



Sew far so good

ANNAH STRETTON

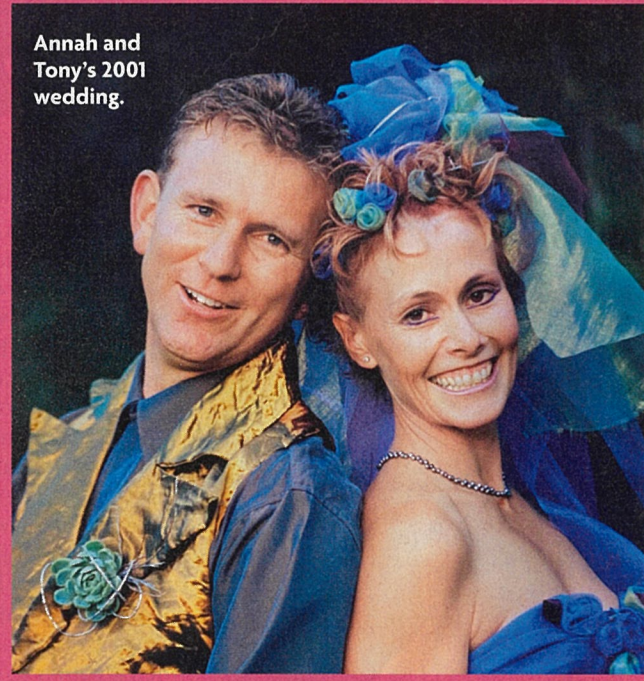
The Kiwi designer has fashioned a family empire that's taken off since making Covid masks for charity

Annah Stretton was 12 when she proudly donned her first fashion creation to the Scouts social in Havelock North. "My mum Vicki taught me a lot of things I see as forgotten skills now – knitting, sewing and cooking," she reflects. "For my first social, she helped me sew an orange '70s seersucker dress. I was quite proud!"

Five decades later, Annah, 61, remains a leading Kiwi designer, whose love for fashion has evolved into a family business which supports philanthropy – a move which helped save the brand from pre-Covid struggles.

Annah chats to the *Weekly* from her home in Hamilton about working with her 32-year-old daughter Sami, how becoming a grandmother to 10-month-old daughter Lily has transformed her life and why her husband Tony's the ultimate romantic.

You trained as an accountant after a dare from your father Pete before launching your label in 1992. What were you hoping to achieve? My goal was to become a strong rural retailer, because I saw that gap. Then I started thinking about Fashion Weeks and became more design-focused rather than just creating affordable clothing. We moved into cities and developed the Annah Stretton



Annah and Tony's 2001 wedding.



Annah at 12 in the dress she and her mum made for a social. "We followed that up with a red-and-white dress with puff sleeves. Those dresses were my first memory of being in a space of wanting to make my own decisions and knowing exactly what I wanted."

brand from what started as Annah S.

How did you get the unique spelling of Annah?

I was christened Annabel and disliked it, so everyone called me Anna, but I felt the spelling was plain. When I got into business, I saw "Annah" and thought, "Wow, what a great way to spell it" and officially changed my name.

Your children were young when you launched the label. How did you juggle everything?

I didn't know anything else. The business was in a purpose-built building we moved onto our dairy farm in Morrinsville, so the children functioned the same way they would with a stay-home mum

– I just happened to be across the driveway in a big building. I'd drop them at school, work, pick them up, then they'd do homework in my office.

How did they adjust to you splitting from their dad John and finding love with Tony?

Sami was nine and Edward was seven when I married Tony. It was really disruptive and I have nothing but regret – not because of the relationship I'm in now, but because of the hurt it created. Tony was the principal of the kids' school, so the community became very divided. But sometimes marriages don't work out and I have massive admiration for the way John's parented the kids with me, even after the

pain and hurt that happened. Our difficulties never became the children's difficulties.

I can imagine the gossiping in a small-town school...

Yes! It was a tough time, but you build resilience from it.

You and Tony recently marked 20 years of marriage. What's helped you go the distance?

Tony has an acronym, FLIP – friendship, love, integrity and passion. We're still independent, but we have a great friendship and an innate love for each other. I've had two great marriages, so I've been incredibly lucky.

What's the most romantic thing Tony's done for you?

I came home on a birthday or anniversary and he'd



The design powerhouse admits, "Some people might see my life as exhausting."

'We started making masks for anyone who reached out to us'

← perfectly cut a million red hearts out of paper, and written little messages on them. A massive trail started at the entrance, then led to this gorgeous space he'd set up with Champagne. Above the bed, he'd built a massive heart out of the small ones, so each little heart went through to a huge heart on our ceiling.

