

Turning creativity into wearable art



By Evan-Lee Courie

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What started as a passion for jewellery and traveling is what led to the start of the Jade, a niche jewellery store that specialises in finding creative inspiration and beauty from around the world and translating it into wearable pieces of art.



Annemarie van Wyk, co-owner of Jade

Under the guidance of Karin and her husband, Christoff Delport, the business grew in popularity, strength and character over the years. From the start, their daughter, Annemarie showed great interest in the business and together with her eye for detail and hard work, she proved herself the perfect candidate to take over the business.

We chat to Annemarie van Wyk, co-owner of Jade to find out about the family-owned business...

■ ***Can you tell us a bit about Jade?***

Jade South Africa is a Stellenbosch based jewellery brand consisting of three retail stores and a network of distributors both locally and internationally. We offer a niche product which is closer to artwork than mass produced jewellery. Our statement designs are unique, and we are proudly innovative in our design approach.

■ ***When, how and why did you get started?***

Jade started as a family business which I joined right at the start. In those days I was a designer, manufacturer, salesperson, cleaner etc, which was excellent training for the future - I had always wanted to own my own business. I worked for my parents for six years before my husband and I opened our own Jade store in Franschhoek in 2012. We had big dreams of growing Jade and in 2013 made them an offer to buy the brand and their Stellenbosch store.

■ ***What is the core function of Jade ?***

Of course we are a for profit business, but our passion is for creating beauty and upskilling the wonderful ladies who work with us, some of whom have been with us since the early days in 2006! We teach them skills they can use to start their own small businesses and we assist them in formal education as well.

One of the very talented young women (the first in her family to finish high school!) has just finished her degree in Engineering from CPUT. We are incredibly proud of her. Some may question investing in an employee that will be forced to leave the company once they graduate, however we know she is destined for great things and are proud to be a part of her and her family's journey.

■ **What are some of the obstacles you've had to overcome since starting out?**

Young entrepreneurs uniquely struggle with legitimacy issues especially when it comes to signing contracts. We were negotiating with a landlord in Pretoria to expand Jade into Brooklyn and the landlord's representative asked me if my father was going to be signing the contract. Coming from another woman it was particularly insulting, however you cannot let small things like this get to you. Cashflow is always front of mind, especially when considering expansion. Our business model is 100% cash funded. We have no creditors or loans. We run the business in a financially conservative way, and this does a lot to take some of the pressure off.

■ **What advice would you give to other aspiring entrepreneurs?**

“ Never give up, never surrender! It is a cliché but it is true. If your dream is to one day own a business, you cannot ever call it quits. Set yourself up for success by planning your transition into entrepreneurship and remember to reinvest in your business. Small businesses fail because of poor cash-flow management. Pay your staff, your creditors, your backers, invest back into your business and then later you pay yourself. ”

■ **What has been your proudest achievement thus far?**

One of my proudest achievements was being asked to be involved with Biomedical Pink Polo at Val de Vie. As a breast cancer survivor (I was diagnosed at 27) I was very open about my journey through diagnosis and treatment and being asked to be a Pink Polo Legacy Member has given me the opportunity to give back. Awareness and encouraging early detection techniques is very important. It is a great honour to be able to give my time, for Jade to donate my designs to raise money for this worthy cause and to be able to give hope to others who are going through the same things I did.

■ **What does the future of entrepreneurship look like to you?**

Big companies continue to swallow up competition, merge and grow bigger. The service they can provide becomes less and less personal, while the prices they can deliver them at, comes down. Entrepreneurial businesses struggle to compete on pricing but other gaps in the market exist. Entrepreneurs will need to continue to focus on their core competencies and where they can offer superior service, products, distribution etc. In a country with so much joblessness, it will remain SMME entrepreneurs who are the drivers of employment. I see more and more micro- entrepreneurs joining the formal economy.

■ **What would you like to see changed in the South African startup landscape?**

South Africa scores quite low on measures of entrepreneurship and it needs to be encouraged from a young age. Many young people seem to aspire to having corporate jobs, corner offices, fancy titles and company cars.

“ I would like to see a shift in attitude to celebrating entrepreneurs and the impact they have on the economy. ”

There seems to be a lack of innovative venture capital operating in South Africa, especially on the small and micro scale. It is nearly impossible to gain access to capital to start a new venture. It is our dream to get involved in this sector and help other entrepreneurs start and grow their businesses. Improvements in the ease and cost of starting and doing business is also of great importance.

▣ What do you believe are the traits an entrepreneur needs in order to succeed?

I think an entrepreneur needs to be able to handle stress, there will be a lot of that. They also need to have enough self-awareness to understand what it is they don't understand. Learn to focus on what you do that adds value and if you can employ people who are better, smarter and more skilled than you, you absolutely should. Believe in yourself enough to keep going when things are tough. Hard work and long hours is a given.

▣ Tell us about your biggest struggles as an entrepreneur, as well as some major highlights.

The human element is the most challenging during a day of work. Customers and sometimes staff. Learning how to inspire a positive work culture and turn your business into an environment where people want to work in and want to thrive in is one of the most difficult tasks and one I certainly still have much to learn about.

Although you should not make the decision to quit at something, lightly, there is also a point where the smart business decision needs to take precedent over your own ego and emotions.

Admitting a small failure now and doing something is a lot better than ignoring it to save face and dealing with the (much bigger) fallout later. The highlights are the small things: celebrating a 10 year work anniversary with a colleague or the many friends we have made through the years from all walks of life. Some of our best friends are 30 or even 40 years older than us. Seeing someone wear your designs at an unexpected event, function or location. One of the most amazing feelings was waking up one morning having being tagged in an Instagram post by South African Super Model and amazing entrepreneur Candice Swanepoel (@angelcandices) in a shoot for her brand Tropic of C (@tropicofc). In one photo we had more exposure than 4 years of our own Instagram page! She is such an inspiration to us, a fabulous human being and a great ambassador for Brand South Africa, we are excited to do more work with her in future.

▣ Why would you encourage someone to become an entrepreneur?

Entrepreneurship is not for everyone. Some people can't imagine working for a boss and others can't imagine having to be a boss. Both have their challenges and rewards. For us it has given us opportunities beyond anything we could have dreamt of, not least of which is the gift of working with my husband and best friend every day. Although we work 7/52 and there is little stability, it does grant certain freedom (after a lot of hard work and sleepless nights). Corporate work grants stability, but little actual freedom. I think everyone owes it to themselves to give entrepreneurship a try. One of the privileges of being an entrepreneur is the sense of community and being part of a family that happens with your staff - truly caring for someone and watching the flourish is a very rewarding.

▣ Where would you like to see Jade in the next 5 years?

We have big ambitions of growing Jade both locally and internationally and opened our first franchised store four years ago. Our five year plan includes new locations in South Africa as well as expanding into a permanent presence in the US and Europe. We have been travelling extensively over the last few years testing markets and learning what approach might work best and we are excited about some big opportunities which we are currently pursuing working with established brands

in these markets. Watch this space! ”

ABOUT EVAN-LEE COURIE

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