Sarasota woman creates her own line of shoes

Diane E. Kelly, 24, a Sarasota native, has created a line of brooch-adorned shoes that is now being sold in upscale boutiques in more than 67 boutiques — including shops at the Ritz Carlton Hotels — in 14 states.

STAFF PHOTO / E. SKYLAR LITHERLAND

By MELISSA QUINN, Gainesville Sun
Published: Tuesday, August 2, 2011 at 7:36 p.m.
Last Modified: Tuesday, August 2, 2011 at 7:36 p.m.

For Diana Kelly, a Sarasota native and University of Florida graduate, finding the right career path was like shopping for a new pair of shoes: She had to try on a few styles and sizes before coming upon just the right fit.

Kelly earned a business degree at UF in 2008 and was working on a graduate degree in interior design there when she decided to honor a lifelong dream of becoming a shoe designer. She began working on a line of elegant shoes for working women ages 25 to 55, each pair decorated with a signature brooch.

"I wanted to develop a lifestyle brand that created value," the 24-year-old says of her shoe designs. "I don't need to be a huge conglomerate; it's seeing people wear the shoes that equals success."

Two years later, Kelly's line of leather pumps, sandal and wedges, retailing from $118 to $228, are carried in more than 67 boutiques in 14 states and the Bahamas through her Diana E Kelly Inc.

At the end of May, the shops at the Ritz Carlton hotels picked up her line, adding to her growing list of retailers.

Her name is mentioned with the likes of international shoe designers Jimmy Choo, Manolo Blahnik and Christian Louboutin.
For as long as she can remember, Kelly says, she has dreamed of shoes -- visions of wedges, stilettos and pumps have danced through her head while she entertained thoughts of the perfect ornament with which to decorate them. In fact, she scribbled a design for her first pair of shoes when she was six.

As an undergraduate studying business at UF, Kelly continued to dream about clothing design. She even decided to design a collection of game-day attire after growing weary of the dresses worn by her classmates while cheering on the Florida Gators. She wanted to see something different -- seersucker blazers and a-line dresses, with an original twist on the Florida Gator theme. Her endeavor, though, was sidelined by classes, tests and life as a student.

In 2008, after receiving her bachelor of arts in business management with a concentration in urban and regional planning, Kelly enrolled in the master's program in interior architecture at UF, hoping to further her knowledge of design.

Instead, she found her thoughts drifting back to the sketches of shoes and clothes that filled her notebooks and restaurant napkins throughout her childhood. During her second year as a master's student, she decided to move back to Sarasota to pursue her dream as a clothing designer.

**Getting into the business**

After returning home, Kelly and her father met with a consultant who offered advice on starting her business.

Her first thought was to continue her original idea of game-day dresses, since she already had designs and samples ready. The plan: start designing apparel, become established in the industry and then move to her main passion -- shoes. The consultant, though, advised her to go straight to shoes.

"It was a puzzle and all of the pieces had come together," Kelly says. "It was all such a blessing. I just knew in my heart that it was meant to be."

She pored over every periodical and book about manufacturing, while
networking with family friends and anyone who had ever been involved in a business.

In late 2008 and early 2009, Kelly received her first manufactured samples -- and landed her first buyer: the Ocean Reef Club in Key Largo. Earlier this year, she spotted her shoes for the first time on a stranger at a luncheon at the Breakers Hotel in Palm Beach.

"My shoes!" she exclaimed.

Kelly also markets her business through organizations such as Wine Women & Shoes and at Junior League conferences and showcases.

She says she finds inspiration in various places, but the brooches adorning the toes of her shoes, from Gators to fleur-de-lis, remain a constant. In her current line, flowers and elephants grace the tops of her most popular pumps and flats, with starfish and turtles taking their places on her new line of summer wedges.

Recently, while visiting family in Sigourney, Iowa, Kelly stumbled upon two new pins -- a starfish and a daisy -- that she hopes to incorporate into her upcoming designs. Kelly also designed a line of handbags that incorporate her love of the pins.

She recognizes that consumers are looking for things that resonate with them, and hopes that her brooches will do just that.

Kelly’s mother, Jacqueline, has contributed to the line, too. When she wanted a trendy, comfortable shoe she could wear on a daily basis, she designed one herself: a low pump that is comfortable enough to wear every day and that bears her name.

As Kelly’s success grows, she believes it is important to give back to the community.

In fact, showing appreciation by giving back is so important that Kelly has one of her favorite biblical verses stamped in pink letters on the bottom of every shoe box that contains her designs: Luke 12:48. "To whom much is given, much is required."

Recently, Kelly appeared at the Boys and Girls Club of Sarasota to
speak about the dangers of peer pressure and the importance of believing in yourself.

Kelly also donates a minimum of 10 percent of the company's proceeds to area charities, from the Susan G. Komen Foundation to Kelly's personal favorite, the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

"This dream has become a reality, and the least we can do as a company is give back," she says.