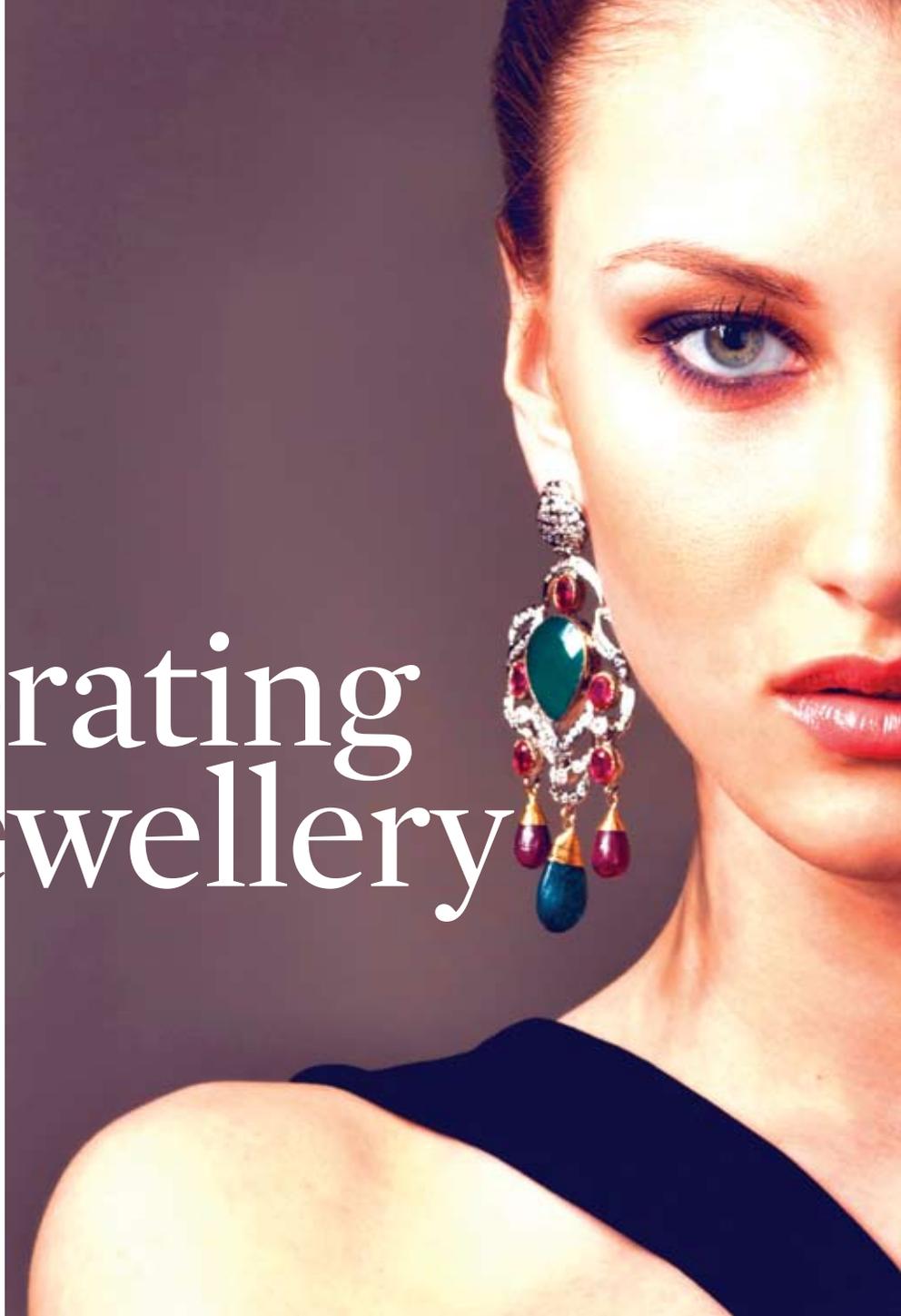


Celebrating jewellery

Camille Framroze meets Canada-based designer Sushma Kilachand who heads a network of sales agents for Dagmar Jewelry, a company renowned for being both artistic and altruistic. While creating its jewellery in India, it also gives 15 per cent of all proceeds to international charities



SUSHMA KILACHAND is never still. Whether she is bouncing around a room or punctuating her words with emphatic gestures, her energy just doesn't seem to run out. She channels this vast store into a multitude of activities and ventures, one of which is heading the sales of Dagmar Jewelry in North America.

"I'm not the sort of person who can work for someone else. I always wanted to have my own business," Sushma states emphatically. After all, surrounded by a family of entrepreneurs, she had a host of role models to choose from. Her decision to work in fashion, as she describes it, was almost inevitable.

"I always had access to a visual plethora of the most stunning architecture, jewels and fabric. We live in a hundred-year old house, with stained glass windows, sweeping courtyards... it's almost like you go back in time."

She recalls the many weddings hosted in the house that she attended as a child, with brides sweeping down the staircase and everyone dressed up to the nines. "Surrounded by that sort of visual inspiration, how can you not go into design?" Sushma asks with a smile.

