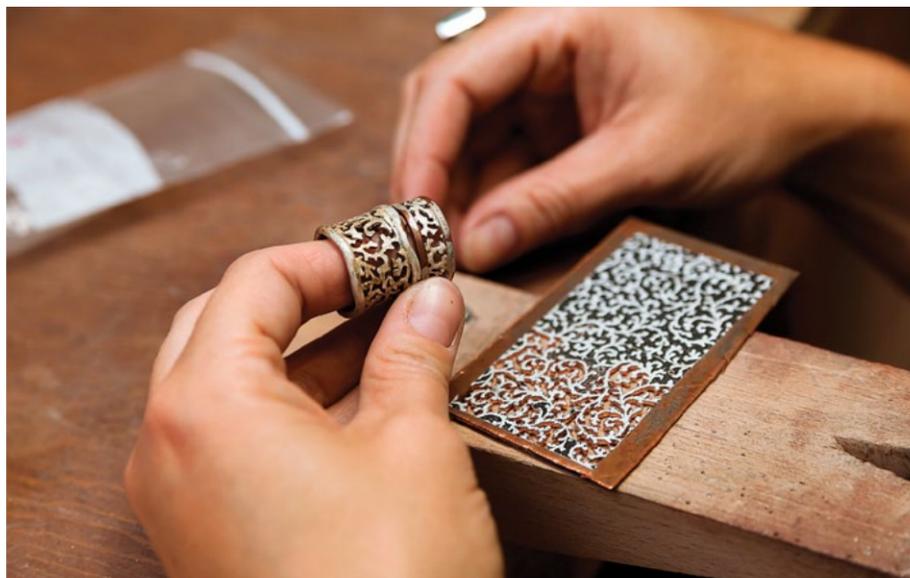




Creative COLLABORATIONS

Whether shaping her own stunning jewelry or teaching techniques to others, Kim Kropf is always learning and growing



BY SANDRA WALNECK
PHOTOGRAPHY • CRESTINA MARTINS

Anyone who adheres to the old idiom that “those who can, do, and those who cannot, teach,” has never met Kim Kropf.

By taking precious metals and transforming them into wearable art, Kropf has established herself as a successful jewelry designer. And by teaching students her techniques, she has transformed herself into a better artist.

Especially when faced with a challenge. “There are four or five different ways to work through a problem,” Kropf explains. “Students can teach too, and they will come forward with their ideas.”

Kropf is excited to welcome students into her freshly renovated combination studio-classroom. Like a proud parent, she walks her visitor through the bright room, past a bookshelf full of volumes dedicated to her art, and along rows of tidy workstations with new tools resting nearby.

Part of the studio is being arranged with display shelves for future shows; another section is rented to a fellow artisan.

Kropf taught in partnership with Connie Godwin for nearly six years before embarking on her solo venture. She took over The Studio KW, on the second floor of a re-purposed shoe factory on St. Leger Street in Kitchener, in July.

For the busy mother of three children aged five and under, it was not an easy decision.

“It is not ideal timing,” she admits. “But you have to take it when something throws itself at you. I get to teach something that I love to do myself.”

Wanting to put her own stamp on the space, Kropf spent the first few weeks of ownership refurbishing the studio and investing in fresh tools. One unusual addition is a tree stump sitting near a worktable that is used for hammering metal into beautiful shapes.

Mindful of disturbing her neighbours with the noise, Kropf came up with a solution

for underneath that station. “It’s a horse stall mat,” she laughs. “I bought it at TSC.”

Kropf credits her husband, Dan Fogal, with providing the tree stump, and admits that she would not have been able to take over the business without his wholehearted support.

“He helps me with anything,” she says. “He is so supportive and passionate. He does my website, he did installations here, he cuts stumps for me!”

Married since 2009, the couple originally set up a studio for Kropf in the basement of their home.

Kropf’s creative ventures have always been a family affair – in fact, her mother was part of the reason she started down this path.

“My mom was really into gemstones, and we were doing some beading and making jewelry,” Kropf recalls.

Looking for something more challenging, in 2007 she enrolled in a continuing education course at Conestoga College in introductory jewelry-making and metal-smithing. Godwin was the teacher.

“I wanted to learn how to set stones,” she says with a laugh. “Which you don’t even learn in that class.”

But she was hooked on working with precious metals, and continued taking private lessons with Godwin.

By 2008, Kropf was selling her jewelry through art shows. She admits it was difficult at first. “It was tough, I tried a bit of social media. I did Art in the Yard in Elora, and Art in the Street in Guelph.”

Despite the early struggles, she began taking more commissions and found success in local galleries and shops.

She also found a mentor in Bob Evans, former owner of the Cobblestone Gallery.

“He was so helpful,” Kropf says. “He gave me tips about how to present my work. I found that artists need to have 20 to 25 pieces so there’s a larger display where people can see your collection.”

In late 2010, Kropf approached Godwin about teaching together and sharing studio space. Although teaching classes added to her already busy schedule, she found



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Kim Kropf took over The Studio KW on St. Leger Street in Kitchener in July.

working outside her home freed her to focus on her craft.

"I then started revamping my products into more cohesive collections," she explains.

