



senior

# STYLE

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Young and active  
after 50

Judith  
Greathouse's  
jewelry makes  
accessorizing  
easier./G8

# Judith's jewelry



DAVE SIGLER/Chronicle

Judith Greathouse makes the Stretchies in her home studio. She has devised her own set of tools to be able to stretch the wire and create the jewelry.

*Functional, yet beautiful accessories are a big hit with seniors*

## NANCY KENNEDY

*Chronicle*

When Judith Greathouse set out to make her signature “Stretchies By Judith” rings, she didn’t know she was about to become a sought-after market segment.

She hadn’t known about functional jewelry. All she wanted was to make a ring that would fit on her swollen fingers.

Demonstrating her stretchy ring on her finger, Greathouse, 67, said when she first moved to Florida in 2004, she had taken a

bunch of rings to be resized and discovered it would cost \$600 — and that was only half her collection.

After seeing a brochure for stretchy rings, she ordered one, but it was “abominable” and “cheapy-cheapy,” she said.

“I had friends who were making jewelry and Swarovski was in then, so I started going to different jewelry Web sites and designed a ring I liked,” she said.

The ring rolls onto the finger and over the knuckle — and stays in place.

Stretchies By Judith was launched Jan. 1, 2006, an entire line of functional jewelry, all made without toggle or lobster claw clasp closures that arthritic fingers find too painful to manipulate.

Rings stretch, bracelets made with memory wire coil around the wrist, chokers stay in place by magnetic clasps and earrings stay on without posts or clasps.

After she made hundreds of rings (to date, Greathouse has sold more than 2,000), the bracelets came about by accident.

"I saw a really interesting one on eBay and ordered it," she said, "and when I got it, it was atrocious... so, I took it apart and said, 'Aha! I know how to do this.'"

She had some beads that weren't right for rings, but they were for a bracelet.

Next came earrings, because women like matching their jewelry, which led to choker necklaces, which led to eyeglass leashes and break-away ID badge holders.

Although she doesn't remember her first sale, she remembers her first show at Citrus Hills Golf and Country Club, an "instant success."

A neighbor took a bunch of her jewelry to Bits 'n Pieces in Ocala, which prompted a steady stream of orders for the boutique, including a request for a line of Gator jewelry.

Greathouse uses natural gemstones, Swarovski crystal and one-of-a-kind dichroic glass beads.

"I had the only single working mother in the neighborhood," Greathouse said of her upbringing in Boise, Idaho. "She was raised on a farm in Missouri and as a girl helped out as much as the boys did. My mother was such a perfectionist — she gave me some material, an uneven plaid, and told me to make a jumper and she didn't want to find a seam."

Greathouse said watching her mother inspired her own perfectionism, including making the jumper with no visible seams.

"I was the only one in my family who wanted to go east," she said, and left Boise for Syracuse, N.Y., first to attend Syracuse University where she majored in business education, and then to begin her career with IBM — actually nine careers with IBM: marketing secretary, administrative assistant, marketing representative selling mainframe computers, administrative manager, then a headquarters assignment, then teaching

commercials for the Computer Store and volunteered 40-60 hours a week with the VFW's Voice of Democracy and Patriot's Pen and Palmetto Girls State, an organization that helps high school junior girls experience politics.

"When we moved to Florida, I promised Robert I wouldn't volunteer to that extent," she said. "But I was bored. That's when the ring thing hit me and I had an "Aha!" moment (for the business) and it kept going."

### Discovering her 'function'

"When I started my Web site ([www.stretchiesbyjudith.com](http://www.stretchiesbyjudith.com)) in 2008, I started out with about 300 hits a month and now I'm in excess of 900 hits, which is huge for me," she said.

If you type "functional jewelry" into a search engine like Yahoo or Google, her site is at the top.

"I had rotator cuff repair and arthritic thumb surgery in February and went for some occupational therapy at TLC (Rehab) in May," Greathouse said. "The therapist saw my ring and asked about it. I took it off and a lady at the end of the table had her hand in a brace like mine and tried my ring on and said, 'I want it!'"

"That happens to me frequently — people buy them off my hands," she said.

Then the therapist asked to see her bracelet, which she demonstrated how it wraps easily around the wrist, even using one hand, and springs into shape.

