



AARON & KIM SVABIK

OF PENTIQUES

BY CHERYL ROBERTS

If you've attended a pen show lately, you've probably met Aaron and Kim Svabik. The Youngstown, Ohio, couple turned an interest in pens into their family business, offering expert pen repair and restoration services. Open since 1999, Pentiques has grown to include the brokering of distinctive pens, and in an effort to expand the community of vintage pen lovers, Kim has become the membership coordinator for the Pen Collectors of America, a vintage pen collectors' club based in the United States.

Cheryl Roberts: Aaron, what initially sparked your interest in pens?

Aaron Svabik: I used a Cross Century ballpoint that my mom gave me as a high school graduation gift all through college, and I was quite devastated when I lost it on the job in 1996. A few months later, on our first wedding anniversary, Kim slid a beautifully wrapped box across the dinner table and said, "For the next stage of your life." How prophetic that statement was. The pen was a Cross Townsend Lapis Lazuli ballpoint.

Roberts: How did you go from one pen to creating a full-time business?

Aaron: I saw the matching fountain pen in the booklet that came with the Cross Lapis ballpoint and was intrigued, although it was way out of my price range. A few months later, I bought a box of fountain pens at a flea market. While researching them, I stumbled on eBay and realized those pens were worth a lot more than I paid for them. If I sold them, I thought, I could buy the Lapis fountain pen I wanted. From there, I was hooked.

Haunting flea markets and selling on eBay, I soon realized that my finds were worth more if they functioned properly. I love to tinker and figure things out, so I started taking them apart and built one heck of a parts inventory in the process. The extra income from pen sales fed the habit and helped us with a down payment on our house. By 1999, I was comfortable enough with my skills to start fixing pens for people other than close friends, and Pentiques was born. The name was Kim's idea. Are you noticing a pattern here?

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Pentiques grew slowly and developed a base of customers as my skill set grew into more complex repairs. Working with my hands was a stress reliever and something I really enjoyed doing. I looked forward to hiding out in the office. We made our name on one-week turnaround, and the business eventually grew to the point where the demands of my hobby were knocking my family and professional demands out of balance.

By April 2007, Kim told me something had to give, and she believed Pentiques was our future. I thought she was absolutely insane, as she had given up her career as a corporate trainer to raise our boys, but she encouraged me to follow my passion. "Do what you love and the money will follow," looks nice taped to the refrigerator, but... Not long after, I had one of those rare cathartic moments in life. I recalled a recent conversation where my boss suggested I sell Pentiques since I was doing so well with his company. I thought to myself, why should I employ my talent to benefit someone else's bottom line? Kim's words echoed in my mind, "It's Pentiques!" When I called her and said, "I'm done," she said, "Let's do this!" With a deadline forced upon me by our financial planner and Kim, the brave one, I left my sales position. We went to the 2007 Chicago show where I asked a dealer I had never met if he had any parts for sale; the next day he arrived with a suitcase full. Chicago was just the beginning.

Roberts: From a part-time business in 1999 to going full-time in 2007, how has the business changed?

Aaron: There are three facets that stand out. The first is my paradigm. I was under the delusion that working for myself would be liberating and exciting. I'm actually working harder now than I ever have in my life. On the way to the last Columbus show I bragged about how wonderful it was not to

work for anyone or answer to a superior. Kim looked at me and laughed, then stated a very real truth: "If you worked for a boss who demanded from you what you demand from yourself, you would have quit a long time ago." (Kim is available for corporate motivational bookings.) This statement made me stop and think. It's by no means easier, however, the satisfaction of making a single dollar from an idea, skill, or talent of my own is far better than making \$100 working for someone else.

