

# The Jewellers' Story

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July	Gold
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## REAL STORIES

# MC

METAL CONCENTRATORS

# *In Conversation with*

# *Dr Petré Prins*

*Words by  
Michael Pryke  
on behalf of  
Metal Concentrators*

I arrived at the elegant building known as Huguenot House and shook hands with Dr Petré Prins. He briefly touched my arm in a comradely gesture. Tall and slim, he beamed a genuinely deferential welcome, smiling with blue eyes that twinkled like the magnificent gems displayed in discrete cabinets around the uniquely restored showroom of the historical building.

As he led me towards his office, we passed through another large showroom where a group of five were admiring the displays. They recognised him immediately and greeted him affectionately like old friends. They talked excitedly together, and it was apparent that they were old customers showing their friends the delightful creations of Prins & Prins Jewellers. After a few minutes of animated conversation, he excused himself and ushered me through the open-air courtyard into another section of the premises.

“This is an incredible building!” I enthused. “How did you come to own it?”

*“I was so lucky. Back in 1993, before our democratic election, I managed to buy it at a reasonable cost. It was built in 1752 and is one of three residences in Loop Street that were restored to their original state.”*

Inside, the original timber of the heavily beamed ceilings creates an old-world ambience that is reproduced throughout by the exquisite furnishings and objet d’art.

“It must be worth a fortune today?” I prompt.

*“I am sure it is,”* he demurs sagely.

Now in his office, redolent with artefacts, paintings, and collectibles, Petré responds to my question about his education.

*“I was born and schooled in Robertson – it was an entirely Afrikaans community. After high school, I was offered a government bursary to become a teacher. When I arrived at Stellenbosch University, I could not speak a word of English.*

*During my first year, I discovered geology and realised what I wanted to study... so I switched courses and was allowed to continue. I went on to complete an M.Sc. in Geology and Geochemistry. Then I was offered another scholarship... this time for Cambridge."*

"How did that happen?"

*"I suppose I was a hard worker," he replies humbly. "And also, my Master's thesis won top honours," he adds, almost as an afterthought.*

"And you obtained your doctorate at Cambridge?" I surmise.

*"No," he smiles. "It wasn't so easy. My time at Cambridge ran out while I was researching the doctorate. Back then in '70, '71, the bursary allowed me to buy my first car – a Morris 1100. For months, my friends and I toured through Europe in that little car! No wonder I could not finish my research."*

"So, what happened after that?" I continue.

*"While in England I received an unexpected call from Professor Wilhelm Verwoerd at Stellenbosch, offering me a unique opportunity to join the faculty as a lecturer in Geology and Geochemistry. And so, I spent the next twelve years at Stellenbosch... they were the most wonderful bachelor years!" he reminisces.*

"So, when did you get married?" I probe somewhat tactlessly.

*"That was not until much later. I was 48 when I married Carina, a lovely woman much younger than me – she was 29. We have been happy together for 25 years. That's a picture of her over there," he points.*

"Okay, so you've lectured for twelve years – what next?"

*"I wanted to move up in the faculty but Prof. Verwoerd was still young, and there was no position for me. I realised I had to do something else. I completed an MBA, and there I was at 35, looking for a job, thinking I should try marketing. So, I prepared a fancy CV and sent it to Anton Rupert who invited me to a talk. He advised... 'If I were you, I would stick to what I know! You know rocks, diamonds, minerals – go sell rocks!'"*

*It certainly pointed me in the right direction. I looked in the telephone directory for any company involved in diamonds and came across Oetha Diamonds. I posted my CV which included my photograph. The next day I attended a party in Stellenbosch and Christo Wiese, who owned Oetha, recognised me from the photograph. He came up to me and said 'Hey – I've got a job for you – come see me tomorrow!'"*

"Talk about luck!"

*"Sure... so I saw him, and he offered me a position at Oetha Diamond Brokers... running the retail operation that included exports and a goldsmiths studio."*

"That must have been exciting!"

