

Local business finalist in Business Excellence Awards

Mangere Bridge based Judith Whyman Wedding Gowns is a finalist for the Excellence in Retail Awards, one of nine Westpac Manukau Business Excellence Awards. Thrilled to have made it so far, owners Judith Whyman and Anne Hayden face an anxious wait till the Awards ceremony on 18 August to find out if they have won.

Anne mentions that they were encouraged to enter the Business Awards, and that they are "...thrilled to be finalists but definitely did not expect it". They both consider the exercise worthwhile. "Going through the application forced us to step back and look at the business from the outside. It provided us with a clear picture of the business, and how much we have actually achieved in a short time".

Judith and Anne set up shop last year in the Bridge, but Judith's design interests go back to her school days, and stretch now more than 30 years. After a 2 year course in design and textile at Wellington Polytech, she joined a small family business in menswear. "But I have always been interested in gowns. I love working with luscious materials like silk and lace". Over the years, Judith has worked for others or for herself from home, but took the big step last year to set up her own shop.

Why in Mangere Bridge? Judith mentions that they were looking for a shop with large windows, on the ground floor, near a bus stop, and with good parking. "And 32 Coronation Road was ideal so we jumped at the opportunity. And being surrounded by florists and bakeries means that flowers and catering for the wedding can be organised at the same time".

They have been in the Bridge for about 16 months and love the community feeling. Says Anne "I was painting the front of the shop and a man came up to me and asked if he could help. Straight from the beginning there has been local support". Neither of them live in Mangere Bridge but both feel a great affinity with the Village.

During the interview it is clear that Judith and Anne complement each other. Judith has a love and the skills for design and dress making, and Anne's analytical approach helps with the administration, marketing and a lot of the computer work. Not that Anne is only involved with the paper work. "I do help with some of the cutting and sewing, and the beading work". Anne's husband has a managerial background and an MBA, and offers advice when required. This is clearly a family business with Anne's son



designing their web site, and Anne's daughter doing the modelling.

Judith and Anne also import gowns from overseas, sourced from collections in the USA, Australia and China. "Importing gowns allows us to add further variety to the styles that we offer", says Anne. Judith points out that not everyone chooses a full wedding gown, "some decide to mix and match skirts and bodices". They have carved out a niche in the wedding gown business by catering for a wide range of cultures and ethnicities, as well as body shapes.

Judith mentions that getting a wedding outfit can be emotional and stressful. "We make sure that the experience is fun for our clients, and since we don't easily get ruffled, we tend to have a calming influence". They advice on style and make sure that the bride (and bridesmaids) look fabulous. Judith and Anne will suggest different options, depending on, for example, whether it is a church wedding, one at the beach, or on a tropical island.

Their slogan says it all: 'Your dream is our business'. Both consider fitting out the bride and brides maids a true family occasion, and try to make it as family-friendly as possible for clients. "Quite often they bring children, so we have a corner with toys where kids can play", says Anne. Feedback from clients speaks for itself. The mother of one bride mentioned that the nicest part of the wedding arrangements was the fitting at Judith Whyman Wedding Gowns. Another one mentions the care and interest shown by both Judith and Anne.

Judith knows what it is like to be put in the spotlight. She has been a finalist in five Benson and Hedges Designer Awards (including entries for leather, wool, and eveningwear). "I was very proud of being a finalist in the eveningwear

category. This is a fiercely competitive category, and I loved the red silk gown we entered”.

While preparing for the shop opening, they used an unusual but very effective approach. Anne mentions that “people often have a tendency to cover the windows with newspaper before a shop opens but we did the opposite and managed to engage the community. We used a partly dressed mannequin when we started, and as shop preparations progressed we dressed the mannequin until she wore a beautiful bridal outfit when the shop was ready to open. And we had lots of people interested in our progress!”.

As a father who may be asked one day by his daughter to contribute to wedding cost, I was of course interested in the cost of gowns. Anne mentions that wedding gowns start at about \$900 and may go up to about \$2,500. Cost may be higher when additional work or accessories are required. For examples of the gowns, visit their site: www.judithwhyman.co.nz.

Organising a wedding requires a lot of time, patience, energy and money. From my short interaction with Judith and Anne I have no doubt that they will try hard to make it as easy as possible, and a memory to treasure. And fingers crossed for 18 August!

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