This sounds like a scene from a rom-com!

It was beautiful. He also proposed over the radio! He's the most romantic man I've had in my life.

Is he into fashion?

He worked with us for years and we do lots of design together around our home. He's now working at the Waikato Women's Refuge, where I'm the chair of their governance board. When Sami came into the business, Tony was ready for something else.

When did Sami first show an interest in fashion?

From a really young age because she lived and breathed it. She watched TV, ate dinner and played around the business because it was in the lounge and bedrooms before we got the building. She did a Bachelor of Commerce, then worked in the footwear buying teams for The Warehouse Group and Rivers Australia.

She's now your GM. How much of a learning curve was it evolving your mother-daughter bond into a business partnership?

It's really hard because I have 30 years of knowledge, hard knocks and knowing the right way to do things, but have to accept there are new ways of thinking. And I need to let Sami make her own mistakes and find her own way. But there is no greater thing than working with your daughter and I get a double whammy in that I also work with my mum Vicki, who's 82. She comes in every day and loves it.

You must have seen so many changes in the industry over

'As long as I'm in love with what I'm doing, I see it as healthy'



Below: Son Edward with his daughter Lily. Right: Anna works with daughter Sami.



Right: Anna's masked team.



three decades. What were some of the early challenges?

The accountancy degree helped as I had both a creative mind and business brain. And the market wasn't saturated then. It wasn't until the last few years it's become harder because people can now buy fashion anywhere, anytime, at any price. We were wondering whether fashion was even going to be our thing long-term because it's not easy any more, but Covid changed everything for us.

How so?

A charity reached out needing 6000 masks and I went, "We've got 30 years of fabric and elastics, and a whole team. I'll make them and won't charge you." We started making masks, put a picture on social media, then my daughter called saying, "The post's going off!" People were fearful and wanting masks, so we started making them for anyone who reached out – hospitals, the women's refuge. We engaged the community

by saying, "If you have a sewing machine and want to make masks for charities, we'll supply everything." Demand became so big, then exploded after Auckland faced another lockdown and Ashley Bloomfield recommended mask-wearing. It was insanity. We put over half-a-million masks out there. It brought people to our website and they went, "I'll have a look around." Then the government encouraged supporting local brands,

so the label went through the roof.

What have been some of the challenges of juggling work and family life?

I've always been what society would call a workaholic. But I don't see it as that because I love what I do. The other day, I overheard my husband say to someone, "If I had to go on holiday with Anna and she didn't have a project, it would drive me insane. She needs to be so occupied." We're all of different ilks and as much as

people might see my life as exhausting, I find life balance through working in spaces I love and on projects I love. As long as I'm in love with what I'm doing, I see it as healthy.

What's been a standout catwalk moment from over the years?

It's got to be when I put the boar's head on the catwalk at Fashion Week. I designed that outfit for the World of Wearable Art Awards and decided to give it another run because there was so much

work that had gone into it. I think we got the front page of every newspaper and people still bring up that boar today.

What's your 30-year-old son Edward up to?

He's got a building company in Mt Maunganui and had his first child, Lily, who's everything to me! You think you can't love anything more than your children, but Lily's added another dimension to everything I am.

So, you're a gran now! We're still working out what

I'm going to call myself. Edward said I need to hurry because when they talk to Lily about me, they don't know what to call me.

That's hilarious you still don't know after 10 months.

I'm so decisive generally, but it's really hard getting my head around nana/grandma! **Especially being in the fashion world too, do you feel those insecurities that can come with ageing?**

I love it. I think differently, approach things differently and know there's so much to be grateful for because some people don't make 60. I don't feel a day over 30! The other day, I thought, "If I've got 10 good years of contribution left, how can I make them count?" That's the only time I've started thinking about it. My health will determine how far I go and I'm overzealous with what I eat and do.

And what do you drink?

I start with Nespresso, move onto tea, then enjoy a Pinot Noir Rosé in the evening in summer or Syrah in winter. But I'm trying to have more alcohol-free days.

You also own a café?

We have Café Frock and what is exciting is that women from RAW [Reclaim Another Woman – a charity Anna founded in 2014, which helps recidivist offenders build better lives] work there.

We specialise in amazing toasted sandwiches and are looking at franchising to give women from RAW the opportunity to own a small business.

What do you do on a day off?

The great thing about Lily is she's forced me to have time out. When she's staying, they bring her out to me at 5am and I get three solid hours of just Lily and me. We do photo bombs or go to the beach and I can't work. If I want to get an email away, Lily wants to help! Lily coming into my life has been the absolute circuit-breaker of work.