*“Yes and no... it was chaos. Soon after I joined, the diamond market collapsed. In 1980, the price of a D Flawless was \$50,000 a carat. The next year it dropped to \$10,000 a carat. That’s the environment in which I started. Two years later Christo said, ‘I’m selling everything and going back to PEP... you can come with me or take over your division!’. So, I decided to buy the company and Christo financed me over five years.”*

*“Here you are 35 years later, obviously very successful!”*

*“But we have had some serious setbacks. I worked every Saturday and on my own most evenings until seven. Big Mistake. In 1993, one week before our wedding, thieves posing as customers got in after-hours and cleaned me out. During the robbery, they shot me in the head – so, at the wedding, I had an ugly blue eye!*

*Sometime later we had a second robbery... I have had to start over twice. However, we recovered... building up the business again based on our strong foundation of trust and goodwill. The premise of our business philosophy has always been to offer customers a unique and unforgettable experience... and to instil the utmost in customer confidence.”*

*“How do you do that?” I enquire, intrigued.*

*“Most importantly, training I like to teach.” Petré smiles genuinely. “. . . and I ensure that all our staff are highly qualified. They must be able to add to the customer experience with confidence and competence. Then there is the element of trustworthiness. We will encourage a potential buyer to inspect a diamond through the microscope, and we will even point out the flaws and openly sell those flaws as part of the unique beauty of the stone. We have built the business on expertise, trust, and honesty. We have created a family of seventeen people, some of whom have been with us for over 25 years.*

*For the past 30 years, I have accumulated statistics on the origin of every client that we served, what they bought and their personal detail.”*

*“So where do your customers come from and how have you built such a reputation?”*

*“Many of our customers are repeat business... or referrals from other satisfied customers. We also get tourist referrals from hotels and tour guides. We try to offer a different experience. In fact, we have created a small museum downstairs next to the workshop – it is a particularly popular attraction for visitors. Come let me show you!”*

Petré leads me through the large reception area and down a narrow staircase.

*“Mind your head!” he warns.*

At the bottom, we enter a neat workshop. The low vaulted ceilings add a mystic atmosphere.

*“This used to be the original wine cellar,” he explains. “And through here is the museum.” he says, gesturing down a corridor that opens into a series of small nooks and open spaces.*

As we move through each section of the delightful museum, Petré is engaging and enthusiastic as he explains every display. Back in the workshop he says:

*“We allow customers to watch their creation being crafted. Our oriental clients, in particular, like to see their diamonds being set. We specialise in one-off, hand-crafted pieces and can design and manufacture an item within 24 hours. I never trained as a goldsmith, but after three decades of managing a workshop, I know exactly what a goldsmith’s job entails.”*

In his office, I ask him about the future of the jewellery business in South Africa.

*“The big problem we face is that we are not preparing for the future. The enormous task for our industry is to educate people to counter the challenges that lie ahead. The core competencies that new entrants bring are simply not adequate. Also, there are no available courses in jewellery business management. People in our industry must have in-depth knowledge so that they can earn the confidence of the client. It’s all about training, training, training! In addition, we’re being regulated out of our shoes – the current laws are utterly impractical ... and in fact, they are driving many businesses under.”*

“I believe you have also written a couple of industry handbooks that are regarded as the best in their class.” I prompt.

“Yes,” he replies, getting up to bring two thick manuals. *“This one is for retailers and the other for goldsmiths.”*

I browse through them. They are replete with detailed hand-drawn illustrations, all done by Petré.

“These look so comprehensive – they should be mandatory for anyone wanting to learn about the business!”

“Thank you,” he says shyly. *“It was much work, but I enjoyed it. And now it is time for lunch ... please, you will join me?”* he offers.

We continue our conversation at a delightful little eatery across the road. He shares his wife’s desire for him to hand over the business so they can spend more time at their house in the French countryside and do more traveling together. He explains the difficulty he faces in leaving a business to which he has devoted so many years of his life. As the time nears to say farewell, I feel I have been privileged to meet with a man of such experience who humbly blends the twin qualities of honour and pride within an increasingly challenging industry.

## **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.