

WORDS OF WISDOM

Freelance jewellery and watch journalist and editor, Barbara Palumbo, talks to *Gems&Jewellery* about her sparkling career, her successful blogging platforms and the advice she would give to aspiring jewellery writers, columnists and authors.



Photo Credit: Bart Gorin.

Discovering beautiful jewellery, discussing gemstones and perusing diamonds is the stuff of dreams for many, but for American journalist Barbara Palumbo, it is a way of life. As a specialist jewellery and watch writer, Palumbo has travelled the world in search of the latest trends and innovations, writing for leading publications and establishing her own websites – *WhatsOnHerWrist.com* and *Adornmentality.com* – in the process. Here, *Gems&Jewellery* gets the inside scoop on what it takes to carve a career in jewellery writing and editing...

How did you find yourself working in the jewellery and watches sector?

My uncle was a part-time metalsmith and had a jewellery bench in his basement for as long as I can remember, but never did I think to myself as a young kid that this was something I wanted to do. It wasn't until I found myself at 23-years-old and without a job that I answered

an advertisement in a Philadelphia newspaper for a jewellery store looking for 'runners'. They were the people in charge of taking a customer's sketches to the wax-carver (this was pre-CAD-CAM days), then taking the wax to the caster, then the casting to the polisher before taking it to the stone setter. All these workers – these craftspeople – had their own businesses on one street, so you could go to a lapidary on the 5th floor of one building before dropping off the stone you just picked up to the setter on the 2nd floor. The job paid \$10.00 per hour in 1996, which was a pretty good wage at the time, but what I got out of the experience was priceless.

In my first year of 'running' I was educated from start to finish on how jewellery is made. I got to know all the Armenian master jewellers and the Israeli diamond dealers and the Italian goldsmiths. Working in a large jewellery district not only opened my mind to the art and craft of the trade, but it taught me about cultures and that was part of the reason I found the industry so special and so intriguing.

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In August of 2013 I launched my original blog, *Adornmentality.com*, with the idea that I wanted to bring some fun back into the jewellery world. It was immediately well-received and in a short period of time I found myself with a solid following from all over the world. Three years later, after having been given an ultimatum to choose between the blog I wrote (which was an unpaid side project) and the sales job I had (which was business development for a luxury jewellery brand), I decided it was time to take my writing to the next level and so I launched my own media company (*TheAtrics Media*) and, with it, a female-friendly watch blog called *WhatsOnHerWrist.com*.

What do you think are the core challenges in today's jewellery market?

Honestly, I think a huge challenge, particularly in the retail market, is that younger people don't want the jobs that made jewellery such a successful industry decades ago. In the age of Instagram 'superstars', YouTubers, and influencers, some Millennials simply weren't interested in standing behind a sales counter or sitting at a work bench, even when the business was passed down to them. Many wanted to be their own bosses and start their own companies and so there was never this experience of moving up the ladder gradually. But Generation Z is different, and they could possibly turn the industry around.

Experiences and education for the next generation will result in them appreciating what goes into making a piece of fine jewellery, and in turn, that could save the industry from its potential demise. But, we have to be open to involving more kids – young kids – in everything from mining trips overseas to enrolling them in summer jewellery-making camps. I believe if we teach Gen Z,



Barbara (far right) taking part in a panel discussion. Photo Credit: Initiatives in Art and Culture.

then they will take the reins and see to it that the other current core challenges (the lab-grown vs. natural diamond debate, nondisclosure in media, mercury in mining environments, underpaid workers, workplace discrimination, etc.) are either addressed, solved, or become problems of the past.

In your blogs you often talk about debunking the myths surrounding our trade and offering a more honest approach – do you think we all need to do more to own up to the complexities and challenges in our industry?

What we need to do as an industry is realise that we are all in this together. If we fight one another, if we become territorial, or if we think we can't tell other people our secrets because we don't want them to be successful (because their success would take away from our success), then we will isolate ourselves to the point of being recluses. We can't be an industry of recluses. Our days as members of this industry are potentially numbered if we don't pull together as one entity and collectively teach the next generation.

What are your thoughts on the shifting landscape of lab grown diamonds and De Beers' Lightbox venture?

I think it was pretty smart of De Beers for a couple of reasons. First, the price points for these 'diamonds' are fairly low and while you might think that a lower price point would send the consumer running toward the lesser expensive product, when it comes to diamonds, it's probably going to have the opposite effect. These Lightbox stones are so inexpensive that the buyer might feel uneasy spending so little on something that is supposed to represent eternity, which may very well send them back to natural diamonds, thus creating a win-win situation for De Beers. I mean, kind of brilliant, business-wise, don't you think?

Finally, in your opinion, are there any brands or businesses that are really doing something special right now?

I am very impressed with Chopard because of its promise to use only Fairmined or ethically-sourced gold in both its jewellery and watch lines, and to have that [transition] happen over

the next couple of years. I feel that this has sent a strong message to some of the other luxury brands out there, and hopefully some of the others will step up to the plate as well. ■

Meet Barbara Palumbo at the 2018 Gem-A Conference at her workshop with Monica Stephenson on Monday, November 5, 2018.



Barbara Palumbo strikes a pose at Dubai Watch Week. Photo Credit: Dubai Watch Week.