

Portrait of a Designer

By JoAnne Sommers



THE POWER OF **TWO**

Born of an entrepreneurial spirit combined with native artistic vision, AYA eyewear and accessories is a unique Canadian eyewear brand that reflects a collaboration between two dynamic women: Vancouver entrepreneur Carla D'Angelo and award-winning First Nations artist Corrine Hunt. AYA is the brainchild of D'Angelo, founder and president of Claudia Alan Inc., a 10-year-old company whose products have garnered rave reviews for their artistic quality as well as the money they've raised for charity.

D'Angelo comes by her gifts naturally. Her father, Antony D'Angelo, was a guest conductor with the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra, and a successful entrepreneur who created private label footwear for Eaton's and Woodward's stores. Her mother, also a musician, was a partner in the family business.

Carla D'Angelo studied fashion merchandising at Ryerson Polytechnic (now Ryerson University) in Toronto, graduating in the early '90s with a degree and, "lots of creative ideas, plus marketing and business skills." She worked for Future Shop/Best Buy, doing layout, planning and store design, then moved to Vancouver-based Suntech Optics, where she was quickly promoted to VP, purchasing and



[AYA mod. Esme]



[AYA mod. Drew]



[AYA mod. Neil]

marketing. While she loved her first foray into the eyewear industry, D'Angelo wanted a family. So she took a hiatus, moving to St. Louis in 2002 with her husband, Peter, a software engineer. Her daughter, Chloe, was born later that year.

Even then, D'Angelo was looking to the future. In 2003, she formed Claudia Alan - her middle name combined with Peter's - and began planning the initial collections. And while visiting Vancouver that year, D'Angelo met Hunt at a One-of-a-Kind craft show.

"I loved her design aesthetic, her passion and her integrity. When Peter and I moved back to Vancouver in 2004, she and I discussed my idea for AYA Eyewear and I commissioned some artwork from her."

D'Angelo's idea was for "wearable art" that integrates the aesthetic of the Pacific Northwest. She admits that she wasn't sure of the market for such a collection, "but I like to take chances so I decided to go ahead with it anyway."

Launched in 2007, the AYA collection is inspired by D'Angelo's love of aboriginal art. Each frame features First Nations-inspired artwork etched on the temples; the nature-inspired designs include Sun, Eagle, Hummingbird, Raven, Wolf and Killer Whale. Each has a deeper meaning: Sun, for instance, symbolizes nourishment, truth, honesty and clarity, while Wolf represents family togetherness and communication.

The design process is a joint effort between the two women. "I know the type of collection I want, based on trends and the direction of the eyewear industry," says D'Angelo, who is responsible for the colour development and

construction of the frames. "Corrine does preliminary drawings, we review them and then work together to integrate her artwork."

Hunt, who co-created the medals for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic games in Vancouver, is a member of B.C.'s Komoyue Nation. Inspired by her uncle, engraver Norman Brotchie, she began designing jewelry at 24. Her work, which includes furnishings in carved stainless steel and reclaimed wood, modern totem poles and sculptural installations, is collected around the world and appears in the Smithsonian in Washington and the Canadian Museum of Civilization.

"When Carla approached me about creating eyewear with native motifs I loved the idea," says Hunt. "I want people to look at these west coast designs and see the world I live in. Our culture is a living thing - adaptable, modern and fresh."

Hunt is inspired by the natural world and her First Nations Komoyue and Tingit heritage. "I also want to create something new that people will see, wear and enjoy."

D'Angelo says that AYA's market is about 60 per cent female with an age range of 35-55, although the collection also appeals to younger people. While Canada remains the primary market, the frames also sell well in the U.S., Germany and Australia.

The next AYA collection will be a bit of a departure, says D'Angelo. "It will have a social theme - "community" - and we plan to interview children to see what that means to them. I don't want to give away too much, but it should be very interesting and I'll share more when we're further along."

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The new collection is motivated in part by the Reconciliation movement, whose purpose is to build new relationships among Aboriginal peoples and all Canadians, she adds.

Partial proceeds from the sale of all AYA eyewear and accessory items are donated to ONE X ONE, a First Nations breakfast program. To date, the company has raised almost \$100,000 for the program.

As D'Angelo, who was recently nominated for an RBC Canadian Women Entrepreneur Award, explains: "Our mission is to create beautiful products that make a difference. I believe strongly in the importance of integrity in relationships and of giving back. It's essential for me to feel good about what I do and to create products that I'm proud of." ■