

Same-sex marriages put jewelers to work

*Marcel Honoré
The Desert Sun*

It's not that multi-colored rainbow sapphire jewelry is new to Matilde Parente's Libertine boutique shop in Indian Wells - she's carried the designs for two years.

But when the California Supreme Court delivered its landmark ruling in May allowing same-sex marriage, Parente had an epiphany: Why

not market the colorful jewelry to gay couples planning to wed?

"I wanted to get some more of the styles that might be more popular," Parente said, referring to the desert as "same-sex marriage capital, USA."

She's one of several Coachella Valley jewelers looking to capitalize on the new same-sex marriage ruling.

So, Parente doubled her inventory of rainbow sapphire jewelry, hoping to attract business from same-sex couples looking for unique pieces to celebrate their nuptials.

She had three same-sex couples buy rainbow wedding bands in the weeks following the court ruling, Parente said.

"For my little store, that's a big deal," she said.

In addition to jewelers, wedding planners, florists, cake-designers and other wedding-related business across the state hope to cash in on the influx of same-sex marriages.

A UCLA study released in June estimated same-sex weddings would boost California's economy by more than \$680 million during the next three years. It estimated about half of the state's 102,600 same-sex couples would marry.

Jef Timms, owner of the Hephaestus jewelry store in Palm Springs, said he's seen a 45 percent increase in business for his custom wedding bands and engagement rings since the ruling took effect.

He attributed the spike to same-sex couples.

"Everyone in the desert who is gay knows to come here," Timms said. "I cater to the whims of our society."

Timms declined to specify what the increase translated to in dollars and cents, but his specialty metal jewelry shop hit the "mother lode" thanks to the ruling, he said.

"Or daddy lode," he quipped a second later.



Matilde Parente with Libertine Fine Jewelry Salon opens a display holding 18-karat gold rainbow sapphire jewelry at the Renaissance Esmeralda Resort & Spa in Indian Wells. Demand for the jewelry has increased since the state's Supreme Court ruled same-sex marriage legal in California. (Richard Lui, The Desert Sun)

His customers aren't just locals; they're couples "from all over the states who are coming here to have the (wedding) services performed," Timms said.

Cesar Ruiz, owner of Prizma Jewelers in Cathedral City, said his store plans to print up to 50,000 more color fliers this fall than last to reach more customers in Palm Springs, which boasts a thriving gay community.

The court ruling on same-sex weddings played a role in the decision to print more fliers, Ruiz said "We're in business ... for everyone," he explained.

In Palm Desert, Leeds & Son jewelers will proceed with business as usual for customers gay and straight, store manager Paul Hering said.

The store already draws business from same-sex couples, so it doesn't need to adjust marketing or jewelry offerings, he said.

Same-sex couples "come in the store because they trust us," Hering said. "The ruling didn't change anything for us."

However, Hering has noticed one change: Same-sex couples visiting his store appear more "comfortable" and at-ease shopping for jewelry since the marriage ruling.

"We're excited for them because they're excited for each other," he said.

Reporter **Nicole Brambila** contributed to this story.