

*The
Jewellers'
Story*

REAL STORIES

MC

METAL CONCENTRATORS

In Conversation with *Vijay Shah*

Words by
Michael Pryke
on behalf of
Metal Concentrators

I met Vijay Shah at his showroom and manufacturing workshop located in tranquil suburb of Durban North. His face exploded into a handsome smile as he greeted me warmly. The walls of his neat office were bedecked with display cabinets containing a myriad of exquisitely unusual designs – creations of a genre that I had never before seen.

“These are absolutely amazing!” I said.

“Thank you,” responded Vijay. “*This display includes all my award-winning pieces going back to the First Place I received at Jewellex 1997.*” He continued demurely.

“Patently you have won a number of awards over the years!” I acknowledged.

“Yes, it must be about thirteen by now – some of the other pieces are designs for display purposes.”

“So tell me how you got into the jewellery business ... what’s your story?” I asked.

“Well, it happened by accident. Although my father owned a jewellery manufacturing and retail business, I had registered for electrical engineering at the Durban University of Technology. But my Mom said to me ‘why are you doing that? Why don’t you join your Dad and learn the trade?’ Anyway, I ended up re-registering for Fine Arts. Sadly, I flunked the first year – I simply couldn’t draw. I went to speak with the lecturer who told me there was no point in continuing. I pleaded with him and he gave me another chance. I repeated the first year and something remarkable happened. I did sculpture, painting, jewellery-design, – and somehow I unleashed a talent within that I never knew existed.”

“How fantastic! What made this come about?”

“When my latent talent became evident, I was encouraged by those around me. And I continuously pushed myself to do better. So, after a rocky start, I graduated in 1990 with my Bachelor of Fine Arts degree.

Back then, I was still not sure of joining my father's business – I had actually set my sights on becoming a teacher.”

“Obviously, that did not happen.”

“That's right – my Uncle said, ‘no way – you must work for the family business!’ So, I started working for my father in Durban. I knew nothing about manufacturing. Although I earned a wage Monday to Friday, I spent every Saturday away from the everyday routine of manufacturing, working to improve my competence.”

“So when was it that your competitive streak start surfacing?”

“In the mid 90's I was getting a bit bored and I wanted to do something more than manufacturing. I had been continuously creating new pieces for specific clients and selling the same design to many more clients. In 1996 I entered a competition sponsored by De Beers and SAJC. My entry was not even accepted!”

“How come?”

“I had not examined the entry criteria in enough detail. I was seriously disappointed and I studied all the entries and the winning designs and realised I needed to adhere strictly to the specifications. It made me even more determined.”

“Okay, so the next year was 1997 ... and we know what happened that year ...”

“Absolutely – I shocked everybody, even my Dad – I won 1st place in the professional designer category.”

“You must have been pleased!”

“I was actually so excited that when I phoned my wife Eshna, she thought I had won the lottery ... I told her it was better than winning any lottery! Would you like to see the piece?”

Vijay went to a cabinet and extracted a pair of earrings. They were unquestionably stunning and quite unique. He had used 18ct yellow and white gold moulded around black-stained beech wood.

“Can you tell me how you came to create something so unusual?” I asked.

“I have always been captivated by the enormous beauty of nature. Back when I first became immersed in Fine Art, I paused to observe the wonderful designs that nature exhibits and I became inspired to incorporate these in my designs – the delicate intertwining of branches, the writhing curls of roots, the intricate artistry within insects. And so, most of my creativity has been drawn from a combination of my imagination and experiences of nature. The theme for the 1997 competition was

'nature' and my design for this piece was the unique shape of the abdomen and hind legs of a locust. I was lucky to be tutored by Sid Forman who helped me with elements of the design."

As I was admiring Vijay's craftsmanship, his son Nihal came in and introduced himself. Like his father, he is a handsome young man with a ready smile.

"Nihal works with me in the business," Vijay explained.

"Can you do work like this?" I asked him.

