



Above: The Cecil Street show includes the designs in Toby Lukes' Tat-120 line.

The creative force

Concord-based designer looks to romantic

By Andrea Stenberg

Annitrelli Coutures in Concord offers romantic and feminine evening wear. And although Elena Annibale, the creative force behind Annitrelli, is a romantic at heart, her head belongs to a solid businesswoman with feet firmly planted on the ground.

By combining her married name with her maiden name, Patrelli, she called her company Annitrelli Coutures. This makes sense: although she didn't launch her business until 1991, Elena had been working towards this goal for years.

In Grade 8, she sewed a pillow as a school project. From there she began making clothing for herself, and the seeds of what would lead to a new career were sown.

"I would go to the store and never find things that really knocked me off my feet," says the designer. "I

started altering commercial patterns to get what I wanted."

From sewing for herself, she moved on to helping friends and family, using commercial patterns. "I would just charge for fabric. I had no idea of my value," recalls Annibale.

Annibale married at age 17 and held several jobs while raising her four children. Yet working in an office wasn't what she had been striving for. So when her youngest daughter started school in 1986, Annibale decided it was time for a change. At age 30, she enrolled in Seneca College's three-year design course. "The main reason I went was to put what was in my head on to paper. I already knew how to sew."

While at Seneca, Annibale continued to sew for friends and neighbours in order to pay for the cost of returning to school. The college taught her to meet deadlines and handle stress

while maintaining high standards of craftsmanship. Thus, deciding to open her own business after three years at Seneca was the natural next step, especially since her family and friends had been urging her for years to go into business.

"At weddings, when I had an outfit on, it was usually made by me. My family and friends encouraged me," says Annibale.

She opened her studio on her family's property in Zepher in 1991. In the winter of 1992, she had her first showing at the Bridal Show at the Toronto Convention Centre. From just a handful of customers in 1991, business has grown. She now averages three bridal parties a month in the busy months of March through July.

Bridal parties along with lingerie, business wear and children's wear allowed Annibale to



of Elena Annibale

heritage of costume dramas for inspiration

move out of her home and into her current shop in Concord in March of 1995. She has a staff of three.

"I used to be stressed out because I didn't have customers, and now I'm stressed out because of how many I have," laughs Annibale.

Concentrating mainly on evening and bridal wear, the business has branched out to include communion and party dresses for girls, business suits for older women, lingerie, and even suits for men. But evening wear is Annibale's greatest enjoyment, because that is where she can be most creative. Influenced by the Renaissance and Victorian eras, Annibale tries to create dresses that are uniquely feminine.

"I always loved watching *Gone With the Wind* or *Romeo and Juliet*. I loved the dresses."

Annibale focuses not just on design, but on providing quality and individualized service as well. A customer interested in a new outfit is given a private consultation.

"I usually schedule about two hours (for a consultation)," says Annibale. "I don't want my customers to feel like I'm pushing them through the door."

The consultation includes a discussion on what the customer is looking for and Annibale's advice about what would work best.

"Let's say we had a girl with bigger hips. We would enhance the shoulders to give her the hourglass look," says the owner.

After the consultation, Elena creates a "mockup" of the dress out of muslin. This is for the first fitting, to which Annibale makes

any necessary adjustments. The fabric is then cut and sewn, there is a final fitting, and the garment is pressed.

From the initial consultation until the customer leaves the shop with her dress may take two to three weeks in the slower winter months to as long as three months during the busy wedding season. A staff of three helps with sewing and pattern drafting, but Annibale oversees everything closely.

"Nothing gets done, nothing gets cut without my supervision," she asserts.

The businesswoman is clearly happy with her success to date, but she does have larger goals. She would like to develop her own clothing line and see it manufactured here in Canada. Unlike many others in creative fields, Annibale doesn't see working from Canada as a disadvantage. "I would love to sell my stuff in the U.S., but I want to live here. I was born in Italy, and I'm Italian through and through, but I'm also Canadian. I don't feel I need to go live in Europe or the U.S. to

achieve my goals."

Annibale's fashions can be seen at a charity fundraiser at Cecil Community Centre on July 24th. This show, featuring designers from all over Ontario, will raise money for a youth program that serves 175 in the City of Toronto.



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