

26 STEPS

High temps and lots of humidity engulfed this dog-day-of-summer in 2003. July in Minnesota is known for its oppressive heat and air so saturated with water, it makes it hard to breathe. Today was no different. For me, it was just another Friday at work. A place I called home since 1989, where I was securely tucked away in the beautiful river town of Stillwater.

Established in the late 1800's, Stillwater was a town full of store fronts with ancient architecture and accompanying stories to be told. Since the river was at its backdoor, Lumberjacks and moving timber was the economy of those founding days. Today the St. Croix River, which separates Wisconsin and Minnesota, was teaming with all forms of marine craft enjoying the beauty of the bluffs.

Stillwater had become a tourist destination for people from the Twin Cities and the far reaching surrounding areas. This warm day boasted the celebration of Stillwater's birth with the annual festival called Lumber Jack Days. The town was exceedingly crowded, bursting with an extra 50,000 people who had made their way to the river to participate in the festivities. The pending evening concert by REO Speedwagon brought all Baby Boomers that lived within a two hour drive. The crowds were elbow to elbow and oppressive.

As I watched the hustle and bustle from my second floor vantage point at Diamonds on Main, I wondered, "Why was I at work?" Normally, I loved what I did. But, today the hours were dragging and I wished I could be anywhere else but there. The locals knew, if there was an event happening in Stillwater they wouldn't make an unnecessary pass through town. Traffic was crawling and parking nonexistent. The burgeoning population was the reason why we hadn't seen our loyal customers.

Diamonds on Main was not tourist driven. We had a solid customer base that sought the unique and unusual fine jewelry we carried. JoAnn Grundhauser, proprietor, established her small business in 1985, and it had become a main stay of Stillwater after 17 successful years. I came on board in 1989 first doing work as a goldsmith, adding retail sales to my skill set later on.

Located 26 steps up off of Main Street, our second floor location on the corner of Chestnut and Main, gave us a bird's eye view of town. We could see all the action, but still offer our customers quiet and personal service.

Occupying 600 square feet, Diamonds on Main boasted five jewelry cases that contained what we considered to be the best designed jewelry on the market. Holding treasures that weren't your run-of-the-mall jewelry, there was one case that was my favorite. It was totally dedicated to diamonds and engagement rings. On quiet days, it wasn't unusual to find me staring with delight at the beautiful gems. There is nothing like a diamond cut so well that it inhales light and breaths fire! Diamonds of that caliber can be seen dancing with the light across a dimly lit room.

Stepping behind the counter through swinging café doors was the inner sanctum of Diamonds on Main. All of the behind-the-scenes work happened there. Packed to the gills, this office/workroom measured a whopping 10 feet by 11 feet, and every square inch served a purpose. This small room met the needs of an office, shipping and receiving, a lunchroom and buying room. It contained all the tools necessary for jewelry repair and refurbishing. Crammed to capacity, it served all the requirements of running a fine jewelry store.

Closing in on the last hour of work, we decided to reward ourselves for surviving another day by enjoying a little dessert before dinner. With all of the wonderful food establishments in town, there were many places to find a treat. We chose a yummy piece of carrot cake from Dream Coat Café' and a fresh cup of Joe.

We had just finished licking our lips and washing down the last bite of our delicacy, when we heard the unmistakable muffled noise of the door opening downstairs. It wasn't a buzzer, we just knew the distinct sound. Clump, clump, clump, was the footfall of our next guest as they climbed the 26 steps to Diamonds on Main. Usually, it was about 15 seconds before the door to our unpretentious little store would open and the ding-dong would announce our visitor.

Sure enough, we heard the bell. We hadn't made it out of the backroom to greet our new arrival, because we were still wiping away the telltale signs of carrot cake. While we were checking each other's teeth for the evidence of our indulgence, suddenly peering over the top of the swinging café doors, was a person wearing a rubber mask which sported a spiked, orange-red Mohawk. The next thing we knew....quick as a flash....he joined us in the back room!

Before us stood a man about 5'7", muscular build, wearing blue jeans, black bumper tennis shoes, a cobalt blue zip up hoody, and a rubber Halloween mask. JoAnn and I stood there in utter disbelief and shock. The next words out of his mouth carried me into an out-of-body experience. Morphing, I became an observer of the events that followed. It felt surreal.

