

KIM ROUSE DESIGNS

By Iris Wiener



F

our years ago, Kim Rouse was a stay-at-home mom in Houston, making jewelry in her spare time. Today, her unique bracelets, necklaces and earrings are flying out of boutiques and department stores across the country. Here she talks to *figure* about what it took to turn a hobby into a lucrative career.

What made you decide to start your business?

When my youngest son began school full-time, I started looking for a hobby. I have a fine arts degree and I've always loved designing. When I focused on jewelry, my friends told me I should sell it.

How did you get started?

One day when I was in my local Bering's Hardware (which sells everything from hammers to Godiva chocolates), I showed the manager my sterling silver and semiprecious stone pieces. The store bought a small collection from me.

A year later, I was in Saks and a group of saleswomen noticed the necklace I was wearing; it was one of my own. I played telephone tag with a Saks manager for six weeks. When she finally saw my pieces, she bought a collection and emptied two display boxes to make room for it!

How much time do you spend on the business?

Every waking moment, after caring for my kids and doing other family chores, is spent on the business.

Your pieces are very distinctive. What influences your designs?

My family lived in Europe from 1989 to 1992, and that definitely influenced me. For example, my "Labyrinth" line includes earrings, bangle bracelets and rings that resemble classic English hedge mazes.

How do you come up with ideas?

Ideas come when my mind is relaxed. Usually I think about the designing just before I go to bed. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and want to write down an idea in the dark, so I keep a pen and paper by my side at all times.

What's been your most rewarding business achievement?

The Museum of Fine Arts in Houston saw some of my pieces at the boutique near my home, and they began ordering from me. Last year the MOFA had a Russian amber exhibit and had me design amber jewelry to be sold on opening night.

What's the biggest difficulty you have encountered?

The illness and death of my father a year ago. While he was sick, I put my business on hold and devoted myself to taking care of him. The hardest thing is balancing work and family. I've tried to create strong personal relationships with my clients, so every once in a while I can call and say 'My son is sick today, I have to send you the materials tomorrow,' and they understand.

What advice do you have for a woman who wants to start a business?

When you're in a design-based field, you have to keep an eye on the finances as well as the creative part. Just because you're artistic doesn't mean you can't be savvy.

"While living in Britain, I began to think about English garden mazes as metaphors for life. We never quite know where the next step will take us—we have to follow our hearts. My new collection, Labyrinth, celebrates that idea." (sterling Labyrinth cuff, \$360, kimrousedesigns.com)



Kim Rouse's jewelry designs range from \$110 for a pair of silver earrings to \$1650 for a solid gold bracelet with diamonds. They can be purchased on kimrousedesigns.com, saks.com or at select Saks stores.