

How I found *my* signature look

For Jackie O it was oversized sunglasses, for Audrey Hepburn a little black dress, and Carrie Bradshaw her Manolos... Whether it be statement shoes or a red lip, the right fashion item sets your style tone. **ORLA NELIGAN** meets three women who have one thing in common: a signature piece that sets them apart.

PORTRAITS BY **AL HIGGINS**

The glasses

DEIRDRE McNALLY, OWNER, OPTICA DUBLIN

They may well be a medical necessity, but the perfect pair of glasses, like the slick of a lipstick or a statement scarf, can transform an outfit. “It’s all in the style, detail and colour,” notes eyewear designer and owner of Optica Dublin Deirdre McNally, who alters her frames regularly, from bold statement styles by Kuboraum to sleek titanium ones by Thom Browne. She’s been wearing glasses since her twenties and still has her original, now “retro” pair. “My 16-year-old daughter has her eye on them,” she laughs. There are no rules when it comes to choosing eyewear, she says. “We shouldn’t be restricted to one shape or colour. There’s nothing better than choosing a style for someone they didn’t expect and watching how they suddenly see themselves in a new perspective. Eyewear most definitely defines an individual’s style and completes a look.”

Not one to follow trends, McNally prefers a more timeless and personal approach to fashion, sourcing Irish when she

can and changing her eyewear regularly. “My style is quite clean and minimalist, and hasn’t really changed over the years. I’m happiest wearing comfortable clothes, usually using black as my base, and accessorising to customise my look. By simply changing my eyewear, I can change my look very easily. It’s an easy way to dress,” she says. Currently, she’s favouring limited edition rose gold frames she designed with Theo, a Belgian family-run business they’ve been stocking for more than 20 years. Her latest Wolfhound collection draws on her recent trip around Ireland with frames in colours inspired by the Irish landscape. It’s about function and fashion, she explains when prompted on the subject of whether eyewear has become more about being seen than seeing. “We use the best lenses combined with really stylish frames and great design with the aim that people will look better and feel more confident than they hoped.” ▶



“Eyewear is about function and fashion. There’s nothing better than choosing a style for someone and watching how they suddenly see themselves in a new perspective.”



“When you feel good in clothes, you stand taller. My coats definitely do that for me.”

The coat

RÓISÍN NÍ MHÓRDHA, PR EXECUTIVE

There was one suitcase untouched after the contents of Róisín Ní Mhórdha’s wardrobe was stolen while she was living in Amsterdam. In it were her much-loved overcoats, and in particular, a grey wool Nicole Farhi favourite. “It was the first one I ever bought with my Christmas bonus back in 1994 while living in London,” explains Róisín. She still wears it all these years later, along with a growing collection of statement coats from Peter O’Brien, her favourite designer. A coat is the last item you put on and the first one you take off, and yet it’s one of the hardest-working items, enduring all kinds of weather. For Róisín, who travels a lot for work, it is the wardrobe staple that pulls an outfit together, always allowing her to feel elegant and presentable. “That’s the beauty of a coat, it’s so versatile; it has to be practical and elegant so that when I step off a plane

into a meeting, it still looks presentable. When you feel good in clothes, you stand taller. My coats definitely do that for me.” Although devastated by the robbery, it has made her more considered in her purchases and more appreciative of her investments. She loves the simplicity, quirkiness and attention to detail Peter O’Brien brings to his designs, and tries to buy something from each season. “I try to support Irish designers and love that I can showcase them in various parts of the world through my work. Peter knows how to design for women. He’s not afraid of colour, and there’s always something unique about the cut or tailoring.” A pocket at an angle, some unusual stitching – the result is always understated elegance with an edge, exactly how Róisín describes her own personal style. “It’s a quiet drama – making a statement, but not over the top – and I just love that.” ■

