Otara



She is young, shy, very successful and is the insignia of her very own ready-to-wear range of clothes marketed under the name – Odel.

Otara Chandiram's beginnings however, have nothing to do with the fashion industry. "I have a degree in biology and with that there wasn't much of a choice of things to do here, so I got into the clothes business", says Otara who has managed to remain simple, unassuming and down-to-earth despite being one of the most successful business women in this country.

Having obtained a degree in Biology from Bowling Green University in Ohio, USA, Otara took to modelling on a small scale there. O her return to Sri Lanka, she continued with her modelling career for three to four years, "I did it full time actually. I started off by modelling for Nayantara first and she encouraged me a lot", says Otara who has since given up a successful modelling career to

concentrate on her booming business.

Anyone needs a stepping stone to get into big time business and in this case it was her family, “where I came back from the States I didn’t have anything to do, so my father opened a company for me and he started importing hair-care products from Australia and I was actually distributing that at the start”, explains Otara who is the youngest and only girl in a family of three.

From hair-care products, Odel has today branched out into seven outlets with a wide range of a very wearable line of western clothes on its shelves. Odel’s crowning glory is its massive outlet located in the bustling heart of Colombo at Lipton Circus, “this place took so much of energy and so much hard work”. says Otara, but it most definitely has been worth the trouble. Odel’s ‘big one’ is a one-stop-shop for the most discerning shopper. “When I started this business I never expected it to grow so big”, she adds. Her husband carries half the burden for her now.

With the expansion of the garment industry in Sri Lanka, our fashion repertoire while moving forward is certainly wide and varied. In this context, one must have a ‘gut instinct’ for what is right for the current market and Otara definitely has it. Odel’s Collection has the elegance, style and charm required in modern clothing.

The displays are so well co-ordinated that a customer immediately gets a visual idea of what he or she wants, “business is very demanding and competitive now and we have to keep changing colours, designs etc., you can’t hang one thing there and keep it for months”, says Otara who sources her merchandise by importing ready-to-wear garments and buying the surplus from local garment manufacturers. “We also manufacture some of our things”, she adds.



Otara also does her own screen printing, “we have a small factory and all our T-shirts are done there”, he says.

Deeply conscious of the environment and a nature lover, Otara has a separate section in her outlet, “where I do things for the environment”, she explains. This ‘environment section’ displays clothes depicting Sri Lankan scenery and wild-life and even displays recycled stationery.

When one visits an Odel outlet, it’s not unusual to see droves of shoppers rushing around from shelf to shelf with beaming faces and overloaded baskets like kids gone mad in a toy shop, “my customers know they get good quality at a good price and if there’s a problem with anything they have bought we always take it back”, explains Otara, confirming that to her customer satisfaction comes first.

Having being involved with the garment industry for so long, one wonders why she hasn’t set out to design her own line, but she explains why, “I do it in a very small way mostly with T-shirts but not high fashion. You can’t do that seriously here because the right fabric and accessories aren’t available.”

One also wonders why Odel has not yet put its own collection up on the ramp. According to its proprietress, “we do lend some of our things to people who have small fashion shows but we haven’t had one of our own. Our things are not upmarket, it’s everyday- wear and what everyone can afford. Another reason is, if a customer sees something at a show and comes two weeks later and wants it, we may not have it on offer because our things move fast. To have a fashion show you have to have a collection for that month. Maybe down the line when we make our own range, at that point we may.”

Too modest to admit her success, she says, “I don’t think I’ve reached the pinnacle of success. Even now I don’t see it as a huge thing. It’s not something that happened all at once. It took so much time. My goal is to make Odel a household name and I think I’ve achieved that to some extent, but at the moment I’m happy with what I’ve got”. Well, she most certainly has succeeded in making Odel a household name not only here in Sri Lanka, but overseas as well.

As all career women know, combining business, family and especially motherhood is no easy task and Otara is no exception to this rule, “I work a lot. I start around nine-thirty in the morning and go on till about nine-thirty in the evening. But it’s fun. It gives me a lot of pleasure. To think I can provide something so many people enjoy and appreciate means a lot to me”, she admits. But of course she does find the time to spend with her young son, especially on sundays, which for all working women is a ‘sacred day”.

Shying away from publicity, she describes herself as a very private person. “I don’t like a lot of publicity. This is the first time I’m giving an interview, but I won’t make a habit of it”, she insists.

Talking about her plans for the forthcoming Christmas season Otara says Odel will be having some pleasant surprises for its customers. Going by the records, it most certainly will be something to look forward to.

Here is a woman who has taken on a challenge with a will to succeed. With sheer courage, determination and that wide smile in place, Otara Chandiram is what one might truly call a woman of substance.

Riding the crest of success

by Sharmini Serasinghe