated to Stony Brook.

They said they will have to familiarize their new customers with their custom jewelry services, some-