

Interview with Gaynor Walkey

Title: 'My dream is to give everyone a good night's sleep.'

Sub-title: Gaynor Walkey talks to Bridget McNulty about how she started Granny Goose 20 years ago – and how she's made it synonymous with the best duvets and pillows in South Africa.

In 1989, I had just recovered from my second stroke and subsequent brain surgery, and I couldn't hold down a conventional 9 to 5 job. But I had to do something with my time. My then-husband, Alan, was in the feather processing industry, and he suggested I start selling pillows by mail order. I didn't write a formal business plan or anything like that, I flew by the seat of my pants – which I still do quite a lot! But I'm very determined about what I want, and I don't hear the word 'no': it just does not come into my vocabulary. I was lucky I had the mentorship of Alan, because he knew everything there was to know about feathers. But he didn't make finished products – I started the finished product line. My first items were a basic channel-style duvet and a pillow to match. All these years later, I still say that we're duvet and pillow specialists, and we have a linen range.

So I drew up a little ad and put it in the Constantia Bulletin. I think the first ad cost me R750 and I got about R3500 business out of it – I thought that was fabulous! I had people lying on the floor in my lounge, pushing pillows into their necks and saying, 'Could you add a little bit more?' or, 'Could you take a little out? It's a bit hard.' That's what gave me the idea for the Sleep Lab all those years ago – the Sleep Lab in our Claremont showroom was my dream right from the start. We finally opened it four years ago.

I never really thought about starting my own company. I was in advertising and merchandising before I started, so I had always worked, but starting a business wasn't something I had considered. My four children were quite young when I began Granny Goose, so it was more of a hobby then. Because I was essentially working for myself, I could be as busy as I liked. That's why I didn't advertise that much – I

would place an ad and it would take me about four to six weeks to clear the order, and then I'd think about placing another one. So I wasn't working all the time. I started off only with mail order. My first big ad was in Garden&Home magazine, and my clientele seemed to dovetail with theirs. I think the ad cost me R10,000 and I got R175,000 business out of it, which was phenomenal. I used to draw up my own ads, and I grew it slowly – for the first few years, I only did about three ads a year. Touch wood, we've never had any really worrying financial periods – I think it's because we grew it really, really slowly. We didn't choke the idea with overheads and expenses right up front.

What's interesting is that duvets weren't really popular then: people had blankets. Hotels definitely had blankets. And if anyone had a duvet, it was a polyester duvet. As far as I knew, there was nobody else making down duvets in South Africa at the time, so it was a huge gap in the market. Today, we are proud to make the best quality linen, duvets and pillows in the country, and we service all the top 4 and 5 star guesthouse and hotels in South Africa. We've also started making in-roads into top hotels and game lodges elsewhere in Africa. At the time, I didn't put a lot of pressure on myself at all, I didn't give myself a deadline to have the business up and running, I just assumed it would happen! I knew that it would work as long as I was interested in it, and I still am – I still love making people comfortable. I love the spoil! It's not many times that we get really spoiled, and that's what we offer with Granny Goose. When people find something that's luxurious but they can justify it because it gives them a good night's sleep, that's when they want to buy it.

My secret to success is probably that I've found the key to a good night's sleep. I spoil people, it's just in my nature to do that – I'm a nurturer. At night, when it's really rainy and cold, I think to myself, 'Well, at least all those people who bought a duvet are lying snug and warm in their beds!' I feel so bad for those who don't have one.

Our product range has grown enormously since those first days. We now have a variety of duvets, pillows, linen, baby products, towels, feather beds – and even blankets and throws. The business really started growing after about five years, when my older daughter Lisa finished varsity and came to join me. That's when I decided Granny Goose needed its own space. For the first few years we shared manufacturing space in Woodstock, then we moved to our own spot in Roeland Street, where we had a head office and a showroom in quite a nice little space. We kept the factory in Woodstock, and now we have over 200 factory staff, who all know me by name. Our next big step was to open in Midrand – my eldest son ran that for us. The other showrooms have come one by one since then. Our Claremont and Fourways showrooms are our big ones, we have six retail outlets around South Africa and 21 smaller in-house outlets with smaller ranges in the top Edgars and Boardmans stores nationally. And now all four of my children work for us: Lisa is the online manager, Glen is my second in charge, Gaby is the financial director and Alex is involved in development and production in the factory. It is still the best thing ever to be working with my children.