"No ways," he replied honestly. *"I do most of our CAD work."*

"And he's very good at it!" quipped his father proudly.

"But Dad is really gifted," retorted Nihal. *"He will go into the garden looking for plants and insects for his design inspirations. Take a look at these ..."*

He gestured eagerly to a couple of other pieces. One was unmistakably fashioned after the delicate form of a spider. The other displayed an intricate flower-like quality.

"Wonderful," I commented, delighted to see the interplay between father and son and how perfectly they complemented each other. I was also keen to get the rest of Vijay's story.

"So that was 1997 – how did things progress from there?" I enquired.

"Working in my Dad's business I continued to enter competitions. Just the recognition of getting selected was a huge reward in itself."

"Then in 2002 came the most difficult decision I ever had to make – I decided it was time for me to go on my own. I had no capital to buy equipment so I sold my car. I started manufacturing in a tiny room connected to my house."

"How did it go?"

"My first order was a neckpiece for a lady client ... and the only reason I got the job was because of the intricate design I proposed. I charged only R4,500 but I was so grateful. The client was delighted and referred me to other clients. Slowly by word of mouth, the business grew. I also prayed a lot and I believe that through integrity and courage things came together. Then clients overseas got to see my style and creativity and more orders started coming through."

"And during this period how did the competitions go?"

"Between 2003 and 2007 I was too busy building the business to enter competitions. I could not afford staff and did all the work entirely on my own. My aspirations to be creative were re-directed by the need to concentrate my designs to meet the demands of the clients. Through perseverance and word of mouth, the business continued to grow."

Then, I started getting involved in competitions again and I have been fortunate to continue the award-winning trend.”

“And the business today?”

“We have kept it small – just three of us ... Nihal, Themi who assists in the manufacturing and me. The majority of our production is for our own clients and the most rewarding thing for me is to see the look in a client’s face when they see what we have created for them. I believe business must be fun ... and I am having fun.”

Vijay and Nihal showed me through the neatly ordered workspace. They bantered more like good colleagues than father and son.

As we returned to the office and I gathered my things to depart, I spotted two striking pieces I had not noticed in the cabinet behind where I had been sitting.

“Tell me about these,” I prompted.

“We brought back some Venetian stone from our trip to Venice last year. I wanted to create something different. This one here I have called ‘Reflections’. It received second place and it was showcased in Japan on the theme ‘How we see the future’, alongside this other piece which depicts a mask inspired by ‘Terminator’.”

I was captivated by the way that both creations portrayed an imaginative perspective of the future through the expert incorporation of the colourful Venetian stone.

I left Vijay Shah feeling honoured to have had the privilege to view such exquisite jewellery and the talented artist who created them. His story is one of perseverance and humility combined with the creativity of an outsider who portrays the world through an entirely unique perspective.

The Jewellers' Story.

An initiative from Metal Concentrators.

Neville Crosse, his wife Charlotte and son Grant purchased Metal Concentrators (Pty) Ltd (MetCon) in late 2015 and rapidly became aware of the issues and difficulties faced by retail jewellers and manufacturing jewellers on a day to day basis. This led to a lot of thought and discussions as to whether MetCon could play a role in improving the sustainability of the industry.

To that end, MetCon created The Jewellers' Story. An initiative intended to provide a platform for dialogue and debate within the industry.

The first phase was a series of published caricatures presenting the compelling case to the public that purchasing South African manufactured goods has a number of benefits for the jewellery purchaser as well as developing the industry to be more inclusive of all the talented people in the country.

The second phase seeks not only to highlight the most apparent issues, but as a space to share knowledge and wisdom from the most senior and innovative participants, and to nurture emerging talented jewellery makers, as well as to help established businesses struggling to compete at the global industry level. To tell important stories. To share lessons learned. To establish a sense of community within the industry.

There are many challenges ahead for the industry, from both direct and indirect forces. Only by working together to confront them as a community can we triumph over them and provide a new hope for all South African jewellery retailers and manufacturers.

This hope we place in The Jewellers' Story.

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