

*The
Jewellers'
Story.*

REAL STORIES

MC

METAL CONCENTRATORS

In Conversation with Michael Pneuma

*Words by
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on behalf of
Metal Concentrators*

I met with Michael Pneuma at Pneuma Jewellers situated in the quaint Crowthorne Shopping Centre in Midrand. I was shown into his office where he greeted me effusively. His blue eyes twinkled mischievously. He wore a chequered shirt, open at the neck displaying a twine thong on which hung a carved fish in antique opal.

“Would you like some coffee – Greek style – we like it strong?”

I explained the initiative by Metal Concentrators SA (Pty) Ltd (Metcon) through which they are playing an active role in improving the sustainability of the South African jewellery industry.

“Through a series of personal stories with leading jewellers, they are highlighting the significant issues facing the jewellery industry, creating a space to share knowledge and to encourage the industry to be more inclusive of all the talented people in our country. They want to help local jewellers to compete globally and establish a sense of community within the industry.” I replied.

“Well, we certainly share a common interest. Where would you like to start?” queried Michael.

“Let’s go to the beginning ... tell me your story?”

Michael smiled – a generous smile that radiated warmth. *“How much time do we have?”* he chuckled.

“As long as you want.” I said, feeling already that this was going to be an interesting conversation.

“I came to South Africa at the age of 13. After finishing my schooling in 1983, I started my apprenticeship in the jewellery trade. I studied traditional European jewellery manufacturing techniques which included both Italian and Arabic methods. Four years later in 1987, I opened my own small business.”

“Well, I can see that 30 years later you seem to be doing well!” I commented, looking out the door to the impressive display of jewellery in the display cabinets around the reception area.

Michael looked at me with a wistful expression.

“Ah yes,” he sighed. “I have certainly had my highs and lows in this business ... and I have learned some valuable lessons along the way!”

“Tell me more,” I encouraged.

“Back in June of 2001, I was due to depart for America for an important exhibition representing small jewellers in SA. I had invested a significant amount in the design and manufacture of a consignment of high-end progressive African pieces to showcase our ability. On the 6th – the day before I was due to depart, my visa was revoked. There was some mix-up at Home Affairs. By the time it got resolved, it was too late – I missed the exhibition and I was left with a pile of products that I could not sell locally.”

“That must have been tough!” I commented.

“It was at the time,” retorted Michael. “But as I reflected on my personal loss, I thought about the others who had also been affected. It made me recognise that there were others who were struggling – young South Africans with so much talent – many of whom lacked the training to get jobs or start their own businesses in this industry.

So, in 2002 I started getting involved in training. After a while, I was accepted into the Technical Reference Group of the MQA (mining qualifications authority) SETA for the writing and validating of all learning material for the training of goldsmiths and setters and by 2006/7 I was employed by the Department of Labour to train the first black trade test official and mentor him to take over the Oliphantfontein Trade Test Center for Goldsmiths.

Over the last ten years Pneuma Jewellers has trained and placed 53 students in the jewellery manufacturing industry, of which 90% are historically disadvantaged. An additional 64 students comprising a mix of goldsmiths and diamond-setters will complete their training in January 2017-2018.”

“That’s impressive! And what’s next?”

“Last month we received the wonderful news that the Quality Council of Trades and Occupations (QCTO) has accredited Pneuma Jewellers as a trade test centre. We will now be able to provide trade test readiness assessments and trade testing in goldsmithing and diamond setting, as well as skills-gap assessment and training.”

“Congratulations! How many other trade test centres are there?”

“Currently, Pneuma Jewellers is the only Jewellery company in Gauteng to hold accreditation as a skills development provider with the MQA and the QCTO. Come – let me show you some of their work.”

Michael led me first through the front shop and showroom where a selection of exquisite jewellery creations were tastefully displayed. He opened up cabinets and pointed out a number of pieces that had been created by his students – multi-coloured gems set in truly innovative settings that ranged from the delightfully simple to breathtakingly intricate and detailed.

“Just look at this talent ... it’s amazing what our young South African artisans are producing – and these are still students in training! At the recent Platafrica 2016, Pneuma Jewellers took first and third place.” He said proudly.

Michael then took me through a security door into the training section of his premises. It was much larger than I expected and consisted of a number of rooms, all full of specialized equipment and filled with at least 60 fully kitted-out stations for students to learn and practice their trade.

“I know that the industry has its challenges – give me your perspectives.” I asked

“Well, let’s start with the Gold Loan Scheme. Metal is only available to larger manufacturers – those that can afford to purchase between 5 to 10kg. But smaller businesses need assistance to purchase gold and the industry needs a business capable of managing this segment, with approval from the Regulator.

In fact, we have already had enormous support from Metcon. They have donated a rapid prototyping machine and a Tig welder to Pneuma Jewellers for use in training and they provide funding assistance for 5 trainees. They have agreed to assist 5 of our graduates to open their own businesses, and will provide them with sufficient work to survive whilst those graduates grow their own client base.”

Michael took a phone call and Dieter and I chatted about his many years in the business. when the call was over, Michael said:

“Look at the time! Come and join me for lunch. There’s a good place downstairs.”

Michael’s amiable and laid-back demeanour belies his determination and vision. As we ate, I learned that he has

registered a section 21 non-profit organisation called “The Foundation for Skills Empowerment”. He wants it to be entirely inclusive, attracting relevant stakeholders including the Regulator, DTI, MQA and other large manufacturing concerns.

As we said farewell, I realised that he is a man with a big heart and a big dream. The industry needs more people like him!

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.