"This is a robbery," He snarled. **"Empty the safe and put it all in the bag!"**

JoAnn and I stood there frozen, like deer caught in headlights. What ran through my mind was, "What idiot do I know that would do this and think it was funny?" Having come from a family of pranksters, I reasoned this must be a joke. What ran through JoAnn's mind was, "What's in the safe?"

"I have a gun, now do it!" He barked.

We had been unresponsive to his first command, so aggressively he pushed JoAnn in the direction of the safe. Deliberately, she slowed down the momentum of his shove. Reaching for the door, she slammed it shut and it promptly locked! JoAnn concluded, if he had had a gun he would have come in with it showing. Having made a calculated decision, she decided to push the door shut.

Our noncompliance was unexpected and threw our robber into Plan B.

"Get down on the ground!" he angrily commanded. Moving toward JoAnn with threatening violence he pushed her to the floor. Losing her balance, she fell backwards into a table that was floating in the middle of the room. The force broke the table leg, collapsing it underneath her. Then, just like dominos falling, the table toppled into my goldsmith bench, tipping it over into the wall.

Thinking JoAnn was acquiescent, he turned his eyes on me. Placing both hands firmly on my shoulders, his downward thrust made my old damaged knees give way in compliance. Unwillingly I crumpled before I knew what was happening.

Not feeling the least bit submissive, JoAnn saw her opportunity. She was up in a flash, out the swinging doors into the retail area, headed full bore toward the exit. Her goal: Get help!

"If he does have a gun, I might see Jesus today!" she thought as she ran from the scene of the crime. Out the door she flew down the 26 steps, barely touching them as she descended. She hit the landing on street level and blasted out the door screaming for help!

Having been left alone with our assailant, events unfolded at a rapid speed. Determined to redeem this robbery that had run-a-muck, the rubber faced monster left me and turned his thoughts to the diamond case out front.

With him preoccupied, I stood up possessing enough where-withal to hit the silent alarm. Wanting to make certain the security company knew I had serious intent, I struck the button multiple times. Like a service bell on a counter, I pounded out my S.O.S.

At that moment, I heard the unmistakable sound of glass breaking. I looked over the café' doors to see this reprobate, ne'er-do-well struggling at the diamond case. He was after my diamonds! Who did he think he was? Having shattered the glass doors, he was trying to maneuver the diamond tray through the remaining shards of glass hanging in the broken door frames. The debris was impeding the possession of his loot!

I felt anger surge within me, like a torch being ignited. I thought, who did this creature think he was that he felt he could come into our business and steal our livelihood? I burned, and my hot indignation exploded. "I'm pushing you out the window, you sucker!" was my next thought.

A huge bank of windows filled our space with sunshine, and I knew a fall from our second story perch to the sidewalk below would take care of my immediate problem. So...I charged him! Like a bull in a china shop that has seen red, I attacked. This time, however, I was the one doing the shoving. Hitting him square on with both arms extended, I pushed with all my might. The crook fell backwards into the window. But, before I could blink, he was upright and on the move.

Hopping the space between the wall and jewelry case he got caught up in the cord to our diamond grading box. Not missing a step, he pulled the box from the counter while desperately attempting to free himself. He bolted through the door to make his escape, next taking flight down the 26 steps to what he thought was freedom. Little did he know...?

"Help! Help!" JoAnn hollered into the crowd on Main Street.

A woman standing amidst the masses commanded her husband, "Go help her!"

In all, five brave men came to JoAnn's aid to whom she excitedly exclaimed, "I'm being robbed!"

"When?" they asked in unison.

"**NOW!**" she screamed.

For this would-be thief things weren't going as planned. In fact, the unseen force of Murphy's Law took this situation from bad to worse. Having made his way to the bottom of the steps, he had not anticipated that the door on Main Street opened out to the street. JoAnn and her valiant team were ready for him. Holding the door shut, they bounced with every forceful thrust of his attempt to escape, imprisoning him in his own worst nightmare.

Seeing it was hopeless, he pulled open an adjoining door on the landing that led to a retail gift shop. Heading to the rear of the store he raced to make his getaway out their backdoor.

"He's going out the back!" hollered JoAnn who saw the intended escape route. And, true to form, her men in shining armor responded by circling back around the building to give chase.

