

five minutes with

Alexandra Stewart may live between Christchurch and Sydney these days, but she's as passionate as ever about Canterbury and the family business Skope Industries Ltd.

Alexandra is Skope's creative director. She's a highly driven businesswoman and designer with a Masters in Design and an Honours Degree in Electrical Engineering. She sits on Skope's board of directors and is a Trustee of the Christchurch Art Gallery Trust.

I caught up with Alexandra to find out what it's like working in a business that has been owned by the Robert Stewart family for more than four decades.

Did you undertake your studies in electrical engineering and design with a view to working in the family business?

I have always been fascinated by the design of things, man made and in nature, and went through several incarnations of whether to be an architect or interior designer, but enrolled in mechanical engineering with the long term view of moving into automotive design. Very late in the piece I moved to electrical engineering, which I suppose was influenced by the family business. In the end, it wasn't right for me as a career but has been a wonderful door opener and eventually I completed my Masters in Design in Sydney.

Before you joined Skope in 2005 you worked in the IT industry in the British and Australian markets. What were the highlights of your overseas experience?

I've worked in a variety of jobs to build up my business experience across the spectrum with a view to running my own company. Working in IT teaches you the importance of strategy, key account management, process and forecasting, working in design teaches you the importance of being close to your customer and understanding their business, creative and lateral thinking, and attention to detail. Career highlights were event organising in London in the mid '90s for the Duchess of York, working with the likes of Robbie Williams, Take That, Chris de Burg and Cliff Richard, as well as organising parties for Elton John and other celebrities. It certainly led to a great deal of fun and a few stories to amaze my children one day!

Are you interested in other areas of design?

I love all aspects of design, with particular interest in object or product design,



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architecture and interiors. I love beauty in all forms and think life should be full of the joy it brings, whether it's a great friendship, a simple bowl of fruit or walking around Hagley Park when the daffodils are out. My husband Richard is an architect so we tend to spend a lot of time visiting buildings or

Alexandra Stewart



far flung destinations on our travels. At home, I am a huge supporter of the Art Gallery and all their amazing endeavors, we're incredibly lucky to have such a wonderful facility here in Christchurch for all to enjoy.

You work with your brother Guy in a long-established family business; what are the pros and cons of working with your family?

A big pro is that it's fairly difficult for him to fire me! We're actually very lucky, we get on incredibly well and there are few issues. The "problem" with a family business is there is no down time, you're always thinking about the business, so I do try and insist on dinners with my father where nothing Skope is discussed, not an easy task. Business travel can be very lonely, especially longer trips, so when we can, Guy and I try and do it together so that's a pretty special time for a little sister.

Skope employs 360 staff in Christchurch and a further 15 sales people based across Australasia - has the past year, with the global credit crunch, been challenging?

It's been tough on manufacturers, but we're working very hard on capturing every possible opportunity with a big focus on exporting. We have recently increased our production staff by 75, which has its own challenges. Our whole company is committed to succeeding and this support is very motivating for Guy and me.

Is it difficult living between two cities in two countries? How do you divide your time?

Not at all. I'm set up in Sydney so all I need is a laptop, mobile and passport. A lot of our clients are there for heating and refrigeration so it's important to be close to them. I go every few weeks and am on first name basis with the great staff at the airport.

What do you like most about Christchurch? And Sydney?

Christchurch is incredibly relaxing and my family and friends are here. It's hard to beat the Sydney lifestyle, great weather, food and that harbour. I'm lucky I have the best of both worlds.

Who is your favourite designer?

Sir Terence Conran from the UK, he's the perfect combination of designer and entrepreneurial brilliance which is inspiring to me.

What is the last book you read and how long did it take you?

"Her Fearful Symmetry" by Audrey Niffenegger, read in a week whilst on business in London.

What couldn't you live without?

My husband and my passport. My relationship with my mother Barbara is also irreplaceable.

What is your favourite drink?

On the one hand Christchurch water and on the other hand a dirty martini with lots of olives.

What is your favourite café, restaurant or bar in Christchurch?

I love the Bodhi Tree, a favorite haunt for catching up with friends when I get home and the Christchurch Club for world class dining.



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