



*The
Jewellers'
Story.*

MC
METAL CONCENTRATORS

REAL STORIES

In Conversation with Chris Van Rensburg

*Words by
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on behalf of
Metal Concentrators*

As the owner of Studio C Manufacturing Jewellers, Chris has managed to blend a flair for creative mastery with the demands of the various markets he supplies. He is both a craftsman and a businessman with a reputation for utmost honesty.

He has been elected Chairman of the Jewellery Council of South Africa for nine years – an acknowledgement of his leadership acumen and extensive knowledge of the industry. His business operates from the heavily guarded wing of a smart office block in leafy Parktown.

Chris strides briskly into the reception area and nods. Clapped to his head is a jeweller's magnifying mask. His fingers are grey with metal filings. With business-like brusqueness, he says:

"You must be Michael ... come through."

He leads me to his office, a large room with character, the walls adorned with awards. Every flat surface is covered with paperwork and articles, jewellery and prototypes, depicting a man who is busy with many things simultaneously. He rips off the headpiece, dusts his hands with perfunctory nonchalance and he looks at me sternly.

"Where do you want to start?"

"Tell me how your business is doing ..."

"The truth ... not great! We have been under a huge amount of pressure in South Africa, as has the rest of the world with the economic downturn. We as manufacturers face the onerous obligation to adhere to regulations as set out in the Mining Charter which was never drafted for jewellery manufacturers."

"That doesn't sound encouraging."

"Back in the days of isolation South African manufacturing wholesalers were 100% self-sufficient. However, with our re-entry into

the global arena in the 90's, our local market gained access to the much cheaper products manufactured in the East. Many local manufacturers stopped recapitalising their businesses and became importing wholesalers. As a result of this, very little employment and training took place which has led to a lack of capacity to supply the local market. Today 80% of fine jewellery is imported. But things are changing now. For a number of reasons, it is no longer cheap to import. However, South Africa does not have the capacity to supply the market."

"Doesn't this imply there is a potential opportunity?"

"Absolutely, there is a great opportunity for the remaining jewellers manufacturing in South Africa with the market already consuming a large portion of imported fine jewellery. We need to take advantage of this and increase local content, build capacity and overcome the poor skills transfer programmes of the past."

"You have spoken about the industry. Tell me about Chris Van Rensburg ... what's your story?" A glimmer of a smile flickers across Chris's features.

"I grew up in Nelspruit. From a young age I realised I had a creative talent. At school, I started making jewellery from brass. My friend and I wanted to do our toolmaking apprenticeship at Iscor, but instead took an apprenticeship with a manufacturing jeweller in Nelspruit. Then followed my army service. I started my own business in 2000."

"What has helped you to get to where you are?"

"Quite early, I recognised the benefits of technology. I decided that I would import a printing machine, which was to be the first in South Africa. In 2004 I bought a R500,000 3D printer from a company in France. I then flew over there and the manufacturers of the 3D printer in America offered me the agency for South Africa and over the next two years I imported and sold 38 machines."

"What advice would you give to aspiring jewellers wanting to start their own business?"

"Go into it with your eyes wide shut. Embrace technology to enable yourself to be globally competitive in conjunction with traditional manufacturing methods."

"What is perfect happiness for you?"

"Contentment – one of my favourite words. I am happy with who I am and content with life as is. I'm at a liberating stage of my life ... seeking contentment."

"What is your greatest fear?"

"Failure! I always acknowledge where I came from – my humble beginnings. I will never allow my rear windscreen to get fogged-up."

“Who of your peers do you most admire?”

“Ernie Blom – for his composure. He is always so controlled in every situation. He sets a wonderful example of what I aspire to with all of his years of experience in the industry.”

“What do you do for leisure?”

“I love cooking and entertaining. I’m a “Dutchman” ... it all happens around a fire!

“I also love riding my motorbike – a sport called ‘foot-up trials’ and often spend my weekends riding.”

Chris’s face really lights up.

“I’ve never heard of it.”

