



HARRIET KELSALL

BESPOKE JEWELLERY

Success means lots of different things to many people. I think that one of the most important stages when starting a business is to decide how you are going to define success. For some this might be running a huge global brand, for others it might be supporting themselves whilst working a few days a week around kids and some have a not-for-profit vision.

For me, success was about being able to creatively do what I loved whilst fulfilling the dreams of my customers and also trying to improve the ethics of my industry.

I started my business on my kitchen table and 18 years on, I am proud to say that Harriet Kelsall Bespoke Jewellery is one of the UK's leading jewellery design companies employing a wonderful team of over 30 with over 20 national and international awards to its name.

I think that having a passion for something is also crucial to success and I've had that for jewellery since I was a child.

My parents are both very creative in completely different ways, and my dad had always made jewellery alongside his job as a GP. He would come home in the evening from work and then sit down at his jewellery bench for a couple of hours. I made my first silver ring with him at the age of four and as I grew older I started to experiment with jewellery making at his bench.

My sister and I got into terrible trouble at junior school for selling clip-on real gold sleeper earrings for £1 per pair, which looked so convincing that parents were having panic attacks when their little ones arrived home looking as though their ears had been pierced. But perhaps there was an early entrepreneurial spark behind the project.

When I was about 11 or 12, an artist friend of my mum's, who happened to be living in our spare room at the time, saw my jewellery and offered to try to sell some of my earrings on her stall at Covent Garden market. I remember her pretending to be cross with me that I sold more earrings than she sold paintings! She was a great creative mentor to me during those years when she lived with my family.

I struggled at school and now know that is because I am dyslexic. This is a huge advantage when running a business because it means that your brain works naturally in 3D and also it is relatively easy for us to think through complex projects on many levels at once. However, at school it can be difficult because our education system mainly rewards those who think in straight lines. My solution at the time was to focus on less wordy subjects like art, maths and science and I excelled in those areas.

My mum encouraged me to follow science and engineering as a career because I was good at those things and she wanted to make sure I was financially independent as a woman. I pursued my three-dimensional thinking through an Industrial Design degree at Brunel University which felt like a path between creative design and engineering.

Upon graduating with First Class Honours and the university design prize, I went into the computer industry and ended up working with feature film-editing software and did that for a few years. All this time, I was still making jewellery just for fun.

A few years later, I began to get a feeling that I wanted to start a creative business and do something different with my energy. I started to consider different options like ceramics or illustration but I was worried about jewellery because I knew it was particularly competitive, and ultimately I needed to find something that could pay my rent if I stopped my 'day job'. However, I felt this pull to jewellery, despite the fact it was possibly the most challenging path.

So I decided to take the jewellery I was already making in my spare time a bit more seriously to see if I could do more with this hobby whilst still remaining employed in my 'day job'. I asked my dad to teach me some more advanced techniques and learned others from books and from teaching myself. I spent a few years improving my skills.

Meanwhile, I had become quite successful in my 'day job' in IT and within a few years I was an Engineering Manager of Tektronix UK. This role taught me so much about how companies work, from management to teams and the core mechanisms of running a business.

My day job was demanding and I worked long hours but in my spare time I was making jewellery in my shed for myself and my friends. It was a hobby with a view to something more. I'd go out there at 9:30 in the evening and work for a couple of hours before bed.

I started taking on commissions for friends, then friends of friends, and then one day about 6 months later, I had a waiting list of 33 people (none of whom I actually knew – they were all friends of friends) and I thought to myself – perhaps I really could actually make this work as a business.

At that time it was very hard to get jewellery designed and made for you unless you had buckets of money. You might know a bloke with a workbench who could make something to your specifications but that wasn't the same as having a properly qualified designer work with you and your ideas to make something really special but affordable for you. So I saw this very real gap in the market for jewellery made to suit the wearer's style, personality and budget. Importantly this was not being done by anybody else at the time.

When I was 28, in 1998, I decided to leave my job and try to do the jewellery business properly.

I set up my first studio in Hertfordshire nearly 18 years ago because it's within easy reach of London, St Albans, Cambridge and other cities and also within easy reach of airports as many of our customers fly into the country to see us. Yet crucially, the location of our converted barn studio feels rural and unspoiled. You can park right outside and don't have to worry about car parks and one way systems.

I like the idea that people can take a trip out to the country and find us here like a little 'secret' jewellery place with our jewellery garden, coffee shop and showroom full of lovely jewellery. I opened a second studio in the heart of Cambridge in 2005 which offers a unique 'bespoke design for the high street' concept and continues to go from strength to strength.

We specialise in bespoke jewellery and both studios are staffed by a team of expert designers who are on hand to chat to customers about individual jewellery commissions. Bespoke design gives the team the privilege of capturing the unique story of every customer, with many one-off designs reflecting the diversity of the people who commission them.

Each customer's story is at the heart of our ethos. We absolutely love telling stories and making beautiful symbols to help our customers express special moments in their lives. We're passionate about excellent design and impeccable craftsmanship and all of our jewellery is made in Britain (specifically in Hertfordshire) by our team of highly skilled goldsmiths.

We've been privileged to win a large number of awards and we're particularly proud that we have just won 'Bridal Jewellery Retailer of the Year' at the 2016 UK Jewellery Awards.

I personally strive to use everything that I have learned to improve the jewellery industry as a whole, particularly with respect to ethics, responsibility, creativity and how to nurture future talent. I pursue these goals in my role as the Vice chairman of the National Association of Jewellers (the main industry trade body) and Non Executive Director for the Responsible Jewellery Council and also the British Hallmarking Council. A particularly proud moment for me was when I helped to pioneer Fairtrade Gold which we launched in 2011.

I worked really hard when I was the engineering manager of Tektronix UK, often staying late and working on Saturdays. At the time I didn't think I could work any harder, but I could. The good news is that when you're doing something you love, it doesn't all feel like work...some of it does...but much of it doesn't because you enjoy it.

Along the way I've been lucky enough to have two wonderful children and I've somehow managed to juggle this with my business. The craziness of running a business and starting a family as a woman with no such thing as maternity leave is a subject for a whole other story!

There have been countless challenges and I've made mistakes but never failed to learn loads from those mistakes, so I now know never to be afraid of getting it wrong. Ultimately believing in your business vision is key. Over the years there have been hard times perhaps when I have been let down and could very easily have given up. But I didn't. And I'm glad as I look around me now.

Perhaps all that separates successful entrepreneurs from the others is that we never give up but just keep trying until we forge our own version of success.

www.hkjewellery.co.uk/

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Editor's Notes:

Harriet Kelsall Bespoke Jewellery (HK Bespoke) is a team of 33, largely made up of designers and goldsmiths across two sites in Hertfordshire and Cambridge. Jewellery is crafted in an on-site workshop by a team of specialist craftsmen. Bespoke and ready to wear jewellery pieces are available online or via either design studio/shop. HK Bespoke is a multi award winning company, including 2016 UK Jewellery Awards 'Bridal Jewellery Retailer of the Year', Business in the Community 'Responsible Business of the Year' and the UK Jewellery Awards' "Ethical Business of the Year".