



Kelley, Kruse win Minnesota small business honors



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Vicki Ikeogu, vikeogu@stcloudtimes.com 5:02 p.m. CDT April 14, 2015



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What started as a side business to supplement income has grown to become a lifelong passion for Jim Kruse. And it has fostered a love for the industry in his youngest daughter, Melissa Kelley.

And after 15 years of doing business in the St. Cloud area, Kruse and Kelley of J.F. Kruse Jewelers have been named Minnesota's Small Business Person of the Year and will compete for a national title.

Maria Contreras-Sweet, the head of the U.S. Small Business Administration, announced in a statement that a panel is in the process of reviewing applicants, and a national winner and two runners-up will be recognized May 8 in Washington, D.C.

"Competition was extremely keen across the nation for these prestigious awards," Contreras-Sweet said. "I couldn't be any prouder than recognizing these outstanding entrepreneurs and small business owners. They represent the backbone of our economy."

But winning the top honor in the state did not come easily for Kruse and his family.

Kruse worked for D.J. Bitzan Jewelers for about 20 years before he quit to take care of a family situation.

"We went through some difficult times when I was about 12 or 13," Kelley said. He became a single dad to Kelley and her older sister.

"We were living in a basement of someone's house. We were starting over as a family," she said.

Kruse began working construction, but his contacts in the jewelry business inspired Kruse to try his hand at selling jewelry once more. He had the experience. And he needed the extra money to support his two young daughters.

Kelley said her father soon found a silent partner and was able to come up with the \$50,000 to start what would be known as J.F. Kruse Jewelers. Kruse opened his business in 2000.

"He had never intended to own a jewelry store," Kelley said. "It was not planned. This wasn't calculated."

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In this December 2011 file photo, Melissa Kelley of J.F. Kruse Jewelers in Waite Park, left, shows Tara Tollefson a final casting of Tollefson's necklace. (Photo: Times photo)

While some people spend years drawing up plans for growing and developing their business, Kelley said her father did not seem to do that.

"God just seemed to hand him a jewelry store," she said.

What started out with two second-hand jewelry cases from local department stores soon grew into thriving business. And Kelley was right in the midst of it.

"At 16 I had really wanted to explore this more as a career," Kelley said.

She had been helping her dad clean up shop since he opened the doors. She knew she loved jewelry and working alongside her father, but still was not certain this was the path for her.

After receiving a degrees in business management and marketing, the 22-year-old Kelley returned to J.F. Kruse and worked her way up to part owner. Kelley also attended the Gemological Institute of America and earned a degree in gemology.

Kelley said the company has experienced tremendous growth. So much, they built a new facility at 110 Waite Ave. S in late 2013. Kelley said there was a dip in revenue during 2014 due to the move, but revenue growth has remained steady in the early part of 2015.

Kruse retired in January. Kelley, at 29, is running the business.

"He's been in retail a long time," Kelly said. "But he did something a lot of people couldn't do. He had the determination to do this while being a single dad."

And that determination has been recognized.

Last year, the St. Cloud Area Chamber of Commerce named Kruse and Kelley's business the local Small Business of the Year. They were subsequently entered into the state competition.

Kelley said this could not have been possible without the hard work of her father and her 17 team members.

"I'm excited for our team and for their effort. And I'm excited for my dad. This speaks to his legacy and helps remind us what he went through," Kelley said.

Kruse and Kelley will be recognized at a ceremony May 7 in the Twin Cities.

Kruse and Kelley will compete against businesses from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

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