The earrings

NATASHA MCKENNA,
SOLICITOR

“The more colourful and intricate, the better,” says Natasha McKenna of her signature style accessory. Perhaps it comes from her love of art (she’s currently on the board of the RHA) or her desire to inject a much-needed dash of colour into her predominantly black work wardrobe. “As a solicitor, I lean towards dark colours. In fact, I’d say my wardrobe is 80 per cent black,” she laughs. “Dark clothes can be flattering and elegant, but I’m really trying to add more colour to what I wear without changing my style. I think earrings do that.” Her collection of earrings began in her mid-thirties, when she started wearing bigger and more elaborate pairs to “dress up” outfits. “Statement earrings can really elevate an outfit and boost confidence,” admits McKenna, who prefers to swap the “law suit” for a dress, adding a structured blazer and heels and pops of colour through accessories. “They change the look and brighten up my day without going too crazy. I love the way they alter an outfit with minimal effort.” Although she admits her penchant for larger earrings can often be a hazard when it comes to phone calls. “And on windy days,” she laughs. “I pull out the ones with plenty of ventilation for those days.” She has just launched her own firm, but there was a time when her choice of earring met with some disapproval, which only spurred her to go bigger and bolder. Her 30+ collection is regularly raided by her teenage daughters. “They can borrow the small ones. One of my favourite pairs are little gold elephants I bought from Costume as a reward for setting up my own business.” And if money was no object? “It’d have to be a big sparkly pair by Alexis Bittar. Although, I’d have to take them off when the phone rings.” ▶



IMAGE
PRESENTS

Ready for
IMPACT

Power used to be measured by the balance of your bank account or the size of your house. Today, it's all about making an impact. In a time when the news is dominated by the negative, these 12 Irish women are reinforcing the positive, challenging the status quo and helping shape the world for the better.

FEATURE DIRECTION BY **LIZZIE GORE-GRIMES**
PHOTOGRAPHED BY **BARRY McCALL**
STYLED BY **CATHERINE CONDELL**
INTERVIEWS BY **ORLA NELIGAN**

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*I love that quote
from Oscar Wilde:
"Be yourself,
everyone else is
already taken."*

Deborah Somorin

**ACCOUNTANT AT PwC AND
ACTIVIST**

When Deborah Somorin sat down for her interview with accountancy firm PwC, she was asked if she was nervous. "Just very excited to be interviewing for my dream job," she quipped. Ever since she was a child, Deborah loved numbers and budgets. Even as a homeless 13-year-old and a pregnant 14-year-old, she kept that "dream job" in her vision. Now a senior associate at PwC, she has recently set up the Empower the Family project, a charity that will open quality accommodation with affordable childcare for lone parents between 18 and 23 in third level education. "I see myself representing a change in how youth homelessness is perceived. My experience as a homeless single mother has given me the insight needed to be a vehicle for change in poverty rates of single parent families in Ireland by removing barriers to education." Deborah's son Liam is living proof of this; her qualification means he will never go hungry or know what it's like to worry about not having a home. She knows the journey is a "marathon not a sprint", but believes we can break the poverty cycle for generations to come. "It would be great to see more people from disadvantaged areas in government. Greater diversity of educational background will lead to better politics in this country. But, as individuals, we shouldn't underestimate the power of our voices, and aim beyond what we think we're capable of." If ever you need reminding that hard graft pays off...

Black studded dress, Victoria Victoria Beckham, €980;
mules, Malone Souliers, €535; both at Brown Thomas.

