



Cyber Lily
collection



Suki
Lau
collection



Rocks collection



Rue B
collection



Owner of The Balagan Group Rachel Parkin



Affirmations
collection



Le journal
de Lola
collection

Beautiful chaos!

Jewellery enterprise grows from a small market stall to a wholesale business and retail shops

THE Hebrew word *balagan* means chaos but there is nothing chaotic about The Balagan Group, a jewellery wholesale and retail business run by Rachel Parkin, of Stamford.

She and her Israeli husband Shay Ginat started in the early 1990s with a small stall on Bridge Street in Peterborough and today the business encompasses two shops – one in the city and another in Cambridge – a wholesale operation supplying jewellery to nearly 2,000 stores in the UK and a burgeoning online business including a new website to help independent retailers through the recession.

Although she has a degree in sociology, Rachel, now 41, left university not really knowing what she wanted to do and decided to travel. She met Shay in Thailand and the couple later married and settled in Stamford where Rachel went to school.

Inspired by their travels they started selling jewellery – some of it their own designs – in Peterborough. That led to the opening of Reba in Cathedral Square, a second shop in Cambridge seven years ago and then the move into the wholesale sector.

"That was really unplanned," says Rachel. We kind of fell into it – our jewellery was

selling really well and we decided to take some of it around to see if stores would like to sell it – and they wanted to. It wasn't a grand master plan but we now have 1,800 customers in the UK as well as others overseas in Japan, South Africa and ex-pat places like Gibraltar."

The couple initially ran the wholesale side from a converted chapel in Eye, but have since moved to spacious, custom-built offices with a showroom on the Axon Business Park at Lynch Wood, Peterborough. These days Shay concentrates on other business interests in property but Rachel runs a team of 16 people in the office, eight sales agents on the road and around 14 staff across the two shops.

She chose the word *balagan* for the name of the main company because she liked it. "It's a nice word."

It is also multi-cultural: "In Russian it means Punch & Judy and in Polish it's a big party. It has many meanings."

The Balagan Group offers 10 different collections and Rachel introduces two new ones each year. She deliberately offers a wide range from wholesale to designer.

"You do tend to get pigeon-holed in the jewellery industry. People say you can't have designer stock when you supply

wholesale but I don't see why not."

Rachel chooses the designs by watching trends on the catwalk and looking at what sells and what she herself likes. "I couldn't sell something I didn't like."

Each of the collections has its own personality and they range from silver and stone pieces to glass and resin. There is also a men's collection with chunky pieces in silver, stainless steel and titanium. The Suk Lau collection is trend-setting itself and Rachel says the Cyber Lyly range in particular embodies new trends.

Rachel is delighted to have spotted that orange, yellow and citrus brights are the colours for the new season – "Our time has come!" She is heavily involved in new designs and it is one of her favourite parts of the job.

At her Reba shop in Peterborough, she concentrates on changing stock regularly "so customers don't get bored". She looks for the quirky – one of her latest favourites is Legomen necklaces and another collection features pieces with inscribed quotes such as 'a journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step'.

She has recently increased her profile by writing business articles for a trade magazine and the Peterborough Evening Telegraph and has just launched a website, www.retailrehab.co.uk, which is designed

to be a resource for small shops and businesses. The site is full of

tips, publicity ideas and free downloads of anything that can make the life of an independent retailer easier. Rachel has also been invited to speak at this year's prestigious International Jewellery London show.

She believes the future is bright despite the recession and refers to a favourite quote appearing on one of her trendy new pieces: "Don't panic, Captain Mainwaring!"

"The new website in particular is all about trying to make positives out of negatives as best we can. I guess I'm a half glass full kind of person."

▲ www.balagangroup.co.uk

Rachel loves ...

FAVOURITE SHOPS IN STAMFORD: Attic, Ruby Loves ... and Equilibrium.

FAVOURITE PUB/RESTAURANT: The Tobie Norris pub in Stamford. I love how tucked away you feel.

FAVOURITE COLOUR: That's a good question. Brown? I wear a lot of black and grey. But if I was making a wow! piece of jewellery ... cerise pink because everyone would notice it.

FAVOURITE FOOD: Italian. I also like Lebanese food. I'm not keen on food in China though. When we were travelling we were served a dish with chicken heads floating in it. When I said I was vegetarian they said 'well, just eat the broth!'

FAVOURITE TV PROGRAMME: The CSI series, Law & Order ... I love all those.

FAVOURITE PIECE OF CLOTHING: Cowboy boots.

WHAT DO YOU DO IN YOUR SPARE TIME? Walk our German Shepherd Rocco, read, people watch. I love bimbbling around Stamford having a look in the shops and seeing what's happening.

PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY: Love many, trust few and paddle your own canoe.

IF YOU COULD LIVE ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD WHERE WOULD YOU CHOOSE?

Thailand because everything is very relaxed. They're Buddhists and it's a very calm place.

