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## Let it bead: Natick Mall kiosk provides creative outlet for jewelry design

By **Bob Tremblay**/ Daily News Staff  
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**N**ATICK -- Here's a business that strings you along and it's a good thing.

Built by Beads, which debuted in the Natick Mall last weekend, gives customers the opportunity to display their creative side by picking out beads in its kiosk's display cases and using them to make beaded products in the privacy of their own homes. The custom-designed kiosk also sells the strings, clasps, tools and other materials incorporated in the creative process.

The beads can be used to make all kinds of jewelry, including necklaces, bracelets and anklets, as well as to accessorize handbags and clothing.

In addition to providing the materials, Built by Beads offers guidance on how to design and create jewelry with beads and beginning next month will offer classes and bead kits.

The kiosk also features a design book containing more than a dozen different jewelry designs. Each of these designs has a separate recipe card with instructions that customers can take home and use as a guide as they create their beaded product. Along with instructions, the card indicates whether the design is at a beginner, intermediate or advanced level. It also estimates how long the design will take to finish.

Built by Beads owes its creation to the Buchman family, who arrived in the United States from South Africa in 1989.

"My vision was to bring something very unique and different to America," says Michelle Buchman, one of Built by Beads' managers. At first, the Marlborough resident started her own jewelry company, MiShells, selling jewelry made primarily out of sterling silver and shells. Its Web site is [www.mishells.com](http://www.mishells.com).

Then, in 1999, Buchman began working in a variety of stores in the Natick Mall. "While working in a clothing store, I saw a great need for accessorizing clothing -- putting beads on clothing, handbags and belts. I thought this would be a neat thing to do," she says.

It's also unique, according to Buchman. "This is the only kiosk in a mall selling beads in the Boston area," she says.

Other Buchman family members involved in the business include Buchman's son Justin, a 2001 graduate of Babson College in Wellesley. Now the company's president, he lined up the company's five investors. These include Buchman's husband, Selwyn.

Justin's brother Stefan and sister-in-law Martine are involved as well. Stefan set up the company's inventory system and Martine is an avid beader.

Outside the family circle but still important cogs in the Built by Beads operation are manager Sharon Paulo and sales associate and buyer Jennifer Blasko, according to Michelle Buchman.

Blasko, who also runs her own jewelry design business, JLynn Designs in Hopkinton, selected all of the 800-plus beads in the company's kiosk.

"The theory is to get people to come in and tap into their creative side, and they can do this by customizing their own jewelry," says Blasko, who also provides instructional support. "It's an interesting concept as a business. I'm a teacher by training and this is another form of education.

"It's making people aware of all the different kinds of materials out there you can be creative with. For example, what does a really good pearl look like? It's educating them more on what they're purchasing. Ultimately, they're making a nice quality product for themselves or others because they're using quality materials."

Built by Beads' mall location provides an advantage, according to Buchman. "You're going to get customers who wouldn't necessarily go into a bead store," she says.

Adds Blasko, "Here's an immediate way of taking whatever they've purchased at other stores in the mall and accessorizing based on the clothing they have. People ask me at my design business about their wardrobe. Here, they have their wardrobe and can match it instantaneously."

The home setting for the creative process also adds a comfort factor, according to Justin Buchman, while the selection process has ease of use in its favor. "It's beads on the go," he says.

"People who have never done this before will go through the process...and walk away with a

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genuine product they'd normally buy in a jewelry store. But it's theirs. They customized it. They designed it. They built it."

Customers can save around 50 percent -- "sometimes more, sometimes less" -- by creating a piece of jewelry rather than buying it, says Buchman. "You save money, but that's not the thrust. This is something they created. It's more special and more unique. No two are the same."

Adds Paulo, "Handmade gifts are always more special. A lot of care goes into them."

Buchman notes that once customers learn one technique they can return to Built by Beads and learn others.

The kiosk provides a five-step how-to process regarding bead selection, and the choices run the gamut from glass to gold. It offers 100 different types of Swarovski crystals alone. Gemstones, semiprecious stones, they're all here in a variety of shapes, sizes and colors. You just won't find any plastic.

The cost depends on the beads chosen with three-quarters of the beads ranging in price from 10 cents to \$1 a bead. Beads can be found as low as 6 cents a bead and as high as \$7.

"This is more higher end than a craft store," says Justin Buchman. "We have a lot of materials you'd never find there. They also lack the range of styles we have."

The store sells specialty strands, too, ranging in price from \$5 to \$70. One of the more unusual strands features meteorite chips. "It's out of this world," quips Buchman.

The stock at Built by Beads changes frequently also.

About 40 customers made purchases during the company's opening weekend. They included a senior citizen who picked out five packets of beads as a gift for his granddaughter, a man who was looking for a 10th anniversary gift for his wife and found one -- a beaded bracelet showcasing the number 10 -- and a mall store which ordered matching earrings for 12 employees to promote employee spirit.

Two brides will also be returning to create beaded products for their wedding parties. A staff member will help them put the package together, according to Buchman. In addition to weddings, the company can services parties, proms and bar mitzvahs.

She points out that all the kiosk's employees have experience in jewelry design.

About 12 people have signed up for the classes so far.

For the future, Built by Beads plans to open kiosks in other malls, according to Justin Buchman. "We just haven't decided on locations yet," he says.

The kiosk for Built by Beads is located on the Natick Mall's bottom level between Chico's and Talbots next to Gloria Jean's Coffee.

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#### BUILT BY BEADS

Owners: Buchman family and investors

Employees: Nine

Industry: Jewelry design

Company background: Based in the Natick Mall, Built by Beads sells beads and related items to customers who use the materials to create beaded products at home. The company also offers classes. Its Web address is [www.builtbybeads.com](http://www.builtbybeads.com).

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