

Fashion passion to transtasman success story

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WHEN Kelly Coe was growing up in Tauranga, all she wanted was her own fashion label.

Now, she is living that dream. Kelly, 27, and her husband Nathan are operating a wholesale women's clothing company, Augustine International — and have just opened their first retail fashion boutique underneath the Oceanside Twin Towers on the golden mile of Twin Parade, Mount Maunganui.

"Ever since I was little, I've been obsessed with clothes," said Kelly. "Even as a poor student, I'd find a way to buy nice clothes at the op shops."

"I collected clothes as a kind of art form. And I loved nothing better than to sit in the main street of a city and watch women walk by and see what they were wearing. It gave me ideas and inspiration."

As a fashion designer and company director, Kelly now dictates what women, between the ages of 25-45, wear for that special go-out occasion.

Augustine International produces exclusive "party" dresses, tunics, tops and pants, much of the silk, cotton, satin and polyester fabric Kelly chooses in China. The company makes only 30-50 pieces of the one garment.

It is high fashion at affordable prices, said Kelly, a former Otumotoi College student who lives in Auckland.

She established the Augustine International label 18 months ago, and now supplies 35 fashion boutiques in New Zealand and 20 in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane/Gold Coast three times a year with winter, summer and high summer collections.

She has the New Zealand retail fashion market reasonably covered and is looking to add only another five outlets by summer 2010, especially in Nelson and Gisborne.

But she wants to expand in Australia, opening her second store in Sydney next year and supplying other big cities such as Perth.

Augustine International supplies Heaven Boutique in the

Bethlehem Town Centre, as well as its flagship shop at the Mount.

The boutique by the same name opened on December 1 and Kelly was happy her first move into retail occurred in her hometown Tauranga.

"The site is just fantastic... you've got to have the right hotspot and the foot traffic (past the boutique) is awesome. The colours and style of our clothing suits the Mount lifestyle because it's near the beach. In the cities like Auckland and Wellington, they still like their blacks," said Kelly.

She moved to Tauranga with her parents Ray and Jill Stewart when she was 8. Her parents now run the new Living Quarters store at Bethlehem Town Centre, after earlier operating 12th Avenue Furniture Court in Cameron Rd.

At school it was sport, and not fashion, that kept Kelly pre-occupied.

She played volleyball and netball at Otumotoi College, helping her college win the national junior secondary schools volleyball title twice and the senior twice.

And when she captained the Otumotoi senior volleyball team in the seventh form (year 13), they lost the final and the title for the first time in five years.

Kelly made the Bay of Plenty senior netball team as a 16-year-old schoolgirl, playing wing attack/centre, and after a break of 10 years she rejoined the side this winter, travelling twice a year from Auckland for training.

Kelly left Tauranga to study for a BA degree in media at Victoria University in Wellington, and then completed a postgraduate course in advertising at Auckland University.

Her fashion instincts returned. She joined Nike New Zealand as the national visual merchandiser, travelling the country to set up displays in Nike stores and checking others were following international display guidelines.

After 18 months, she joined the country's biggest manufacturer of high-end women's clothing, High Society. She quickly learned the "rag trade", starting as a sales marketing co-ordinator and finishing up as brand manager for four different fashion labels.

"That was my dream job," said Kelly. "I'd sit in on design meetings, work with pattern makers, help choose the fabric and trims, and follow the process right



LIVING THE DREAM: Augustine International's Kelly Coe (nee Stewart) is bringing high fashion to Tauranga, and other parts of the country, at affordable prices.

PICTURE / CLAIRE FRASER 231209CF008P

through until the (clothing) ranges went into the stores."

In between, she signed up with the Auckland 62 modelling agency, and completed fashion shoots and catwalks during New Zealand Fashion Week.

Helped by her entrepreneurial husband — Nathan runs *My Want You Motor Group* in Takamini and a bar in downtown Auckland — she was more confident about starting her own fashion business.

She left High Society in August last year to establish Augustine International — named after the month of August when her mother, her grandfather, her friend and herself celebrate their birthdays. It must have been a good omen.

Augustine International has now produced five winter, summer and high summer collections — the clothing is made by one Chinese factory just out of Quanzhou — and the production run has doubled each time.

Every collection, and individual garments, have names. The latest high summer range, now in the stores, is called *Take Me With You*, and the winter collection, going into the boutiques at the end of February, will be called *Lightkeeper's Secret*.

Kelly has just designed the sixth range for summer 2010 and that will be delivered to the stores next July.

"I'm the creative one and concentrate on designing. Nathan

does all the other bits and keeps pushing to grow the business," said Kelly.

She visits China five times a year, buying fabric, liaising with pattern makers and checking production.

So what's in store for the fashion punters next year? Bright prints and embellishments such as trims and beading have been popular and they will stay around, said Kelly.

"But I've just designed a lot of leathers, sequins... and used tie-dye in fabrics. And I think the mini-skirt will return, but not too mini," she said, providing a glimpse that next year, for Augustine International, will be even more colourful.