



Harriet Kelsall named Woman of the Year in retail awards

Harriet Kelsall, founder and managing director of bespoke jewellery company Harriet Kelsall Jewellery Design, has been named Woman of the Year 2011 at the Specsavers everywoman in Retail Awards.

At a ceremony held on the 14 September at London's Savoy hotel, judges praised Harriet's "vision, innovative approach and success," and described her as "an outstanding role model who will inspire more women to choose a career in retail."

"The Woman of the Year Award recognises the woman who is a truly inspirational and visionary individual," they added, "and Harriet Kelsall is an exceptional role model for the industry."

Harriet Kelsall (pictured, with Dame Mary Perkins) started her jewellery business in 1998, operating out of a spare bedroom. Just over 10 years later, she now employs nearly 30 staff and has an annual turnover of £1.5 million.

Turn to page 26 to hear from Harriet herself.



Wonder woman

Louise Hoffman catches up with Harriet Kelsall, who has recently been presented with a coveted 2011 Specsavers everywoman in Retail award

Congratulations on winning 'Woman of the Year' at the recent Specsavers everywoman in Retail Awards! Can you attempt to put into words what this achievement means to you?

I was utterly flabbergasted when I won – especially next to such brilliant candidates from such well-known and successful companies. I feel the win was about our whole team (who are also thrilled!) and not just me, as our team are just as passionate about our bespoke jewellery company as I am!

We've had an amazing year; in February we were chosen as one of the very first jewellers to be allowed to work in certificated Fairtrade gold, and then opened our newly refitted Cambridge shop – with a new concept selling proper 'clean-sheet' bespoke jewellery on the high street. This summer we had a lot of industry recognition, and then to receive this everywoman award was an incredible honour and the pinnacle of our success to date!

It has given me much more confidence to keep following my instincts and not to be afraid to blaze a new trail. I am also now more determined to drive the business, which I started from scratch, up to a whole new level.

Did you receive any feedback from the judges about your work?

The judges said some lovely things about me – especially that I was an inspiration to others. I don't really think of myself as inspiring so that was a lovely compliment.

Where is your new trophy residing?

The trophy – an amazing handmade glass shopping-bag-shaped trophy with beautiful glass barley-sugar twist handles – is in our entrance hall at our Halls Green studio. As it happens, our own company colour is a very similar shade to the everywoman purple!

Which factors, tangible or otherwise, do you think have helped you to become Woman of the Year?

I think it is probably because we have always been different from other jewellers and have always done things in a non-traditional way.

When I started the business back in 1998, I had already established my jewellery website two years before most people had even heard of the internet. Also, when we started, the only way to get custom-made jewellery was to either go somewhere really posh and expensive, or to go to a 'bloke with a bench' who could make what you wanted,

but rarely had much design flare and couldn't really advise you on what suited you or would work for your lifestyle.

I think we were the first to use the term 'bespoke jewellery' (my grandmother was a tailor, so we stole the term from that industry!). I remember being worried that the term sounded a bit pretentious, or that my American customers wouldn't understand it (as it isn't a US word), but I guess it must be the right term as now everybody uses it.

Anyway, I started designing and making proper bespoke jewellery with proper design education behind me and great craftsmanship, and strove to bring affordable, clean-sheet, bespoke design to a mass audience; not just assembling cast parts and not only working on CAD – we can work any way that is right for the customer, be that hand forging or whatever.

I think our presence on the internet was a bit scary, and I always knew that people could very easily see and try to copy what we do. But that is just inevitable in business and if you hide your ideas and designs from people in fear, you are only really inhibiting your own success anyway.

I am very passionate about proper designers working in bespoke jewellery, and am working hard to encourage others. For example I am currently working on a design competition which we are holding at UCA (University for Creative Arts) in October. This is the first bespoke jewellery design competition and our brief will take the form of an actress being a 'customer' and describing their bespoke brief via a YouTube clip. I'm also collaborating with Doug Richard (ex Dragons' Den) on the School for Creative Startups, and I've recently been working on some entrepreneurship competitions for the Peter Jones Academy to inspire their students too.

And how has the accolade spurred you on in terms of plans for your business and for your own personal growth as a business owner?

This award has given me even more energy than ever! I still have to keep pinching myself to really believe the success and recognition that we have had from within the jewellery industry; this award from everywoman, being such a well-known national retail award, is just incredible. It makes me think that we need to be more confident about our way forward, and that kind of confidence is such a powerful thing in terms of making things happen.

We need to continue to be the UK's leading bespoke jewellery design

company and continue forging the way, and I have loads of new ideas all the time! We are working on some technical improvements at the moment, which is exciting, and we do hope to open more stores soon.

I have also been very proud to have been involved in the launch of Fairtrade gold, and have been having some interesting conversations about that and about ethical issues. I want to find some time to work further in that important area as I am starting to see a way that I may be able to improve things.

We have also just had our RJC audit, which has been a big deal for us. The RJC has defined a list of standards that we can hold our businesses up against to see if we are doing our best to behave as a responsible company, and this can only be a good thing. Fingers crossed we will pass – we hope to hear within the next two weeks.

For the first 12 years of running my business I worked very hard but in quite an introverted way, and this year I raised my head and found that we are doing really well. It feels like suddenly others have noticed what we have done too, so now is the time to see what I can do to raise our profile further.

I want to continue to inspire and help young designers and young entrepreneurs too. I am very proud to have been part of a big change in the industry over the last 13 years or so but we have a lot further to go. I want to see if I can somehow get involved in bringing designers into ordinary, tired high street stores. We have such brilliant designers coming out of our UK colleges all the time, so let's team them up with good retailers and create something more interesting for our customers! I'd love it if somebody asked me to help with a TV show turning around a high street jewellers or something like that – but that is probably just a pipe dream!

I'm not quite sure if I will get all that done this year – but I'll do my best to make a start!

