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Jewelry hobby becomes business

Courtesy of Laurie Wetterschneider
Wetterschneider, left, and Peterson model some of their jewelry designs.

By Lynn Freehill
ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Running a business can be difficult enough for partners living in the same city, but the challenges multiply for sisters living on opposite sides of the country.

Laurie Wetterschneider and Lisa Peterson create jewelry for Laurie and Lisa Designs - Wetterschneider from Tucson and Peterson from her home in New York City.

The sisters formed the business in March 2003 after taking a jewelry-making class during Peterson's visit to Arizona.

They loved the process, but material costs made jewelry an expensive hobby. After friends wanted to buy their creations, Wetterschneider and Peterson realized they had a potential business on their hands.

Forming Laurie and Lisa Designs marked a dramatically different career path for both of them.

Wetterschneider had managed radio stations and served as a development director for a charity for more than 25 years, while Peterson had logged 70-hour workweeks as an attorney.

Peterson, 43, left law practice in 2001 to become a full-time mom to her sons, now 10 and 13 years old. Jewelry-making provided her an opportunity for extra income and a fulfilling activity apart from parenting, she said.

"I was looking to do something more creative and flexible with my time," Peterson said.

But the sisters said they hadn't bargained for how much time the business would require. Both found themselves working in their home studios until 3 a.m. some nights. Disciplining themselves to keep reasonable hours was their biggest challenge, they said.

Wetterschneider now devotes about 70 hours a week to the business, while Peterson puts in 40 hours. They divide profits according to who made each piece of jewelry that sells.

Profile

Name: Laurie Wetterschneider and Lisa Peterson

Age: Wetterschneider, 48; Peterson, 43

Job: Jewelry designers

Friday On the Job focuses on the people who make Tucson businesses run - those who are in charge, keep a business running, are just starting out or hire workers.

A clear division of tasks is key to managing their business together while they're thousands of miles apart, they agreed. Both sisters design and make the jewelry pieces, usually stringing semiprecious stones, sterling silver and hand-blown glass on wire.

Wetterschneider, 48, purchases the materials and tracks the inventory.

"The computer is my forte," she said. "Lisa is a very creative writer, so she's working on that for the Web site we're making."

Wetterschneider also markets the jewelry, which is sold at five Tucson locations. It has also been sold in a New York City clothing store, and Peterson is scouting more New York locations.

Karol Gugino, who owns Elements gift shop, 6544 E. Tanque Verde Road, was the first to carry Laurie and Lisa Designs pieces last year.

Gugino said the jewelry, with necklace and earring sets priced between \$500 and \$1,000, is the best-selling line in her store.

"Their quality of gems is the best. Their design is the best - it's the whole package," Gugino said. The personal touch the sisters provide customers is also superior, Gugino added.

"If someone orders a special piece, it's there the next day. They take requests, size things - and do all those extras at cost. I don't know of anyone else who does that," she said.

The personal control is what Wetterschneider and Peterson said they treasure most about their business.

Working together has helped them grow closer, Wetterschneider said.

"I left for the University of Arizona when she was 11, so I missed seeing her grow up," Wetterschneider said.

Now the sisters spend six weeks together on vacations and buying trips.

Technology makes their day-to-day communications more convenient, they said. The Internet allows them to zap designs back and forth. And the two talk via cell phone many times daily, although the time difference makes for some calls at odd hours.

"Initially, we thought the thing we wanted to do was expand and have employees as quickly as possible," Peterson said. "But we realized we liked it this way. We wanted to make sure quality control was closely monitored."

In five years, Wetterschneider added, she'd like to see the jewelry in a few more stores. But more importantly, she said, "I want it to continue to be as enjoyable as it is now."