

Lessons Learned

Memorable Advice, Mentors, and More

By Sharon Elaine Thompson

Five questions for Annamari Mikkola, founder of Annamari Mikkola Creative in New Canaan, Connecticut. Mikkola has taken to CAD design and 3-D printing to create both custom work for clients, as well as design accessories to complement existing product lines.



What is the most memorable advice you ever received?

The advice you hear repeated over and over again in all the business seminars: Don't sell yourself or your work cheap. You pay a lawyer or a plumber an hourly rate, and you should ask the same for yourself. You spend hours educating yourself and training. You have expensive tools and materials. You may have to rent a studio. But it's not just the stones and materials—it's also your design time. You need to be reimbursed for your talents. I'm also a graphic designer. I've always been able to charge my hourly rate, so this came naturally to me.



Pod pendant: 3-D printed using steel powder, from a stereolithography (STL) file; gold-plated

What is the biggest mistake you ever made?

Early on, I thought I'd sell handmade, small-edition jewelry. I purchased all this equipment for my studio. Shortly after that, I discovered CAD design and 3-D printing. I came to the conclusion that for the work I do, 3-D printing is more profitable. So in my studio, I have all these expensive tools and equipment. I still use them for stone setting or assembly, but there is a large investment that is just sitting there. I don't know what to do with it.

What lesson did you learn from that experience?

Perhaps to plan a bit better—to buy used equipment or rent what you need. But it's also good to keep an open mind. You can plan, but only so much. Who would have thought, a few years ago, that 3-D printing would be so big now? And now you can even sinter jewelry directly from precious metal powder. The field is constantly changing. The changes may be painful, and you do pay for it a bit when you find better alternatives, but technology is constantly advancing.

Who has had the most influence on your business life?

I don't come from an entrepreneurial background. Selling doesn't come naturally to me. Sometimes it feels almost physically painful. So I admire not necessarily a single person, but all the designers who have succeeded in making money



Oar pendant: Sterling silver, designed for a rowing coach, 3-D printed wax, cast in silver

from their passion and sheer persistence. One example is Armi Ratia, who created the Finnish textile brand Marimekko, which started as bold prints for simple cotton dresses and has evolved into an internationally known brand. Even after 52 years, the brand is true to its original voice. You can always recognize a Marimekko print. That is exceptional, that for so long you can stay so true to your original concept. I admire the type of person who has a vision and then makes big things with it. I'm still hoping to be able to do that.



Links bracelet: 3-D printed using steel powder, from an STL file; gold-plated

What advice would you give to the next generation of designers and jewelers?

Do what you love, not what you think might sell, and design what you believe in, [something] you would wear yourself. Try to find your unique voice; there is too much of the same in the market. And always try to present yourself professionally, whether it's your website or packaging. It evokes trust in your product and skills, and it makes a difference—so if you can't do it yourself, hire a professional. ♦