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**Shirley Uris**

Upholsterer

## FROM ADMINISTRATOR TO ENTREPRENEUR - REDISCOVERING HER TRUE CALLING

**Upholsterers construct or repair upholstered furniture. Replacing worn coverings, padding, and webbings, they finish furniture pieces by attaching ornament trims, buttons and grommets. Meet Shirley Uris, sole owner of newcomer upholstery firm, Décor Diva, and whose creative skill as an upholsterer has seen her making waves in this exciting and lucrative sector. This is her story.**

### COMPETITIVE CHILD

Upholstery work is dexterous nimble-finger work, requiring both physical strength and creativity - skills Windhoek-born Shirley Uris has had in equal measure, since childhood.

Growing up a typical tomboy with a strong competitive streak, Shirley was the type of child that always wanted to win at all costs. "According to my mom, I didn't like dresses and was happiest when playing with the boys. I guess I was your typical tomboy. Yes, and I hated losing. In fact, I still do. I remember how I would be angry for days if someone else outperformed me in school. I always wanted to be first", she reminisces.

Little tomboy Shirley also demonstrated a strong creative side. "I don't know where it came from, and I didn't even know then what an interior decorator was, but I've always just had this thing for how people would decorate their interior spaces", she shares. "I would always make comments about how nice a space looked and add my two cents in terms of what I would've done differently in terms of arranging furniture pieces and setting an ambience", Shirley adds.

### YOUNG AMBITION

Confronted with what to make of her life, Shirley, upon completing Grade 12 at Khomasdal's Dawid Bezuidenhout High School, Shirley wanted to become an airhostess. "I guess it was just another way my creative side was coming to the fore. I fell in love with the way airhostesses looked, how well groomed they were, how they carried themselves, how they dressed, the make-up. I love a woman that looks well after herself. And travelling and getting to see the world, of course", she explains.

Circumstances did not allow, however, and Shirley ended up in the civil service, landing employment as the personal assistant to the Director of Civil Aviation. "Ending up in the administration field was not the dream, but I was able to excel because I'm a meticulous go-getter, who loves order and organisation. Although not an airhostess, working as a personal assistant also gave me the space to maintain a well-groomed professional

look. And although not in aircraft, my work was still about aircraft”, Shirley chuckles.

Soon, Shirley found greener pastures at electricity utility, NamPower, which coincided with her enrolling part-time in an Information Administration diploma course at the then Polytechnic of Namibia. “The NamPower years were good years. Working for a leading employer, I was able to study part-time, whilst gaining valuable experience in and exposure to the corporate world and growing immensely as a person”, she notes.

## TRUE CALLING

After nine years of dedicated service to the power utility, Shirley realised that something was still amiss in her life and that she could no longer ignore her creative calling. “It wasn’t a case of not enjoying my work. Instead, it was more a matter of not feeling gratified. After a lot of introspection and self-examination, I decided that I had to do something about it”, she shares.

Surfing the Internet for information that could guide her into career options through which she could express her creativity, Shirley came across a Johannesburg-based institution, which offered short courses in interior design and decorating. “I enrolled for their three-month short course and delving deeper into the intricacies of interior design, merely affirmed that I was doing the right thing. The change was heaven-sent: from tedious files and appointment books to exciting colours and fabrics – I enjoyed the training immensely”, Shirley explains.

Armoured with her new skill set, Shirley was ready to enter the interior decorating market. This proved easier said than done, however. Not one to give up, she realised that to make it as an entrepreneur in this cutthroat environment, she had to enter the upholstery sector. “I saw the demand within the field of upholstery. Mind you, upholstery is also part of interior design. Yes, the demand for upholstery exceeded all the other sectors I studied for. And that’s how I ended up in this field”, she highlights.

## A MAN’S WORLD

Today, Shirley’s thriving business, Décor Diva, continues to make steady strides in establishing itself in the competitive upholstery market. “Competition is tough, as more and more upholstery players enter the game. However, we believe that it is our creativity and commitment to quality workmanship that will continue to set us apart, from the rest. We keep busy. And even when orders are low, we remain productive and work on new unique pieces for some of our discerning clients”, she notes.

It wasn’t smooth sailing all the way, however. Shirley had to deal with low business volumes initially, and male employees who found it difficult to adjust to a female boss. “I started out with an all-male team. However, somehow they could not deal with having a lady boss. They were disobedient and unreliable. It stressed me out to a point where I had cut them loose and went solo, all on my own”, she recalls.

Shirley also struggled in convincing her husband, Charles, an established electrical installations contractor, that becoming an upholstery contractor was what she wanted to pursue. “My husband didn’t like the idea of me doing this job. It really took me a while to convince him that I wasn’t necessarily doing it for the money, or because I was struggling financially; but because I am passionate about this work. He eventually recognised that this was indeed my true passion, and started supporting me. He continues to support me in so many ways”, she shares.