“I belong to a club and we use specially modified ‘trials bikes’. We ride in places that even humans struggle to get on foot. Here let me show you a video clip ... this guy is a champion!”

“Wow – this looks really dangerous! Surely you can hurt yourself – especially if you fall off the top of one of those piles of rocks or the side of a mountain?”

“I have had a few tumbles. But we start off easy and practice to get better.”

“Okay! So patently you are not afraid of hard work. When and where are you the most productive?”

“My problem is that no-one can do it as well as I can, so I’m always trying to do everything myself.”

“On what occasion do you lie?”

“Never! Being too open and honest has often got me into trouble. I’ve paid the price ... I have found out that not everyone’s a friend!”

“What is your greatest regret?”

“No regrets! I’d do it all again!”

“What or who is the greatest love of your life?”

“My son Jannie. He works in the business – he has become my inspiration and driving force!”

Chris is silent for a few seconds and then says:

“Follow me – I want to show you the works.”

He leads me through the reception and into the manufacturing area. It steams with industrious activity. Around twenty crafts persons are intently engaged at benches and machines. We arrive at Chris’s workbench. It is scattered with numerous rings in various stages of creation. He picks up a few classically-styled diamond rings and shows me.

“I have an order for 200 of these. It’s seriously boring work. Here, this what I really enjoy ...”

He picks up half a dozen heavy rings in assorted caricatures of a human skull. Their unpolished grins exude a macabre beauty.

“These are fun and there is an expanding market for this kind of stuff.”

As we walk back towards his office he stops as a young man approaches.

“Meet my son Jannie!”

He is a handsome youth with a deferential manner. We shake hands and he smiles politely.

Back in the office Chris shows me the cast of a ring.

“I love making different things – this was a concrete ring that won first prize in the jewellery category of the PPC competition in 2015.”

“That is so unusual. So how would your closest friends describe you?”

“I don’t really want to sound boastful. What I can say is that I had a bunch of friends around for my birthday recently ... and everyone said very nice things about me. But I was the host and supplying lots to drink ...”

“Which talent would you most like to have?”

“To sing! I can play the guitar, the trumpet, the trombone – but I can’t sing to save my life!”

“What do you consider your greatest achievement?”

“Coming from where I did ... to where I am today. Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined that I would be Chairman of the Jewellery Council of South Africa.”

“For what would you most like to be remembered?”

“Turning the industry on its head through the introduction of technology.”

“What do you see as the future for the industry?”

“I believe that the face of the retail jewellery industry will change dramatically in the future. The concept of having high-value goods in a retail environment is no longer viable ... high rentals and cost of insurance, but most importantly, security and the loss of human life. A different business model needs to be developed.”

What are you going to do about it?”

“Watch this space!”

The Jewellers' Story.

An initiative from Metal Concentrators.

Neville Crosse, his wife Charlotte and son Grant purchased Metal Concentrators (Pty) Ltd (Metcon) in late 2015 and rapidly became aware of the issues and difficulties faced by retail jewellers and manufacturing jewellers on a day to day basis. This led to a lot of thought and discussions as to whether Metcon could play a role in improving the sustainability of the industry.

To that end, Metcon created The Jewellers' Story. An initiative intended to provide a platform for dialogue and debate within the industry.

The first phase was a series of published caricatures presenting the compelling case to the public that purchasing South African manufactured goods has a number of benefits for the jewellery purchaser as well as developing the industry to be more inclusive of all the talented people in the country.

The second phase seeks not only to highlight the most apparent issues, but as a space to share knowledge and wisdom from the most senior and innovative participants, and to nurture emerging talented jewellery makers, as well as to help established businesses struggling to compete at the global industry level. To tell important stories. To share lessons learned. To establish a sense of community within the industry.

There are many challenges ahead for the industry, from both direct and indirect forces. Only by working together to confront them as a community can we triumph over them and provide a new hope for all South African jewellery retailers and manufacturers.

This hope we place in The Jewellers' Story.

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