

CLASS RINGS

Custom looks help keep class rings relevant in the age of iPods and cell phones

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BY RYAN E. SMITH
BLADE STAFF WRITER

Beyonce can sell CDs, magazines, perfume, Pepsi, jeans, even a mediocre Austin Powers movie. But who would have guessed she would try high school class rings?

And yet there it is: the Dereon Class Ring, a fashion-forward line of jewelry from Beyonce and her mother that more closely resembles a cocktail ring than an old clunker from the past. Featuring a square-cut birthstone topped by a special crest and accented by two cubic diamonds or cubic zirconia, it's one of what seem to be an endless variety of class rings available these days.

It may not be the biggest seller for Jostens, a Minnesota-based company that's been around for more than a century, but it does show one way the industry is trying to stay relevant in the age of Twitter.

Helena Krodel, a spokesman for the Jewelry Information Center, a trade association based in New York City that educates consumers about fine jewelry and watches, said class rings remain important purchases for high-schoolers despite all the social and technological changes that have occurred since their parents and grandparents graduated.

"It's important only because we're in such a disposable market where so many things come and go so easily, such as, say, a paper yearbook," she said. "Fine jewelry is something you'll have for the rest of your life."

While sales are down compared to decades ago, recent response has been steady and encouraging, even in this economy, according to Rich Stoebe, a spokesman for Jostens.

Students still cite tradition as a reason they're interested. The first class rings go back to the U.S. Military Academy in the 1800s, Mr. Stoebe said.

Libbey High School senior Shamarah Helm, 18, said she ordered a ring as a sort of investment in nostalgia.

"I want to remember my high school days. I want to have something to look back on, to show my kids," she said.

New times have brought new challenges, however, not the least of which have been iPods, cell phones, and all sorts of other ways for teens to spend their money. That's why Perrysburg sophomore Nick Hentges isn't getting a ring; he'd rather go to concerts and hang out with friends.

"If I got one, I would have to pay for it myself, and I decided I would rather spend it on other things than a class ring," he said.

Rings can range from less than \$100 to several hundred dollars and can feature a broad variety of metals nowadays, including non-precious ones. (In case you're wondering, a Dereon class ring in 10-carat gold but with no diamonds sells for \$449.95.)

Some local students said they didn't buy a ring because of the cost, while others said they bypassed the major companies and found cheaper alternatives from Wal-Mart. That's where Johnathan Nichols, a senior at Libbey,



Libbey High School senior Johnathan Nichols, 18, with the class ring he purchased from Wal-Mart. (THE BLADE/JETTA FRASER)

said he found his after deciding to get a ring to highlight his accomplishment of graduating.

Then there's the issue of personalization. Instead of just one or two styles, they seem limitless now. Jostens, for example, has more than 500 designs representing sports, clubs, even activities like paintball and rafting. Teens can look through all these options online and design their own customized ring, then e-mail or text it to friends or their parents.

Aware that some students don't buy rings because they won't wear them once they're in college — suffering the same fate as many high school varsity jackets — companies sell to freshmen and sophomores too, not just upperclassmen, said Alan Miller, owner of Alan Miller Jewelers in Oregon, which sells ArtCarved class rings.

"That gives them longer to wear it," he said. "Years ago, we used to go after juniors. Every year they used to push it back."

But even four years of wearing a ring was not enough time for Molly Camp, 16, a Perrysburg sophomore who decided not to buy one.

"You could wear it your four years in high school but I was just thinking beyond that. Honestly I don't think I would wear it beyond high school because you're going on," she said. "My mom said she got a class ring. She wore it through high school, she said, but she just kind of has it sitting in a jewelry box [now]."

Contact Ryan E. Smith at: ryansmith@theblade.com or 419-724-6103.

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