We only have showrooms, no shops. When people come and buy a Granny Goose product, they need someone who can share all the information about it with them. We call them showrooms because the people who come here spend half an hour to two hours deciding on their options, and testing them out. Granny Goose products are investments, you don't just walk in and walk out. In our Claremont and Fourways branches we invite customers to lie in a fully made-up bed in our Sleep Lab and give them different kinds of cushions to try out so they can find the perfect fit. I'm an absolute stickler for the perfect fit and the highest standard of quality. Only the best seamstresses sew Granny Goose products, and they know that it has to be absolutely perfect. It's so gratifying that in the marketplace that guarantee of excellence carries through. Even if someone has never bought anything from Granny Goose, they hear where I'm from and say, 'Oh, you make the best down products!' That's such a great feeling. There's something in me that has always insisted on this

extremely high standard – it's a non-negotiable for me. I can't stand the thought of someone getting a Granny Goose product and being disappointed.

My biggest difficulty has been others trying to copy my ideas. I trademarked my name, my logo, the Four Seasons Duvet and the Gosling Range right in the beginning, and I've actually had to enforce that on a number of occasions.

Keeping in touch with market trends is very important. I'm lucky enough to be able to travel a lot, which keeps me inspired and lets me see what the trends are overseas. It's mostly linen trends, but we have just introduced a new pillow: a three-chamber pillow, with feathers in the middle and down on the outside, so it's soft to the touch but with a firm middle. We also expand our product range to suit our lives: We started a gift registry when my children got married, and designed a baby range when they had children!

I've loved all of it, the whole journey, I've embraced all of it. The challenging times are at the moment because retail is slow, and obviously everyone is affected by that. This is probably the most challenging market I've had to deal with, in the last 20 years. But throughout it all, the most rewarding part is my customers – my customer loyalty is unbelievable.

Sidebar: The Real Me

Biggest ambition?

For me, now, I want to stay at the top of my game and be able to hand over more and more to my children, even if I'm still the figurehead. I couldn't imagine what I would do without Granny Goose, but I want to hand over a really thriving business to my four children one day.

Bestsellers?

I would say the feather bed – it's the only feather mattress topper in South Africa, as far as I know.

Personal favourite?

My duvet, I just can't live without my duvet!

Mentors?

My ex-husband Alan taught me everything I know about feathers. Every year we would go to the International Down and Feather Bureau meeting and I would catch up on all the feather trends. And I was really inspired by a UK entrepreneur, Chrissie Rucker, who started The White Company – one of the most successful lifestyle brands in the UK, only selling white linen and crockery – by mail order. I followed her success and thought, 'I'd love to do something like that.'

Biggest triumph?

Opening our showroom in Claremont, after all those years of wanting to be able to spoil people with the Sleep Lab. When we took the showroom it was a big gamble, and it's really paid off – it's doing so well.

The best bit?

The flexibility. The fact that everything I do is for my family. It's rewarding from that point of view. But it is honestly the flexibility of being able to be a mom, a granny and a businesswoman that I love the most.

Sidebar: Gaynor's Business Tips

- Make yourself a mission statement. Be passionate about what you're doing, and every now and again go back to that mission statement to show yourself you haven't veered too far off what you were aiming for in the beginning.
- Keep passionate about what you're doing.

- Identify your market. Don't try and go too many different ways. Find your market, and then go all out for that one aspect, don't try and be everything to everyone.

The Golden Rule

Your customers are gold! Treat them like that. The one person who has an unfortunate experience with you can influence your business negatively so easily. And vice versa: the good stories spread too – so make sure you have plenty of those.