



Where there's a wool there's a way

The daughter of a musician and and artist, designer Heather was always destined for a creative career

BY JUDY MURPHY

IT'S hard to imagine designer Heather Finn having opted for a career that didn't involve creativity.

The Oranmore woman grew up in a house where art and music were the norm – her mother Leonie King is a well-known artist and her father Alec Finn is a musician and a co-founder of the legendary group De Dannan.

Now Heather is making a name for herself as one of Ireland's leading young fashion designers, with her vibrant knitwear made from cashmere, merino, lambswool and silk.

After attending secondary school in the city's Coláiste Iognáid (The Jes) Heather went on to study at the National College of Art and Design in Dublin, specialising in fashion and textiles.

"I always loved making jewellery as well as designing and textiles," she says of her decision to focus on that area.

The course included knitting, which she had never done before that. However, the NCAD only taught machine knitting so about four or five years ago Heather taught herself how to hand-knit.

She learned the technique, including the process of casting on and off and more complex stitches, through books and YouTube videos. She also learned crocheting, a skill she also brings to bear in her designs.

In college, Heather found that there wasn't a great deal of colourful fabrics around with which to design clothes and that was one reason she was drawn to knitwear.

"I'm like mum in that I love colour," she says. "And when you are knitting you can make

your own colours, so you have a lot more control. You select the colours and the textures."

After college Heather got a job in Dublin with renowned knitwear designer Lainey Keogh. Later she moved home to Oranmore and got a job in Galway City working for Phyllis McNamara, who is best known as the owner of Cobwebs Antiques on Quay Lane.

"I worked as a buyer for Love It, a shop that was located on Abbeygate St, and from that I learned a lot about what people buy. Now that I'm on the other side, it's good to know that."

But Heather missed designing so she moved back to Dublin and became part of a design studio, where fellow workers were involved in fashion, jewellery and photography.

They had a market in Cows Lane, which she joined, selling her knitwear there.

In 2005 the English fashion chain, Top Shop, which was opening its flagship shop in Dublin's St Stephen's Green saw her work and offered Heather and some of her colleagues a concession in the store. They had space in Topshop, but were responsible for selling their own goods.

"That gave me the push to get business cards and get organised."

During the two years she was there, Heather began doing fashion shows, exhibiting her work at **Dublin Fashion Week** and selling to boutiques.

She says being part of the Cows Lane market was a vital launch pad for her.

"You can be really good, but if you are in the back, nobody will see what you are doing."

As her business has grown,

she has brought skilled workers on board – with one woman doing sewing and another doing embroidery. Heather still does a lot of the knitting.

She uses a mix of cashmere and lambswool which is both fine and light, but also cosy – suitable for Irish weather, winter and summer.

"Irish women wear a lot of knitwear and they want it to be light, because it's more flattering. And I think Irish women really like colour."

At five foot ten inches, Heather is model tall, but says she doesn't design for a particular body size.

"Although maybe I have my

mum in mind – someone a little bit different who doesn't mind being noticed and who likes clothes."

Heather sells into about 15 boutiques in Ireland and gets feedback from these shops. And, because she works in fashion she gears her work towards different seasons.

"There is Autumn/Winter and Spring/Summer so I have two times of year when I sit down to design. It's such a fast-moving thing. You have a week or two weeks to do it in, so you have to focus."

Her inspiration could come from anywhere – "a trip to India, where there is lots of pink and orange, or maybe a visit to Morocco, or a fashion trip".

Heather is part of a group of 14 designers who recently opened a collective in Dublin's South William Street called Project 51.

It's possible for a person to assemble an entire outfit for a special occasion there, because of the range of work on offer, she says.

In a strange way, the recession has actually benefited the young designers in their efforts, she adds.

"It's given us access to buildings and spaces like this that we wouldn't have had before and gives us an opportunity to do something."

The Dublin venture is her main focus at the moment. Because there is no middleman, it gives her more creative freedom.

"I can make something special that doesn't have to cost the earth."

Creativity and a good business head don't always make for comfortable companions, but Heather likes the business side of her work.

"A lot of it, I've been learning along the way, from my mum and Phyllis and I've had a lot of support from the Crafts Council and the Dublin City Enterprise Board."

The Enterprise Board has a scheme whereby fledgling designers are mentored by more established figures, and it also provides training in the nuts and bolts of bookkeeping. Prices for Heather's knitwear start for €20 for gloves and vary – going up to €250 for 100 per cent cashmere scarves.

"I have to have things at affordable prices," she says but she also must factor in the cost of her work and of the yarns she uses, which are not cheap.

She points out a stunning hand-crocheted dress that took two weeks to make. Heather used it for a showcase – it's not the type of thing most people could wear. But she accessorised it with wraps and cardigans and these will make most people look good.

"And if I do knitted dresses, I'll do them in blue or black or

in flattering shapes.”

Her knitwear is high-end, but sales haven't been overly affected by the recession.

“The funny thing is, that as people are buying less, they are

looking for quality and buying good things.”

And they also like supporting Irish design, she feels.

“People are beginning to appreciate the quality of the

work. It's the Year of the Craft and there's craft everywhere, and it's being looked at in a different light.”



Designer Heather Finn with her creations.