Kropf is reluctant to describe herself as artistic, but clearly she has found her calling. "Designing gives me an outlet to take an idea that is floating around in my head and produce something permanent," she says.

Those designs are inspired by the metals she uses, and through discovering a variety of methods to shape metal, from casting to reticulaton. "I like the process or technique and from there I design the pieces from within," she says.

Kropf's jewelry is a study in contrasts. Although some pieces appear heavy, they are light and comfortable to wear. And she cleverly combines texture and sheen to create her unique collections. "I really like texture," she says. "I try to incorporate one if not two in all of my work."

Her search for new methods introduced her to cuttlefish casting. Finding inspiration in a bag of dusty looking cuttlefish bones seems unlikely, but she enthusiastically

explains how to carve intricate designs into the pliable bones to create moulds.

She recalls attempting to cast a square using the cuttlefish technique and being disappointed in the result. Eventually, she worked it into a stunning pendant. "That is one of my favourite pieces that didn't turn out (at first)," she says.

Now Kropf is not afraid of failure. "Even with my mistakes I am learning something," she says. "Some of my non-successes have become my biggest triumphs because we can reuse all the silver."

The ability to view mistakes as opportunity has contributed to making her a valuable instructor, longtime student Chantelle James says. "She is a great teacher because she was a student herself not that long ago," says James. "She has so much energy and so many ideas."

The Studio KW offers eight-week classes tailored to beginners, intermediate or more advanced students, as well as workshops. Advanced students such as James can also rent studio time to perfect a piece, with Kropf available to give guidance.

James is eager to work in the updated

space. "There are so many new tools," she says. "I like the stump and the horse stall carpet. Everyone does a bit of hammering to shape things."

Kropf's collaborative approach in the classroom studio appeals to James. "We see what others do, and learn from other people," she says. "She's good because she lets us figure out how to do things and is open to people's ideas."

James is also a great admirer of Kropf's work. "I love the finishes that she puts on her jewelry," she says. "She does a lot of casting and I love her cuttlefish work. I can learn that from her."

Kropf's students are not the only ones who appreciate her craft. Aileen Leadbetter, owner of the Cobblestone Gallery in Waterloo, describes it as "stunning."

Leadbetter took over Cobblestone last March and is delighted to have Kropf's work on display.

"It is really beautiful. People always admire it," Leadbetter says.

"The quality is exceptional. It is contemporary without being 'weird.' It is very simple, but there are lots of little design touches to it."

Customers often choose it to mark particular milestones.

Knowing this, Kropf puts a great deal of reflection into creating a collection. "It usually starts with one piece," she says. "You just go from that one piece and you know you need a statement necklace, a pendant and earrings."

It's not easy, Kropf says, and when things don't work right away she takes a few days away.

And perfecting a special commission, such as the wedding rings Kropf is casting on this day, is very important to her. "If I am not happy, I don't let it go," she says.

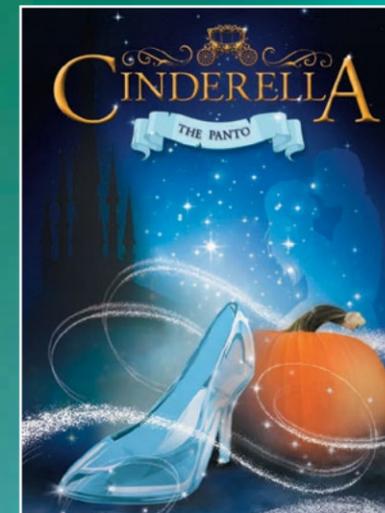
Kropf is animated when she talks about her work, but even more so when she contemplates her students.

"People start out and say, 'I can't do this.' And then they leave with a piece that they're so thrilled with. That's what I love about teaching." 

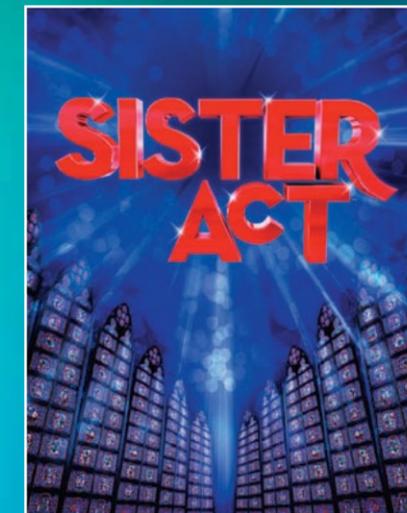
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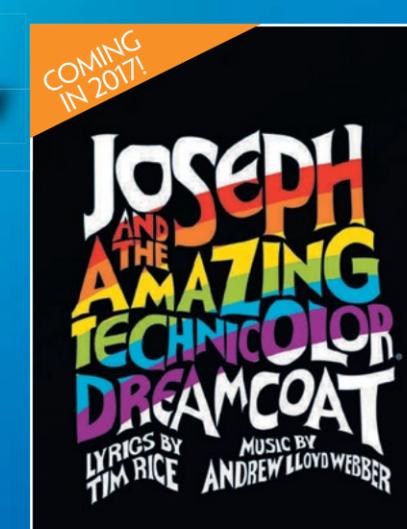
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