Jordan Hewson

FOUNDER AND CEO, SPEAKABLE

At just 29, Jordan Hewson is kicking career goals, and then some. Blazing a trail in the tech world with her new company Speakable, Hewson's mission is to help people find their "civic voice" and take meaningful action through the development of the "Action Button" – an interactive tool embedded in select news sites that empowers people to make a difference through signing a petition, donating or Tweeting a policy-maker. Quite a feat for a poetry graduate, but then, Hewson comes from strong social activist roots, being the daughter of U2 frontman Bono and his wife Ali Hewson. "I don't know if I can call myself an activist at this point, but I'm making it my job to help empower other people to be." Resistance, she tells me, is what you're asking for when you create change. "There will always be those who tell you it will never work. All that matters is how resistant your belief is in yourself." Self-belief is something Hewson isn't short of, approaching the highs and lows with steely focus, optimism and a maturity of someone way beyond her years. And, while being an entrepreneur is something she "fears", it's also tempered with the philosophy that all that matters is the impact you achieve at the end, even if you do fail along the way. "Only two per cent of venture capital funding goes to women-led businesses. There is so much wrong with that," she says of her challenging role as a female CEO. It's hard to change the behaviour or expectation of an industry, but she is intent on shifting the landscape with the Action Button. "We are not trying to change how journalism is written, but how it's consumed. I believe fundamentally people are compassionate and want to make a difference. We just need to make their ability to do that a lot easier."

Multi-stripped jersey dress, Sportmax, €780 at Brown Thomas.

*You don't need all the answers
- trust in the process and trust in
your gut, not in your fears.*



Dr Norah Patten

SCIENTIST-ASTRONAUT

It's fitting that the mantra "shoot for the stars, the sky is not the limit" is one scientist-astronaut Dr Norah Patten favours. Her life's goal has been getting to space ever since a family trip to NASA when she was 11 years old, and she is firmly on course to be Ireland's first astronaut. When asked how she challenges preconceptions, "keep pushing forward" is her reply. Not that she had many; she relishes a challenge and deems success as making a positive contribution to the world. She recently established a new STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) product for children called Planet Zebunar, an interactive galactic adventure that promotes diversity and inclusion while introducing children to STEM concepts. "I didn't set out to be an agent of change, I just wanted to share my experiences with others, especially children, to prove to them what was possible. I want to show people that no matter how big their ambitions are, nothing should hold them back." If she does become Ireland's first astronaut, she'll be bringing her camera and Planet Zebunar's Astro Granny with her to space. "She's a great character – a superhero granny that will help explain elements of space to younger people when I get home." And that's what Patten will continue to do – prove to a younger generation that you can be the scientist, the astronaut and the superhero too.

Navy embellished silk jersey Olivia dress, €1,295 at Louise Kennedy.
Studded patent shoes, Valentino, €720 at Brown Thomas.

Other people inspire me - I have had amazing mentors and friends who I look to for advice and inspiration.



*Getting older and more confident
is a wonderful thing.*

Domini Kemp

AUTHOR, CHEF, RESTAURATEUR, AND CAMPAIGNER

For a food writer, restaurant owner and chef, it's hard to believe Domini Kemp has an irrational fear of crabs. But that's about as far as the fear goes. Navigating her way through the recession while battling breast cancer, campaigning for better nutritional information for cancer patients in the face of much scrutiny, helping prisoners in Wheatfield Prison realise their ambitions of becoming business owners, and travelling to Uganda to assist Self Help Africa facilitate farmers are just some of the ways she has proven that advocacy starts with curiosity, perseverance, courage to change, and one person taking that leap. "I'm incredibly curious," notes Domini, who admits to "rattling a few cages" in her pursuit of change. "If you're experiencing some

backlash, it usually means you're making some people uncomfortable, and that's probably a good thing. Just don't take it personally, and remember your motivations for wanting to make changes." There is a certain moxie and can-do attitude to Kemp's métier and, I'd imagine, everything she does. Success is getting through cancer for the second time, writing her fifth book with Patricia Daly, which has been a bestseller in the US, or simply feeding people. "Nothing makes me happier than seeing someone enjoy something I've cooked." So, in moments of self-doubt, how does she bounce back? "By making people laugh or simply doing the toughest job that no one else wants to do. It's a great way to break down barriers."



