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Photo by Jamie Manser

Stephen Perri at Perri Jewelers.

72-Years in the Heart of the Old Pueblo

Perri Jewelers Moves to a New Downtown Location

by Jamie Manser

Congress Street is buzzing on a recent Saturday afternoon. Buses and cars move slowly along Downtown's main artery, as do the people sauntering along the sidewalks and crosswalks. It's mid-November and restaurant patios are packed with diners enjoying their lunches and temperatures in the mid-70s.

My husband and I chat about the current and recent construction projects, the empty storefronts, and the new and long-time businesses along Congress. As we pull into a parallel parking spot just west of 6th Avenue, in front of Empire Pizza, we wonder what will eventually take up residence in the large, empty Chicago Store space across the street and in the space that will soon be vacated by Hydra.

On this day, I'm headed over to Perri Jewelers at 1 E. Congress St. to interview Stephen Perri about his recent move to this new location from 13 N. Stone Ave. Perri Jewelers was located on Stone Avenue for the last 13 years, but 13 years is just a fraction of the time the downtown stalwart has done business in the heart of the city.

I bid my hubby and our pooch adieu before entering the jewelry shop, and pause to take in the signage around and on the door. I've always loved the Perri Jewelers' logo with its mid-20th century design and font, designed by Simon Perri. I admire the neon sign that I'll later learn is the original sign made in 1945 that Stephen had restored. Chimes lightly jingle as I push open the door and

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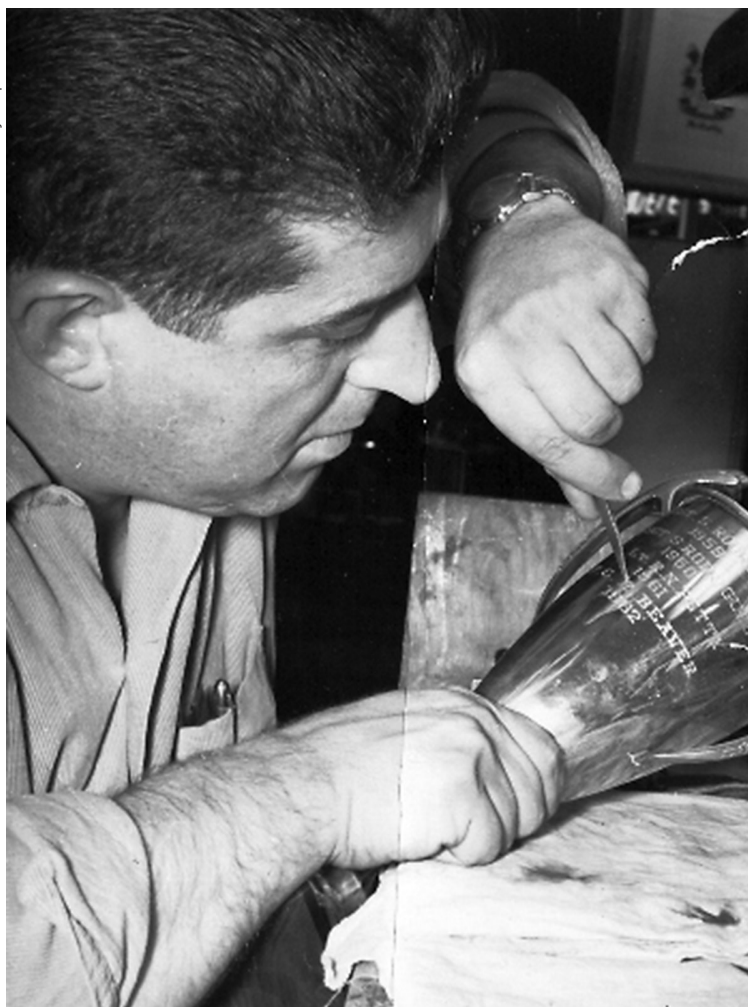
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Photo courtesy Stephen Perri



Simon Perri was a master hand engraver.

step up to go in. Taking in the scene, I see a charming and intimate space with beautiful lighting that makes the jewelry displayed on the wall and in the glass cases simmer and sparkle.

