

**Jill Kenik, President,
Acropolis Studios, Inc.**
www.acropolisstudios.com

"I always thought I would be a craftsperson, go back to get my MFA degree, and live out my fantasy of having my own production line," says Jill Kenik. "After working for Swank, Inc. as the Men's Accessories Designer for seven years, I realized I liked working for industry. My job there was like another college education. I learned that a designer needs to be able to manufacture, not just draw pretty pictures. I never went back." Now the owner of her own product development company, Acropolis Studios, Jill specializes in jewelry and giftware, helping clients with the product design, models, and consulting to get their ideas from concept to fruition.

"When I was in high school, I had a definite interest in art," says



David Kenik

Jill. "I had relatives who were graphic designers and weavers. Although my high school art program wasn't great, my Aunt Jean was a jeweler and an excellent mentor for me. I decided to attend the Rochester Institute of Technology and I declared my major in Metals as a freshman." Jill earned her BFA degree in Metalcrafts and Jewelry from the School of American Craftsmen at the Rochester Institute of Technology in 1985. During her senior year, when there was a discussion about how to make a living in the field, a teacher who knew Jill's strengths suggested that she consider working in industry.

"I started as a designer at Swank right after graduation, and although I made less money there than someone working at Wendy's, I loved it," says Jill. "It was a good combination of things for me because I was strong technically and enjoyed working within tight constraints. It was an incredible learning experience. I rolled my sleeves up and learned all aspects of the business, including the speed required to build things. Every job was a huge learning opportunity, and I found that I could still come up with beautiful pieces within the constraints of production. I found I liked figuring out how to do the production the first time, then having someone else execute the production of the pieces themselves. For someone who doesn't like to do the production, industry has something to offer artists. Also, most artists don't realize that industry is willing to take phone calls for small jobs. The nature of retailing is changing, and there doesn't have to be a division between industry and artisans anymore."

Jill went on to work for several other companies in production and product development, learning more about manufacturing, before the opportunity came to work for herself came in 1994. "At age thirty-two, I not only had a lot of contacts and knowledge, but I was about to lose my job," says Jill. "It took some quick stepping, but I opened my business in a spare room using a Visa card with a credit line. I slowly built it up from there, and my husband was very supportive. Although initially my income was half of what I had made at my job, I had low overhead, with most of my costs in labor. I worked out of the house for a year, maintaining a 9-to-5 (plus a 7:00 to 10:00 P.M.) schedule. To get an emotional break, I rented a small office, and the business slowly grew. Three years later, I hired my first employee. Eight years later, I have three bench people, plus a CAD/CAM system that is worth another two employees. It's a great place to work, and we are extremely creative."

Acropolis Studios works on a wide range of projects ranging from boxes, baby rattles, frames, and rings to you name it. But they don't

manufacture the products themselves; they just do what needs to be done to help a client get a piece off the ground. "We might start with a blueprint or a drawing on a napkin," says Jill. "We help the client make a prototype or model so they can do a look-see and then take it to the next step in the manufacturing process."

Jill has also learned to make the switch from being the primary designer to being a supervisor. "Sometimes I am forced to work on the bench, and it's refreshing," admits Jill. "I miss working on the bench, but I have a lot of other things that I enjoy. This is a very creative job. We make stuff every day. It's hard and it's scary, but I'm making a good living and it's a great way to go through life. I always wanted to make money and have three square meals a day plus health insurance, and this allows me to do it all."

The decision to purchase a CAD/CAM system has allowed for more job satisfaction for the staff. "I want to make the best product I can, and the computer system has helped me achieve that goal," says Jill. "I researched and discovered that I needed the system for the survival of my business. It allows master sculptors to be good at what they are good at and not have to do all the boring stuff. Two years ago, we would have made changes using pencil and paper. Now, we can make twenty changes in twenty minutes on the computer. It allows a more creative approach and is very freeing."

Jill decided to create a Web site for her business and has found it to be a good addition to the business. "The Web site paid for itself within the first two weeks of setting it up," says Jill. "It's a link to industry, and we get about fifty hits a month. It's set up as a portfolio site and is geared to the CAD/CAM system. It's basically a resource to show potential clients samples of our work."

Jill did go back to school, but this time receiving an MBA degree in 1997, not an MFA. "I'm running a business," says Jill. "In the MBA program, I did a business plan, analysis, and research. I'm a businessperson who is sensitive to good and bad design. Although I never thought I would run my own business, I am passionate about this business. It's 100 percent mine and I lose sleep over it. I'm going to keep doing what I'm doing."

"If you are going to succeed, decide what you are good at and maximize yourself," says Jill. "Take some business classes that include book-keeping and how to put together a marketing plan. Don't invest in the studio until the numbers make sense to do so. Realize that the decision to run your business may mean that you are no longer making art for art's sake."