Sinéad McSweeney
MANAGING DIRECTOR, TWITTER IRELAND

What's the difference between a good leader and a transformational one? Vision, integrity, respect, empathy, and the ability to take risks and remain curious. Having advised two attorney generals, headed communications for the PSNI and the Garda Síochána, Sinéad McSweeney is well versed in solution-based thinking. Since taking the helm at Twitter Ireland, the forward-thinking MD has been committed to progress, as always, propelled by her idealism and belief in the power of imagination and change. "In forensics, there is a principle that 'every contact leaves a trace', the same is true of the impact we have on others. We are all agents of change, the question is whether we change the circumstances and people around us for good or bad." Her decision to ban smartphones and laptops in meetings is part of her philosophy of "resilience and respect". She believes that, whilst technology is wonderful, meetings are about creativity, self-expression and human contact. Respecting people's whole lives, not just their work life, is a fundamental part of the culture she's trying to create at Twitter. The result is a more productive office and workforce. Her advice for anyone trying to instigate change or challenge injustice? "Spend time trying to understand whose minds you are trying to change and what they believe. Open the dialogue rather than force the debate," a premise that echoes the theme of her TED Talk, which embodies that notion of "growth". "We are never finished learning – a day without learning is a day not living life to the full." Success, she says, is not about a title, but knowing that you are being the best version of yourself through constant development. If she had to choose how she'd like to be remembered, it's as someone who "cared, listened and acted". Of that, we have no doubt.

Navy silk dress, Dorothee Schumacher, €689 at Khan.

Helen Cody

FASHION DESIGNER

"Fear is the biggest hurdle to overcome to achieve change," says fashion designer Helen Cody, who's faced a few hardships in her life, including the death of her son, the breakdown of two marriages, and being diagnosed with bilateral breast cancer. But she has never been afraid to take a risk or change direction. Her career has steered her from working for French *Vogue* in Paris to a stint as stylist for President Mary McAleese, being head of department on more than 600 TV commercials, to one of Ireland's most renowned couture designers. It might also surprise you to know that at 14, Helen was Ireland's roller disco skating champion. In 2015, she once again represented Ireland as a designer in ID2015 in Shanghai. She faced an international audience of thousands, and her biggest phobia: public speaking. "We grow so much by overcoming personal fears. Once you prove you can do something you fear, you can conquer anything." She considers herself lucky to possess a positive outlook on life; disappointments and failures are "learning curves". At the core of Cody's ethic is self-belief, gut instinct and a desire to pay tribute to her son in every endeavour. "It took a long time, but I realised that by focusing on my work, I could honour my son." It's become her mantra for any challenge. That, and refusing to compare herself to others. "Be the best version of yourself, and forget everything else."

Alice Maher

ARTIST


"I was always drawing and observing – always looking," muses artist Alice Maher, whose artistic practice spans the gamut of creative genres, from painting to sculpture, drawing, installation, animation and film, often with the female as the protagonist of her content. Initially, Alice was more conservative in her work, but now she is intent on finding new narratives and images of women that are non-exploitative, affording them an agency and psyche of their own. Of her ability to reinvent, she cites the constant development of her artistic language, without copying herself, as the biggest challenge. Along with other creatives, Alice has worked to encourage social change through cultural means with the Artists' Campaign to Repeal the Eighth Amendment. "Visual culture is a wonderful vehicle for expression and allows people to approach and engage with complex subjects," notes Maher, who together with other artists created A Day of Testimonies – re-enactments of testimonies from people affected by the Eighth Amendment. "I am adding my voice to a bigger one, I suppose, so that does make me an agent for change. In the 19th century, women were the muses of culture. I hope we become the makers of culture, not just being looked at, but adding to the conversation."

*I'd most
like to be
remembered
as someone
who gave a
damn!*

Vintage lace dress, Helen's own.
Jewellery, price on request at
Emma Stewart-Liberty. Sandals,
Carvela, €110 at Brown Thomas.