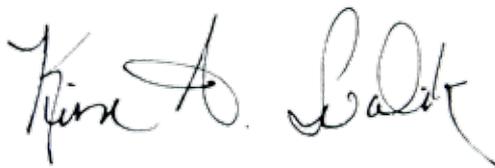
Secondly, my understanding of the fundamentals of pen repair has evolved. I appreciate the early hard-rubber pens and am astounded by the tolerances that manufacturers were able to achieve nearly 100 years ago. Last winter I was fortunate to study under Lynn Sorgatz (see *Stylus*, Aug/Sept 2008), one of the true masters in the field and learn delicate, intricate repair processes. Fountain pens were not made by magic. A process was involved, and once you deconstruct that process and understand it, the rest is simple.

Finally, we are becoming known for our brokering services. Doing this on a daily basis gives us a pretty good idea of what is moving and who is looking for what. Many of our clients are just too busy to be actively selling between shows, so their investment just sits. We are able to keep these assets liquid by finding buyers.

Roberts: How do you make an online business personal?

Aaron: Our philosophy is "your passion is now our business." Regardless of what you do for a living or what you deal with in any given day, your pens are your hobby, your joy and down time. Our goal is to meet you on that level and make your experience with us as pleasant as possible. We make it personal by treating your repairs or consignments as if they were our own. We make ourselves available on your

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timetable via e-mail, phone or appointment.

Roberts: What type of repair is most often needed?

Aaron: Our most common service is a sac replacement in a lever-fill pen, followed in a close second by Vacuumatics. I am proficient in all filling systems. I love working with anything that requires a cork seal—Nozaks, Montblancs, Onotos, and so on. I truly enjoy high-end, complex, intricate repairs and cosmetic restoration.

Roberts: Do you both work on pens?

Aaron: No. Kim once tried to surprise me by installing a water purifier on the faucet. After I repaired the ceiling, she agreed to never play with tools again.

Roberts: Kim, how did you become involved with Pen Collectors of America?

Kim: Since volunteering to help Terry Mawhorter at the Detroit show in 2007, the P.C.A. board brought me on to be their “face” at the shows. Since then, we’ve worked together to create a visual presence to further the mission of the PCA. I’ve enjoyed getting to know the pen community while promoting new memberships and scouring the expired lists for renewals. Membership in PCA includes a subscription to the quarterly *Pennant* magazine, a thoughtful publication that includes the vast knowledge of our pen community contributors. Members also have access to the PCA library, which is in the process of being digitized for members to download, as opposed to sending for copies from the librarian. Thirdly, membership payments go toward our Pens for Kids program. This innovative facet of the PCA is passing on the legacy of pen collecting to the next generation by collectors who want to share their passion with their children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews.

Roberts: Are you active members of the Northeast Ohio Pen Club?

Aaron: We formed the NEO Pen Club in August 2007. With the tenacity of “The Kim,” our first meeting had around 20 attendees from Toledo to Pittsburgh and all points in between. It has grown from there with 30-plus currently on our mailing list.

Roberts: Anything else you’d like *Stylus* readers to know about Pentiques?

Aaron: I recently told someone I fixed pens for a living; he literally thought I mended animal pens. In a world where communication is instantaneous and impersonal, I would like to thank those of you who appreciate the concept of thought expressed on paper by means of a fine writing instrument. I am just a guy who enjoys fixing pens. Thank you for allowing me to continue doing what I love.

Roberts: Aaron, you call Kim “the closer” for the P.C.A. Kim, would you like the last word?

Kim: I don’t know if that’s possible. Have you spent time with Aaron?

But really, the pen community is a small circle with the greatest people we have ever known. From our adoptive family in Detroit to the doctor from Selma we named our son after to everyone who encouraged us to take the leap and has been there for support, our closest friends have come from the pen community. I encourage all the lurkers and closet collectors out there to get involved! Join a local pen club, attend pen shows. There is absolutely no comparison between an online forum and the excitement and energy of a pen show in full swing! Come out and meet the person who fixes your pens or writes the articles you read. In doing so, you are protecting your investment in your passion. 

For more information, visit www.pentiques.com