"The therapist said, 'You're making functional jewelry.' Then she said I needed to go to the (next) Florida Hand Society (annual) meeting," Greathouse said.

She attended the meeting and set up two tables of her jewelry, the only jeweler there.

"As soon as the hand surgeons and therapists realized what I make, they mobbed my table," she said.

Later, someone asked her how her sales went. Normally, if they go well Greathouse says she "hit a homerun."

She didn't hit a homerun that day, she said.

She won the World Series.

"Some of the ladies who bought jewelry said, 'You need to be in the international show — hand surgeons and therapists — in Orlando next year.' That's 5,000 of them all in one place," she said.

Through connections she's made, she got an invitation to the trade show for June 2010.

"It's costing me \$1,800 for three days, but it's worth it," she said.

Lisa Reed, an occupational therapist at TLC, said the first time she saw Greathouse's jewelry she thought it was



**Stretchies are made in wide selections of styles and colors. Greathouse has created a line of matching necklaces, along with the bracelets and rings.**

In an avalanche effect, other stores began carrying her jewelry (locally at Ritzy Rags in Inverness and Becoming You in Hernando), as well as boutiques and galleries in The Villages, Micanopy, The Harn Museum of Art Store in Gainesville and a store in Texas and one in Denver, Colo.

### Boise beginnings

Greathouse is a fireball of energy. Focused, precise, a perfectionist and driven to succeed — all traits she inherited from her mother.

corporate new managers, designing training for the corporate management school and finally as educational director.

While at IBM, Greathouse earned an MBA, an MS in instructional design and a Ph.D., in education administration.

She and her former husband, also with IBM, lived all over the eastern United States.

"The marriage didn't work out, but the career was wonderful," she said.

She retired to Charleston, S.C., in 1991 where she met and married her husband, Robert Greathouse, consulted for IBM, ran her own computer training business, did

beautiful.

“When she showed me the functionality of it, I told her, ‘That’s perfect for so many women.’ A lot of women come in who have arthritis or weak and painful hands,” Reed said. “Their hands and fingers are so swollen and they can’t wear their rings; they can’t get them on — or off. For some, (their jewelry) is important; it’s their identity and it’s meaningful to them.”



“As soon as the hand surgeons and therapists realized what I make, they mobbed my table.”

**Judith Greathouse**

about when she took her jewelry line to the Florida Hand Society annual meeting.

Reed said she also attended the Florida Hand meeting and saw people swarm around Greathouse’s table.

“She hit it right on the head,” she said.

### **Dreaming big**

At her same age and stage in life, many people would be content to sell to friends and maybe at a few local shows and events, but Greathouse said from the very beginning she’s had a business plan to go big.

“It’s not being a jeweler in Citrus Hills making things for 10 or 12 people, but it’s getting investors offshore pushing the functional jewelry to the Arthritis Foundation and the hand therapists worldwide. Of course, I need money for that, to go national and global and have other

people do it, and then I can design beautiful unfunctional jewelry,” she said.

Greathouse said with what she does now, she sees herself more as a production designer rather than an artistic designer.

“Although I still think my stuff is beautiful and I love to sell it and I love the compliments people give me, it gets tiresome,” she said. “I’d like to see if I can be a ‘real’ designer.”

For now, she’s focusing on the functionality of her pieces and branding herself in this niche market.

That said, her customer base is not the stereotypical arthritic elderly, but active women in their 50s and 60s.

“They like my designs,” she said. “My stretch rings and coil bracelets are unique.”

She’s tapping into women’s needs to feel beautiful at any stage in life.

“My whole focus is to help women get dressed by themselves, because sometimes you’re alone when you get dressed,” she said. “I’ve always thought that if you can’t adorn yourself, then your personality gets lost.”

For more information, e-mail Judith Greathouse at [stretchiesbyj@aol.com](mailto:stretchiesbyj@aol.com) or visit her Website at [www.stretchiesbyjudith.com](http://www.stretchiesbyjudith.com). Call her at 341-1464.

Contact Chronicle reporter Nancy Kennedy at 564-2927 or [nkennedy@chronicleonline.com](mailto:nkennedy@chronicleonline.com).