*My biggest triumph is
waking each morning, and
my greatest disappointment
is having to go to sleep.*

Graphic print shirt,
Dries Van Noten,
€690 at Brown
Thomas. Trousers,
Annette Götz,
€369 at Khan.



I wouldn't hurt a fly, really, but I did knock a guy out with my right hook once. Let's just say he was an unsavoury character that was threatening one of my children, so he deserved it.

Christina Noble

FOUNDER, CHRISTINA NOBLE CHILDREN'S FOUNDATION

"The only way is up," sings Christina Noble, otherwise known as Mama Tina to more than one million children she has helped through her foundation. It's her motto, she tells me, one that she sings to herself and many children in her quest to give them back their freedom. Since 1980, Christina has dedicated her life to giving life to others. Abandoned to an orphanage at the age of ten after her mother died, subsequently homeless and abused, she refused to allow her past to have any power over her future. "You cannot make changes if you are bitter and angry. It'll never be for the right reasons. You can sell a coat, but you can never sell your heart and soul. If you do, it's over. I managed to hang on to mine, and I've learned forgiveness." Christina is not just the conduit, but also the catalyst and the caregiver in changing impoverished children's lives in Vietnam and Mongolia.

Her aim is to give them back their dignity and respect and help them realise their potential. "I remember one little girl always playing in the sand. I asked her why, and she said she wanted to know where it came from. She is now on a scholarship at Beijing University studying geology. She is just one of so many children we've helped." There must be countless "proud mama" moments, and yet Christina never really stops to consider how far she's come. "I don't think about walking into a war zone or the enormity of what we've achieved," she laughs. "I just get on with it with as much love, compassion (and singing) as I can." It's her youthful outlook on life, along with her kindness and determination that has led Christina to become one of the world's best-loved fairy godmothers. Still blazing a trail at 73, she proves you're never too old to make even greater waves and change lives.

Louise Galvin

ATHLETE, PHYSIOTHERAPIST
AND CAMPAIGNER

In November 2013, professional rugby and basketball player Louise Galvin experienced one of the most tragic things that can happen to someone – she lost her partner Alan unexpectedly from a brain haemorrhage. Since then, she's turned her pain into purpose, commemorating Alan and raising awareness for organ donation through her work with Cystic Fibrosis Ireland. "One of the only constants in this world is change. We all have to roll with it to fulfill our potential, hopes and dreams. When Alan died, I was at rock bottom, but have since learned to change my outlook." Following Alan's death, Louise moved from Limerick to Dublin, sacrificing her permanent job and her status as one of Ireland's leading basketball players to become a professional rugby player with the Irish 7s squad. It was a pivotal moment of change that catapulted Louise to reach her full potential as an athlete going on to represent Ireland in the rugby World Cup in 2017. It's not just sporting prowess that has made her a formidable athlete, but "dogged determination", a trait she is most proud of. "I am an athlete, rather than a 'female' athlete," she says with steeliness. "I want girls and boys, men and women, to look at someone like me and think it is not only achievable, but normal for girls to play sport, to represent their country, and for it to be their job."

Black leather wrap dress, Strand, €550 at Costume.

*Hard work beats talent
when talent doesn't work hard.*

Sonia Deasy

CO-FOUNDER,
PESTLE & MORTAR

Sonia Deasy thrives on moving targets, the kind that allow her the freedom to control her own destiny, change direction and move forward. "Regressing isn't a natural state for me, progressing is. There can be no progress without change, so I tend to embrace it." Sonia grew up helping her dad in his shop steered by his mantra: "consistency is the key to success". Whilst working in her husband's photography business, Sonia noticed how dry and dull many of their subjects' skin looked. Frustrated with the lack of effective skincare on the market, she drew on her Indian herbalist heritage and developed Pestle & Mortar – a unique beauty brand that combines science and nature to create simple solutions for skin. It takes a certain steely focus to catapult a niche brand into an otherwise crowded beauty market, but she has done it with aplomb. Apart from being a mother to five children, Pestle & Mortar is her biggest achievement, challenges and all. "It's about keeping the big vision in sight and empowering others to support you." Sonia credits her large family for her thick skin, which is often required to navigate the competitive industry pelt. In moments of adversity, she always sees the lesson. "I ask myself what I can learn from the situation. Secondly, I reinvent my future; and lastly, I ring my sister and find something humorous in it," she laughs.

