

## KEEPSAKES

### Thumbprint charms remind wearers of loved ones

[Suzanne Pullen, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

Sunday, October 30, 2005

---

Crime shows on television have exposed mass audiences to almost every intricacy involved in fingerprint collecting. But one entrepreneur is using the whorls of a fingertip to resurrect an age-old tradition of wearing memorial jewelry.



David Gordon came up with the idea of **Thumbies** -- keepsake charms made from fingerprint impressions -- after his mother gave him a gold pendant crafted from a wax casting of his newborn daughter's thumb 28 years ago.

[Printable Version](#)

[Email This Article](#)

Though it may seem macabre to some, others find wearing charms imprinted with the fingerprint of their loved ones comforting.

"I bought one when my father-in-law died," said 48-year-old Hal Dellwardt of Napa. "My wife was very close to him. He was her hero. The Thumbie is a remembrance of him, and she never takes it off."

Gordon, whose company is near Chicago, began creating the charms in 1996. When he started, he had no idea the majority of his customers would discover his **Thumbies** in funeral homes and mortuaries.

He didn't know it at the time, but his idea had ancient roots. Memorial jewelry honoring the deceased has been around for five centuries. Locks of hair bound into brooches were worn by Victorian women in mourning. Theodore Roosevelt wore a ring holding strands of Abraham Lincoln's hair on his inauguration day in 1905. Georgian-era pins featured miniature portraits of gravestones and funeral scenes. When George Washington died, his tomb became a popular image for jewelry, and several rings containing plaited hair from him and his wife were given out to their loved ones. Gordon's modern technique brings memorial jewelry into the 21st century.

Nancy Schroder of the Fremont Chapel of Roses said such jewelry can be soothing and helpful.

"A fingerprint is unique to every individual," said Schroder. "So the charm is a unique, tactile reminder of the person that you can rub and feel the ridges of their print."

The ink fingerprint, collected by a loved one or funeral home, is converted into a charm using lost wax casting, similar to the technique used by Gordon's mother to create the original charm nearly three decades ago. A digital image of the print is made and then converted by a special machine into a wax cast. The cast is then encased by a mold. Hot metal is poured into the mold, melting the wax and leaving only the metal charm.

**Thumbies** come in two sizes and are also made into earrings, tiepins, cuff links and key chains in sterling silver or 14k white or yellow gold and can have a birthstone added to them. They range in price from \$130 to \$500 and can be engraved. Gordon said a few people have offered limited imitations of the fingerprint charm, but he has patented the technique. Ninety-five percent of **Thumbies** customers are clients who want a keepsake of their beloved dead, he added.

In the case of infants or very small children, the entire hand or footprint can be used for the impression.

"We have created thousands of charms for parents whose child was stillborn," said Gordon. "It gives them something tangible to hold onto."

Sherry Hardeman of San Francisco had several hand and footprint charms made when her 2-year-old son, Justin, died after an 11-month bout with brain cancer.

"It was a way I could always keep a piece of him with me," said Hardeman, adding that other mothers who see his handprint want to get ones of their living children. "I got the charms for my mother and sister and a tie tack for my husband, Mark. The tie tack will be given to Luke, Justin's twin brother, when he's older, so they're heirlooms as well."

The popularity of **Thumbies** is growing, said Gordon, and the product line is expanding. His company, Meadow Hill, has sold 35,000 pieces, and this year it started making charms for pet owners.

"One customer asked us if we could do a paw print of their dying dog," he said. "Then we started doing cat and dog nose prints. Last month we did our first horse hoof."

Local funeral homes offering the service include the Neptune Society and Valente-Marini Perata Funeral Home in San Francisco, Fremont Chapel of the Roses in Fremont, Tradition Care Funeral Home in Pleasant Hill, Richard Pierce Funeral Home in Napa. To find out more, call (877) 848-6243 or visit [www.thumbies.com](http://www.thumbies.com).