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## REMEMBERING STEVEN KRETCHMER (1953-2006)

I'm not a fan of superlatives—the *most* this, the *best* that, the *greatest* whatever. For me, reporting like that seems too exaggerated. That being said, however, Steven Kretchmer was one of the most committed contemporary fine jewelry designers in America, one of the best metallurgists of our time, and one of the greatest modern-day innovators in our industry. His untimely death at the age of 52 from a July 8 motorcycle accident leaves a void in our industry.

It also leaves me sadder than I can say. I met Steve 14 years ago, on the day he was voted New Designer of the Year at the Jewelers of America show. I walked up to his booth to congratulate him. Steve had no idea what I was talking about. He didn't even know he was in a contest, let alone the winner. It was his first time exhibiting at a fine jewelry show, and he was just happy to be there. It seems the organizers of the competition had told me (one of the judges) before they told him. I also met his lovely wife, Alma, and their daughter, Claudia—both so obviously proud of Steve and genuinely excited over the news. Claudia kept saying, "You won, you won!" And Steve, looking a bit like a deer in headlights, kept saying, "Won what?" I then interviewed him and,

subsequently, wrote what turned out to be the first article ever written about Steve Kretchmer, jewelry designer.

This past June, at the Couture show in Las Vegas, when he introduced me to an up-and-coming young jewelry designer, he said, as he often did: "I'd like you to meet the editor who wrote the first story about me." He then proceeded to tell her every (admittedly, not exciting to anyone else) detail of our initial encounter. That was vintage Steve. If he liked you, he let you know it, and he let others know it, too. Conversely, if he didn't like you—or, if he was displeased with something you (and sometimes, I) wrote—he let you know that, too. He used to remind me that, as press, I had a big responsibility to "get things right" (his words, not mine). I assured him that I took my responsibility as the Fourth Estate quite seriously. Still, Steve set himself up as my Fifth Estate. He was a watchdog for all things designer in our industry.

Because Steve wanted to make sure I "got things right," he became my #1 go-to guy for jewelry technique and alloy information. It made sense, since Steve's knowledge of jewelry making, and especially metallurgy, was huge. He didn't get anything out of being a go-to guy—it's not like I would quote him or gave him free publicity because of it. He just got satisfaction out of knowing an editor was reporting the facts correctly. Steve was committed not only to his own design innovation but to the integrity of the industry. One time, I inadvertently featured a picture of a ring that was a direct knockoff of an award-winning piece by designer Bill Richey. Bill never called me about it—Steve did. "You should know better," he told me. And he was right, I should have. He kept me on my toes.

I admired Steve so much that, when I was discussing him and his work, I often found myself referring to him as "a genius." Now, truth be told, I didn't want to use the word "genius" because it seemed, well, too much like a superlative. But it was the word I usually found spilling out of my mouth anyway. Steve invented so many things: a patented tension setting; a general purpose platinum alloy, Plat/S+; 18k blue gold; a purple gold; a magnetic platinum alloy, Polarium.

Had he lived, we may have seen yet another groundbreaker: a new 18k rose gold alloy. A month before his tragic accident, he and I were discussing a substance he had developed that "would make regular pink gold even better." He called it "flamingo pink." Why would the Kretchmer flamingo pink be better than regular 18k pink gold, I asked him. Steve said that regular 18k pink gold tends to fracture when working with it at a jeweler's bench. He said: "I'm trying to see if it's worth patenting and protecting, so I gave some of my flamingo pink to Michael Bondanza and Alex Sepkus to test it with some of their designs. Then they'll help me determine if it's as good as I think." Steve gave everything that he invented his whole enthusiastic self. But if people he respected told him something just wasn't as great as he thought, he'd move on to the next thing.

Part of the beauty of Steve was that you never knew what that next thing might be. He was, after all, a visionary, a risk-taker, and an artist. Much as he enjoyed being all of the above, it didn't necessarily make life easy for him. Several weeks before his death, we had one of our occasional two-hour phone conversations about the current state of the designer jewelry industry. The day after that particular conversation, he wrote me a one-last-thing kind of e-mail, telling me: "If I didn't have my inspirations that drove me to realize them, I wouldn't be in the hell I'm in . . . I'd have a job . . . but, as it is, my inspirations enslave me . . . artists and innovators are forced to follow their passions."

What a better world it is because Steven Kretchmer followed his passions. Already, I miss my friend, my go-to guy, my ideal of what a real jewelry designer is. In the weeks, months, and years ahead, I hope his family and friends will find some comfort in knowing how much he gave to us all.



Happier times: Steve and I in 1998 in Las Vegas at the Contemporary Design Group annual awards dinner, when Steve was named "Most Valuable Designer Player" and I "Best Designer Advocate."