By the time the robber made his way out the exit he had removed his mask and cobalt blue jacket. He had hoped to be lost in the throng of revelers. Our band of five rounded the corner of the brick and mortar building, and a pursuit gave way down Water Street. Weaving in and out of the masses, the thief raced full speed in the direction of a chained off parking lot adapted for other uses during the celebration.

The huge crowds for Lumber Jack Days necessitated extra police presence and added peace-keeping forces recruited from the St. Cloud State College football team. An alert went out, "Robbery in progress at Diamonds on Main!" A very astute security guard, saw the stampede heading straight toward him and recognized they were coming from the general direction of Diamonds on Main. He assumed there was a good chance the man in the lead was somehow connected to the heist. His action plan to subdue the suspect was simple. As our unmasked marauder vaulted over the chain barrier, our guardian sprung the trap! Hoisting the chain he caught his foot, and the resulting momentum threw him face first into the ground. The next step in his plan? Fall on top of him, and hold him until the police get there! Simple.

"I can't breathe!" the robber gasped.

"That's all right. We'll just wait until the police arrive." replied our moonlighting defender; who, as fate would have it, played tackle on the football team.

Meanwhile, back at the store...

Concerned that the delinquent might come back to exact his revenge for my noncompliance, I locked the door to the store. Pacing the floor, I shook like a leaf. JoAnn was downstairs in the retail store nervously running her fingers through her hair, and wondering what kind of financial cost this event would bring.

Fearing that evidence might be disturbed, the police didn't allow JoAnn back upstairs. She called, and as I spoke with her on the phone I hovered over the smashed case that had held all the diamonds that danced with the light. It was impossible. Every piece of broken glass looked like a diamond. I was confident they were all gone. Having been told not to touch anything, digging through the shattered remains was not an option. Through swelling tears, I told JoAnn the diamonds were gone. He had taken the tray and gotten....away.... with....

"Oh....wait...Is that...no...is that the .75 carat diamond?" I hesitantly stammered in disbelief.

Breathe....Inhale....

"Is...that the...1.04 carat diamond?" I said speaking my thoughts out loud to JoAnn.

Exhale...Keep breathing...Inhale."Yes....yes," I thought, my mind racing!

"There's the .65 carat!" I exclaimed to JoAnn.

On and on I went, testifying until all nine diamonds from the tray were accounted for! Amidst the broken and splintered glass I saw every one. Naming them one by one like they were our ransomed children, I told JoAnn in disbelief, they were all there! Praise God! We had been spared that tremendous loss.

The impact of my furious rampage against the thug had caused all the gems to pop out of the tray and land back in the case. Unbeknownst to him, he left the store carrying an empty diamond tray as his plunder! It was found at the bottom of the 26 steps.

Following the dreamlike event of that afternoon, the Stillwater police arrived upstairs to do what I would call the debriefing. The chief asked me to think back over the last couple of weeks; did I remember anyone who resembled our antagonist?

I thought for a moment and then rattled off this information, "Yes. I waited on this guy last week who was about the same size...blondish colored hair...a tattoo on his forearm. He was shopping for an engagement ring. His name is Bill and he's from Somerset."

"How do you know all that?" the chief said with surprise.

"That's what I do." I said. "It's my job to bond with my customers and gather information. He was extremely nervous and I was trying to help him relax with the idea of getting engaged."

Sure enough, our criminal turned out to be William Ziemer of Somerset, WI! I failed to comprehend that my engagement ring shopper had been casing the joint. As I continued to give the chief information about our harrowing experience, I admitted to trying to push him through the window.

In disbelief he asked, "You tried to push him through the window?"

"Yes!" I said. "He made me mad!"

Smiling, the chief said, "If you tell anyone what I'm about to say, I will deny it." Chuckling, he added, "Good for you!"

JoAnn and I both thought that no would ever try to rob us in this second floor location. Our perch over Main Street, we thought, was safe and secure. After all, it was 26 steps up and 26 steps down. There was no other

way in or out. To us, that setup didn't seem like a good blueprint for a robbery. How naïve we were. The chief's assessment? Securely tucked away in privacy is the precise reason we were vulnerable.

On that hot July day at Diamonds on Main, the doors of the jewelry case weren't the only thing shattered. Our sense of security was devastated, as well. We no longer believed we were untouchable. Forever spoiled was our confidence that there was safety in those 26 steps. The big bad world had gotten up close and personal that day. No longer was our idyllic second floor location with the bird's eye view, seen in the same way. It had been tainted with the brute reality of life.