After high school at Mumbai's Cathedral and John Connon, she graduated from the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising in Los Angeles in 1994.

She then went on to work with Saks Fifth Avenue in Boston for a year, but eventually decided to return to India where she started her own business in men's wear.

"It was just that I was extremely homesick and wanted to contribute to Indian society in some way."

Of course, those plans didn't include being swept off her feet! "I thought I was struck by lightning when I first met Ashish," Sushma laughs, reminiscing today.

Their first date stretched into a six-hour-long dinner at the end of which, at 2 a.m., the two were politely asked to leave the restaurant. They were married within a month, and that, Sushma says, is what took her from India to Canada.

Red-carpet representatives

Today, Sushma heads a network of independent sales agents for Dagmar Jewelry in North America. These representatives sell the jewellery through fund raisers, launch parties for celebrities, parties at home, etc.

Dagmar currently has 10 representatives in Canada and 20 in the United States. The jewellery is also widely sold through other store fronts and shopping channels.

One of the most unique things about Dagmar is that they change their collections every month and never repeat designs. "Everything is one-of-a-kind, and there is always something for everybody," Sushma says. She wears a lot of the creations herself.

"Indians grow up with jewellery. It is in our blood," Sushma points out. In fact, the country has the highest consumption of gold in the world. "Canadians, on the other hand, are extremely conservative in all aspects of their lives, as a result of which any sort of red-carpet piece is always greeted with skepticism. Can I, should I, will I? That's where I come in, to say, 'You look fantastic, what are you worried about, do it!'"



“I am not the sort of person who can work for someone else. I always wanted to have my own business,” Sushma states emphatically. After all, surrounded by a family of entrepreneurs, she had a host of role models to choose from. Her foray into the world of design seems almost fated

For Sushma, the Dagmar woman is one who is fashionable, enjoys dressing well, appreciates interesting conversation, is not obsessed with the way she looks but at the same time wants that one special piece to make her feel like a million bucks. Targeting this woman has always been important to Dagmar, as she is the one who does not have the advantage of variety in the selection of jewellery within her desired price range



The many faces of Sushma

Affordable creations

One of the most appealing aspects of the Dagmar collections, to Sushma personally, is its affordability. Dagmar is marketed mainly to the upper middle class. She describes the Dagmar woman as one who is “fashionable, enjoys dressing well, appreciates interesting conversations, is not obsessed about the way she looks but at the same time wants that one special piece to make her feel like a million bucks.”

Sushma states that she has always wanted to target this kind of woman because she is the one who does not have enough variety in selecting jewellery within her price range. “We offer the look of Bulgari and Tiffany’s, but at affordable pricing, and with Indian workmanship,” Sushma explains.

“I’ve always wanted a woman to be so enamoured of a piece that she has chosen that she is compelled to ask where it is from. It makes me really proud to say it is from India.”

Using cheaper materials, like semi-precious stones instead of diamonds and rubies, helps bring down the price of a piece. But at the end of the day, as she points out, the jewellery still has a lot a value.

Her favourite is their recent Nizam of Hyderabad Collection. “We took images of his personal collections and made them into affordable pieces that everyone can wear. We have used crystals or naturally-occurring stones, which keeps the prices down.”

A sense of civic responsibility also influences what Dagmar does with its revenue. “There has to be some level of social consciousness in everything you do, or you shouldn’t be doing anything to begin with,” Sushma says firmly. “You need to give back to countries and people that need it. Not to do so is shameful.”

Dagmar donates 15 per cent of all its proceeds to charity. Many of its beneficiaries are charities that work in South Asia, primarily with children.

“These are charities that I believe in and have an emotional connection to,” Sushma says. They include Children’s Hope, the Trillium Health Care Community Hospital, the Heart and Stroke Foundation of North America,

the Children’s Aid Society, Mount Sinai Children’s Hospital and Seva, a charity that effectively works with homeless women in Indian villages. They also organise fund raisers throughout the year.

She is now committed to bringing contemporary Indian art to Canada. She is currently working closely with Waddington’s, Canada’s only auction house, and their new gallery space, Concrete Contemporary. She travels to India regularly to procure South Asian art and market it in Canada.

“It is important to market Indian culture that is not part of Bollywood,” she says. “There is so much richness in our country that I feel that it is my moral obligation to educate my fellow Canadians about India.”

All of these responsibilities leave little room for children at the moment, but Sushma says that she might start a family within a year or two. She credits her own for a lot of what she has achieved. “My family is my backbone,” she says. “It means the world to me.”

She loves to watch movies and enjoys entertaining friends. She describes her ideal way to relax as having “a bunch of close friends at home, opening a fabulous bottle of wine, cooking a great meal, and having an interesting conversation.”

And there are a lot of interesting people around to meet! Sushma believes that the South Asian immigrant population is much more mature than it used to be, and more aware of what India is really like.

“The previous generation was stuck in a time warp believing that India today was the same India that they had left.”

That is certainly changing. “People like us, the younger generation of Canada, have traveled back enough to know that India is more than just Bollywood. We are confident that Canadians will be receptive to the variety it has to offer.” ☑