



The Jewel Eden Mule and Jewel Eden Pump are part of Nicholas Kirkwood's new Dark Matter collection. CREDIT: NICHOLAS KIRKWOOD

Footwear fundamentals

Life in the footwear industry isn't always rosy, admits shoe designer Nicholas Kirkwood, but he says he "wouldn't change it for anything else".

UK-based footwear designer Nicholas Kirkwood says owning your own shoe company is like having a baby. "It will be needy, it will keep you up at night, it will make you proud, but sometimes it will make you despair," he told students at the 2017 Cordwainers National Footwear Student Awards in June. He was invited to speak at the event as a graduate of Cordwainers' College, where he learned the art of shoemaking, and he drew on his own experiences in the footwear industry to offer some advice to the students in attendance. The most significant was what he called the "three absolute fundamentals" for starting a footwear business: find a niche, don't do it alone, and show your passion.

Mr Kirkwood couldn't stress enough how important it was to "find a partner to go on the journey with you". Although it is "physically possible" do it alone, he said, the mental challenges involved mean that, in reality, it is not. Your partner needs to be someone you trust implicitly, someone who you can call at midnight to bounce ideas off or talk to about your worries or insecurities, of which he said there will be many. Choosing this person is "one of the most important decisions you'll take when starting your business," he insisted.

The designer was speaking from experience; when he

founded his eponymous brand in 2005, he did so with his business partner, Christopher Suarez. While Mr Kirkwood assumed responsibility for the creative direction of the brand, something which he continues to do, his partner offered valuable support in the role of company CEO. They worked side by side for a decade, until Mr Suarez left in October 2015 to pursue other interests. During this time, the brand opened its first flagship store in the affluent Mayfair district of London, as well as stores in New York and Las Vegas.

Breakthrough

2013 was an important year for Mr Kirkwood and for his brand. On a personal level, he became the first accessories designer to win the prestigious British Fashion Council/Vogue Fashion Fund, which came with a prize of £200,000 to put towards developing his business. Later that same year, French luxury group LVMH purchased a majority stake in his brand as part of a strategy to enhance its stable of young designers. LVMH described the acquisition as the start of a long-term partnership and said it aimed to help Mr Kirkwood "further develop his vision and develop his brand internationally". The investment, and the publicity that came with it, propelled the



Nicholas Kirkwood presented the prizes at the 2017 Cordwainers National Footwear Student Awards.

CREDIT: MARK WITTER PHOTOGRAPHY

Nicholas Kirkwood brand to new heights. According to figures from LVMH, the brand now offers shoes in around 45 countries and its products are available in 150 department and specialty stores worldwide.

The Beya Loafer from Nicholas Kirkwood is part of a capsule collection of 77 limited-edition pieces that LVMH has curated to celebrate the launch of 24 Sèvres, its new e-commerce platform. The site, which sells fashion, beauty and luggage products for women, takes its name from the address of Le Bon Marché, the group's luxury department store in Paris. It features items from 150 luxury womenswear brands, many of which are owned by LVMH. A number of other Nicholas Kirkwood designs are available for purchase on 24 Sèvres, indicating that the brand remains a key part of LVMH's plans.

Fierce competition

"I design for a sophisticated woman with an implicit understanding of luxury who has a strong defined vision of herself and her personal style," Mr Kirkwood says of his design style. At the awards ceremony, he emphasised the importance of finding your own niche when designing shoes. He explained that this is even more important now that "every fashion brand, B-List celebrity and their pet chihuahua has a shoe line". "From when I started 12 years ago, the landscape of shoes has changed so much," he said, remarking that shoe departments are now "three times the size they used to be". This means the competition is greater than ever, so aspiring designers need to offer something different to get noticed. He called on the students to be original but, above all, to be true to themselves.

Mr Kirkwood celebrated the ten-year anniversary of his label in 2015 with the release of a playful collection called 'Kirkwood 10'. It was inspired by the designer's childhood and included nods to popular games, toys and films from the 1980s like Pac-Man, Star Wars and Back to the Future. The collection featured 10 ready-to-wear footwear styles and a range of accessories, including purses, bag charms and mobile

phone cases. The shoe silhouettes revisited some of the brand's most iconic models from the previous decade. Information about the designer and the products on the dedicated 'Kirkwood 10' website mimicked the easily recognisable opening credits sequence from the Star Wars films, while visitors could play the classic arcade version of Pac-Man and add their top score to an online leaderboard.

The brand recently unveiled an initiative that allows customers to create bespoke versions of its Beya Loafer and Beya Mule. This reflects a growing trend of customisation in the women's footwear industry; the likes of Gucci and Salvatore Ferragamo have launched similar initiatives in recent months. Nicholas Kirkwood customers are able to customise a range of features, most notably the material used in the shoe and its colour. There are eight different leather options available as part of the Beya Bespoke initiative, including suede, alligator leather and python skin, as well as 23 different colours to choose from. The shoes will be manufactured at the small factory in Veneto, Italy where the brand makes all its products. They will be delivered to the customer within six weeks of order.

Dedication

Mr Kirkwood told the students they should only start a footwear business if it is their "absolute passion". He said they must be prepared to dedicate themselves to their business, otherwise "it is just a hobby and is destined to fail". He also warned them that running a business never gets any easier; "when you solve one problem, another one pops up". Despite the constant challenges it poses, he insisted he wouldn't change it for anything else.

He ended his keynote speech with a rallying call to those young people present, urging them to stand up and be counted. They have a responsibility "to be disruptive and challenge the status quo" in a changing and increasingly uncertain world, he declared. "We can't predict the future, but it is up to all of you to help create it," he said.



The Kirkwood 10 collection, released to celebrate the brand's 10th anniversary, features designs inspired by the 1980s, including this sandal with a Pac-Man motif.

CREDIT: NICHOLAS KIRKWOOD