## ALL FEMALE TEAM

Today, the couple’s partnership continues to grow. This mother of three daughters uses her administration expertise to support her husband’s businesses and ventures, whereas he has made available premises in the Northern Industrial Area, from which Décor Diva operates.

Now employing her retired mother to manage the workshop, Décor Diva is a true family business. “After letting go of my all-male workforce, I felt somewhat destitute and lost, contemplating to just close shop and going back into the administration world. But, my retired mother came to the rescue. She is very reliable and takes care of some of the dreary day-to-day tasks, such as cleaning the workshop and managing orders and supplies. She too, has grown into the upholstery world. For her, it’s like a new lease on life. She is now my right hand”, says Shirley.

“We’ve always been close, but the mother-daughter relationship continues to strengthen. Often I forget she is a pensioner, especially when she starts complaining about some pains and aches after a day’s work. But, the next day, she is back at it again. Full of energy and drive, she has my back”, she adds.

Shirley’s cousin, Zaheeda Engelbrecht is an apprentice upholsterer, and is the other member of the Décor Diva team. “There are no men here; only the three of us. Zaheeda is a good apprentice. She too has my go-getter mentality and she is not afraid to put in the hard hours. Together, we make a solid team and we prove to others that less indeed can be more”, Shirley notes.

## DRIVEN ENTREPRENEUR

Managing an upholstery business is arduous and demanding work. Time management is of the essence in navigating between workshop manufacturing, machine maintenance, attending to clients, site visits and administration tasks. Shirley takes it all in her stride, because she loves what she is doing.

“It may sound cliché, but it is really about finding that thing you love and making it your purpose. Think of it, to be in a space where you have the freedom and confidence to grow and nurture your innate and special talent, expressing yourself creatively through your work; while at the same time earning an income from it. I am my own boss. I am an employer, and not an employee. In fact, the only thing I regret, is not taking this step into the upholstery world, much earlier. I should’ve started ten years ago”, Shirley shares.

Quick to point out that being your own boss comes with risks and responsibilities, Shirley shares that entrepreneurship is seldom easy and that challenges are aplenty. “You need to keep your eyes on the prize, even when things get slow. It’s about persistence, selling and growing your brand, and doing the right things the right way. In my case, I’ll say that I’m succeeding as an entrepreneur, because I have the full package: a willingness to get my hands dirty, a desire to grow, an ability to innovate and adapt, an appreciation of the importance of marketing, and most importantly; making work of your dream”, she adds.

## HANDS-ON MARKETER

Marketing her venture and introducing her products and services to new clientele, stand central in Shirley’s ongoing success. Before and after pictures of furniture pieces help in this regard. I am able to show prospective clients how we were able to transform a worn-out and lackluster piece into something that attractive and unique. Of course, we cannot compromise on quality, because ultimately, quality determines whether someone will be a repeat client, or not”, she says.

“Going forward, I need to intensify my marketing efforts, especially in the digital space where social media is proving to be a very effective platform in attracting new customers. Word-of-mouth is also doing the trick, especially in terms of the work we do for event planners. They order very specific items and we have done many special pieces for various event planners, from scratch. We consult, after which I design and manufacture what

they need. It is a small but lucrative niche market that I intend to explore further”, Shirley notes.

“At the end of the day, if people do not know about your service, how can they support you? It’s about being visible. It’s about selling yourself and your brand. It’s about quality, quality and again, quality”, she adds.

## CAREER CHAMPION

Shirley embraces the fact her journey is seen by many as an example of how technical and vocational skills can empower individuals and transform lives.

“I fail to understand how we often add further fuel to this negative perception fire around technical and vocational career options. The thinking that these career options are only for those that do not excel academically is gibberish. I am a good example that it is not true, because I’ve always excelled academically. It is just that working with my hands is what I enjoy most”, she explains.

“I go out of my way in fighting this widespread mindset and it is important that we all do so. I’m a parent and my firstborn is studying towards a veterinary science qualification. She excels academically, but loves working with her hands, as well. The fact that she loves animals makes this an ideal career choice for her, and as parents, she has my full support. How can I not support her? My mother supported me; she still does”, Shirley says.

“I think as parents we need to accept that our children are unique and that their talents differ. Yes, a strong foundation and discipline are important in teaching them the value of education. But, it’s more about challenging them to get out of their comfort zones. It’s about identifying these unique gifts and nurturing and supporting our children to grow these talents, as well. After all, it’s about their dreams; not our dreams for them”, Shirley adds.

Shirley Uris – Bustling and inventive, her story teaches us the value of true commitment and creativity in starting a business: that a startup without creativity is comatose; that an entrepreneurial venture without hard work is paralysed. It is about doubling down on what you’re best at, and love most. The reward is in the work, because you keep getting better and what you are best at. She is a trailblazer for technical and vocational graduates wishing to start their own businesses. She is living her passion!



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