

Diana's design dreams

From policewoman to shop owner, it's all in a week's work for interior designer Diana Stroh. She speaks to Kate McNally about her split personality.

WHEN Diana Stroh bought the children's furnishings shop Dreams and Wishes in the centre of Ipswich at the beginning of this year, it was her own dreams and wishes she had in mind.

Having studied interior design at art college in London on leaving school, she somehow found herself spending 15 years of her life on the beat for Suffolk Constabulary. She still works as a policewoman at weekends to help pay the mortgage, but her future lies with her first passion, in interior design. Half a career later, she has finally come full circle.

Diana's idea was to set up a freelance interior design business focusing on children's interiors – "people will spend more money on their children" she reasons – but when she happened to pass the Dreams and Wishes boutique in St Nicholas Street last summer and saw the "For Sale" sign, her plans took a detour. As well as a great opportunity in its own right, the shop would

provide the perfect shop window for building her interior design business.

"The purchase went so smoothly, I thought it was definitely meant to be," says Diana.

"I re-mortgaged my house to raise half the finances and the bank covered the rest.

"The money I earn from the police pays my mortgage and I can vary my hours as necessary, so that gives me some flexibility."

Despite the gruelling seven-day schedule, Diana says she is actually finding it more relaxing as she no longer has to work night shifts. And, for the moment at least, she is happy to spend any annual leave visiting design exhibitions and shows. She has given herself two years of juggling parallel careers before deciding whether she is in a position financially to focus entirely on her creative work.

"In a couple of years' time I aim to be running a successful shop and interiors design business specifically for children with clients as far afield as London and Cambridge," she says confidently.

So how did somebody all set for a career in design find herself joining the police force?

"I never planned to join," Diana explains. "I was working at a gym thinking about what to do next with my life and a policeman, who was a member and had done a couple of programmes with me, said I would make a great police officer."

"I laughed, but he brought in an application form and I thought the

least I could do was fill it in."

Her fate was sealed by Ipswich Town Football Club. In the final interview when she was asked why she wanted to become a policewoman, an unprepared Diana decided to lighten the mood and answered "to get into the football free".

"I think I was the last interviewee and they had heard 'because I want to serve the community' a thousand times already, so they offered me a job," she laughs.

"I have loved every minute of it," she says of her career in the police. "I worked a lot in child protection which can be so harrowing and stressful, but the fact that you've stepped in and made people aware of the situation, even if you don't always get a prosecution, it is less likely that the child will be harmed again and that keeps you going."

In latter years, though, she found the increased bureaucracy more of a burden and felt it was time to rediscover her creative side.

Although running a design business is a totally different world, the skills she learned in the police are proving beneficial. Discipline for one, she says, is very important.

"The police teaches you to get the job done," she explains. "You have a victim to deal with, an offender to deal with, and somebody at the other end relies on you getting that process done."

"I have learnt to work to a routine which helps, because it's nice to sit in a pretty little shop and welcome people in, but I've always got a list of

jobs to do each day and I have to get them done."

Diana has also transferred her social skills across into her new job, as well as a confidence to tackle new tasks and challenges.

"As a police officer I have always been used to speaking to the public and I have to step into situations that I might not always want to step into, and ultimately that builds confidence. It has helped in buying and setting up this place because I don't have any fear. If I have to phone a supplier and don't know what I'm talking about, I think if you have a confident air they tend to take you more seriously."

Diana admits she has no retail experience and no prior experience of running a business. However her parents ran their own business for many years and she believes she learnt a lot by osmosis growing up around them.

She has taken business courses to fill in the gaps and praises Ipsenta for the invaluable advice and training it has provided.

Diana is also gaining support from the retail and restaurant community in the immediate vicinity which meets regularly to jointly promote the area that will soon be one of the main routes from the town centre down to the Ipswich Waterfront.

Dreams and Wishes reopened in January Diana had hoped to open before Christmas but was unable to change her working pattern at the police any earlier due to the all-out murder hunt in Ipswich at the close of the year. She is busy making up for

lost time sending promotional material to target groups, such as local nurseries and NCT groups, and advertising in local media, and is hopeful the summer months will be good for trade when nearby restaurants put tables outside on the pavements and diners find themselves looking directly into her shop window.

Given that the shop was closed for the most part of 2006, however, Diana is pleased with footfall so far this year.

"I was surprised how quickly people started to come back in and all the feedback has been positive," she says.

"I look at my overheads and set my own targets and, touch wood, I seem to be reaching my basic overheads already"

As we speak, Diana is sitting behind a pretty white desk in a corner of the shop wearing an elegant cream linen jacket and trousers, her hair loose and make-up carefully applied. A rather different image, I imagine, than Diana in uniform "back at the nick".

"It's lovely not to be in uniform all the time," she says, clearly relishing the chance to choose her own daily attire.

"That's one of the negatives when I go back to police work at the weekends, walking around in hobnail boots and a stab-proof vest!"

For the time-being however, linen jackets and stab-proof vests will continue to hang side by side in her wardrobe.