Stephen is consulting with two long-time customers when I come in, but he smiles and offers a quick hello before getting back to his clients about ring sizes. As the three converse, I admire the exposed brick walls, high ceilings and the unique jewelry offerings tucked into 250 square feet of space. I overhear the couple tell Stephen that they knew his grandfather and share that this is their 36th wedding anniversary. It's a sweet exchange that illustrates the power of customer service that goes above and beyond the typical interactions that occur in chain stores. It also showcases the generational depth and breadth of Perri Jewelers' clientele that is not only attributable to longevity – Perri Jewelers has been around for 72 years – but also to masterful artisanship, a robust work ethic, honesty, and a deep sense of community.

"My father taught me to be honest, do things right, work hard and build relationships with customers. We would go to our clients' funerals, weddings and other events. I thought that was just the way it was," Stephen says. He adds, "I later learned that not all businesses operate that way."

Perri Jewelers originally opened in the spring of 1945 at 129 ½ W. Congress St. – where the Pima County court and governmental complex currently stands. Stephen shows me a digital scan of the business' advertisement that ran in a March 1945 issue of *El Tucsonense* newspaper. He surmises that is an accurate timeframe of when his uncle Peter Perri opened shop. Stephen has his laptop up on the counter, and is showing me the pictorial history of the jewelry store. It is filled with family photos and images from the *Arizona Daily Star* archives.

"This is my uncle Peter, who started the business," Stephen shares, pointing out a photo that is over 50 years old. "When he (Peter) went to work for Hughes Aircraft – which is now Raytheon – my dad took over and bought him out in 1957.

"My uncle Peter was a watchmaker, my dad did hand engraving. My dad, Simon, learned his craft from being an apprentice for two and a half years in Los Angeles." Stephen scrolls through more photos on his laptop, and pauses on a picture that shows the West Congress Street block in the 1950s. "See that sign for La Selva Latin Club," he asks, pointing it out. "We were downstairs from that."

When the city decided to tear down the businesses that lined West Congress Street – west of Church Avenue – to build the current governmental complex,

Perri Jewelers moved to 37 W. Congress St. in 1963. For the next 40 years, Simon Perri served the Tucson community by selling jewelry, offering hand engraving, along with selling musical instruments and luggage. The store was open six days a week, and catered to its customers by offering layaway and never charging interest on purchases.

Stephen pulls out a file that is stuffed with receipts his father saved, with names such as Ruben Romero and Eve DeConcini on the typed receipts. "He kept everything," Stephen remarks as he shuffles through the papers. As he puts the file away, he reflects on how he almost closed Perri Jewelers in 2003.

"My dad had a stroke in the fall of 2003, and initially I was going to close the store. I'm a teacher, I work full-time. But, the school (Salpointe Catholic High School) gave me time off to make a decision." Between September 2003 and March 2004, Stephen ran the shop and was inspired by the customers who came through and shared their stories of purchasing jewelry or getting repairs

and hand engraving done by his father.

"I decided that I couldn't close it after hearing all of those stories. We had an 80th birthday party for my dad, and so many people showed up. I'm proud to be able to keep Perri Jewelers going for my dad and my uncle, and remain downtown. We've endured and survived entirely based on the people downtown."

When Stephen had to make another decision about the survival of Perri Jewelers, by moving it from the Stone Avenue location to 1 E. Congress St., he shares the synchronicity that came along with finding the new location.

"It was cool that (commercial real estate agent) Buzz Isaacson showed us this space, because he knew my dad. I got to look at a lot of places downtown, but it was important for us to keep the overhead low. We found this space, and it was retrofitted for our needs. We were able to move within a week of closing the Stone Avenue space and opened here on October 30.

"It's been an odyssey – being downtown – and to watch it (downtown) come back; finally, private investors are putting money in, I think downtown will keep growing. I'm glad we aren't a place with chains, we've got local and independent stores. When you finally get investors, it's key."

Perri Jewelers is located at 1 E. Congress St., online at PerriJewelers.com and by phone, (520) 624-4311. The store is open Monday-Friday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. ■