

SILVER LININGS

FEELING LOST AFTER FINISHING SCHOOL AND STUCK IN LOCKDOWN, LILI GARD SOON DISCOVERED A PASSION FOR MAKING JEWELLERY AND A GAP IN THE MARKET. ONE YEAR ON, IT'S NOW A THRIVING ONLINE BUSINESS, WRITES SARAH BIESKE



WHEN Lili Gard embarked on a late-night internet search for a pair of earrings, she never imagined that 12 months later she would be making and selling earrings herself.

She was on the lookout for something simple, a bit fun, wasn't going to break the bank, but still good quality. After hours of scrolling, she couldn't find anything that ticked all the boxes.

"I found a pair with a simple charm for \$120, and I just thought that was so expensive for what they were," Lili says.

"So I did a bit of research and I worked out that I could make something similar for myself for \$15 or less, so I ordered some hoops and some charms and that's when it started."

At the time, the 20-year-old was studying her Diploma of Nursing at The Gordon TAFE and working three jobs as a waitress, a lifeguard and a nanny. Understandably, the thought of starting her own business on top of everything else never even crossed her mind.

But it was her friends who gave her the push she needed to turn her new-found hobby into something more.

"When I ordered the materials to make mine, I made a few pairs for friends to give to them, and they started getting a lot of compliments on their earrings," Lili says. "I started with some lightning bolt pendants and little stars and moons to some crosses and circles. Lockdown had just started so I had the time to sit and do it and I just really enjoyed doing it for fun."

But that 'fun' sparked a passion she didn't realise she had. Reluctant but ready to test the waters, she launched Lil Jewellery, a tribute to her name, but also her love of 'little' jewellery.

She created an Instagram page to see how much interest there was in her earring designs and whether or not they would actually sell.

"I sold 200 pairs of earrings in a matter of days," she recalls. "I was making them, packaging them, delivering products locally and posting orders, it was all a bit of a whirlwind."

It was also a make or break moment for Lili and her new business venture.

"After those initial sales I had to put up a 'sold out' sign on my page because it just was so crazy and I felt as though I couldn't keep up," Lili says.

"I realised I had really found a gap in the market but I had so much other stuff going on that I just didn't have the time to make that many sales. That's when I realised that I needed to pull back from one of my other jobs if I was serious about giving this a real go. And I felt like

"YOU DON'T ALWAYS HAVE TO GO TO UNI, YOU DON'T HAVE TO STUDY, DOING SOMETHING OUTSIDE THE BOX IS OK."

after those first few days that maybe this could actually be something."

Self doubt was Lili's biggest enemy as she weighed up the pros and cons of taking the leap into the business world. The former Sacred Heart College student admits she was terrified people would think she was just another wannabe creative.

"I was really scared of the judgement and being another young girl trying to start her own business on Instagram, but I've learned that it's so worth giving it a go and no one is going to turn to you and say 'it's stupid, it's not going to work'," she says. "But I really did doubt myself so

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much. Putting yourself out there is really scary."

Her fears proved to be unfounded and Lil Jewellery is about to celebrate its first birthday with a pop up store in Newtown on June 19-20.

Lil Jewellery now includes Lili's popular pendant earrings as well as necklaces, rings, hair clips, affirmation jewellery and a new men's range.

She runs her business from the pool house out the back of her parents' Newtown home and says the entire process, from designing to making the jewellery, has become like therapy.

"It's so relaxing, I actually get up and look forward to getting into it," she says. "Being a nurse, you don't get to be creative with that, but it's so nice to have this creative outlet."

Her customer base extends from Geelong to Melbourne, Sydney and even Perth.

While young women Lili's age were initially her target market, she says friends of her 14-year-old brother love her products as much as her mum's friends in their 50s.

She sticks to simple, timeless, on-trend, quality jewellery and even asks her loyal buyers what they want to see next.

"I work out what doesn't sell as well and I won't invest in those products any more. I like knowing what my customers want to buy," she says.

As well as her online website, Lili has also sold her jewellery range at local markets, which is her favourite way to meet her loyal customers.

"I had a line of people waiting to look at my stall and I sold out of almost everything," she says of her first market. "I walked away feeling so overwhelmed and I thought, 'I've really achieved something here'."

Lili's first foray into the jewellery world was as an ambitious 14-year-old. She made clay earrings, sold them to fellow students and even had them



Geelong's Lili Gard started her jewellery business Lil Jewellery during lockdown last year. Photos: Alison Wynd

stocked in a couple of local shops. But it proved to be short-lived as school and bit-jobs took over.

Initially, Lili planned to go to university after completing Year 12 — not so much because she wanted to, but she felt it was expected. When she didn't get in, Lili's plans were turned upside down.

"After finishing Year 12 I was so lost. I really struggled with that transitioning from school to adult life and when I didn't get into uni, I really felt like I had failed," she says.

"But not getting into uni, in hindsight, it worked out really well for me because I really had the time to give this business a go.

"I'm the one drawing up the rings or the earrings and I'm the one making them — I get to do it all and I never knew that I could actually do all of that until I tried it, it's not something you learn at school.

"You don't always have to go to uni, you don't have to study, doing something outside the box is OK. You shouldn't be defined by your ATAR.

"I didn't get into uni, I went to TAFE and I was so bummed about it, but had I gone to uni I wouldn't have started this. I'm so grateful this is how it worked out because I've discovered something that I really love to do."

Down the track, Lili hopes to employ a social media team to help grow her business. But right

now she's content being a one-woman show.

"I've learnt so much about myself doing this. I'm not fussed about the figures, but when I see the customer when they order something and it's their third or fourth order, or when people come to each of my markets, it's that customer base that keeps me going," she says.

"People come up to me at the markets and tell me they came just to see me, it makes me feel so happy to hear that."

Lil Jewellery's pop-up store on June 19-20 will be held at 28 Lambert Avenue, Newtown. Follow @liljewellery_ on Instagram or shop at liljewellery.com.au

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