Black jumpsuit, €595 at Róisín Linnane.
Necklaces, Melissa Curry, €89 each at Khan.

I always think of something Gandhi said: "A man is but the product of his thoughts. What he thinks, he becomes."



FEATURE DIRECTION BY LIZZIE GORE-GRIMES, ASSISTED BY MOLLY FITZPATRICK, PHOTOGRAPHED BY BARRY MCCALL, POST PRODUCTION BY DYLAN MADDEN, STYLED BY CATHERINE CONDELL, ASSISTED BY KITTY McLAUGHLIN, MAKE-UP BY ZOË CLARK, ASSISTED BY MARY DRUMMOND, HAIR BY KATIE CULLETON, SHOT ON LOCATION AT BOND STREET STUDIOS, DUBLIN 8.



Dr Cliona Ní Cheallaigh

CONSULTANT AND CLINICAL LEAD AND INVESTIGATOR FOR THE INCLUSION HEALTH RESEARCH SERVICE AT ST JAMES'S HOSPITAL

As a child, Dr Cliona Ní Cheallaigh was more interested in becoming a ballerina, or a detective, eventually landing her “dream job” as a doctor when she realised medicine could satisfy her desire to hear people’s stories and work with those on the margins of society. She has taken the old medical adage of “good bedside manner” to new levels, forming the Inclusion Health Service, a project that seeks to bridge the gap between those people excluded from society and proper healthcare. A system that treats everyone with kindness and understanding, whether they are marginalised for reasons such as homelessness or addiction, is the core of her approach. “The standard models of care don’t suit all patients. By tailoring our approach to better meet the needs of individuals, we can address those inequalities,” she explains. The service is the first of its kind in the world and has already successfully reduced the rates of admission, re-admission and length of stay of homeless patients. While lack of clarity on instigating change on a national level frustrates her, she is hopeful. “It would be great if healthcare providers and systems would directly address social determinants of health, but there is so much good and concern for others among people, and seeing that is a privilege.” The first step to change is realising you don’t have to get it right the first time, but part of her ability to challenge preconceptions stems from her personal and empathetic approach. “I try to get people to see things differently, often giving details about the person so they can be seen by others as the human beings they are.”

Coral dress, Emporio Armani, €495; embellished suede shoes, Kurt Geiger, €170; both at Brown Thomas.

Ellen Keane

ELITE ATHLETE AND PARALYMPIAN SWIMMER

While most of us were perfecting our break-dancing moves or wondering what we’d grow up to be, Ellen Keane was competing for Ireland at the Beijing Paralympics at the tender age of 13. “I was just a pretty miserable girl who decided to change her life.” As a child, Ellen was acutely aware of her “missing arm”. Physically, she never struggled – there was always “another way of doing things”; but mentally, it was a rollercoaster. “Swimming

gave me the courage to want to change how I felt about my body, and the platform to help normalise the stigma surrounding ‘disabilities’. Now I just want to be the person I needed as a kid because other people need that too.” Keane possesses the kind of mettle only an elite athlete with a disability could. She has experienced more highs than lows, but admits to being hard on herself; she won a medal at Rio, but it wasn’t her “best time”.

Her motivation is knowing she could always do better, but she has also learned to forgive herself when things don’t go to plan. “I often stop and remind myself of how far I’ve come. Sport is a rollercoaster of emotions, and the fact that I’m still here working away after all the ups and downs means I’ve come a long way.”

Black and white shift dress, Antonelli Firenze, €439 at Khan. Boots, €59.95 at Zara.



RING MASTER

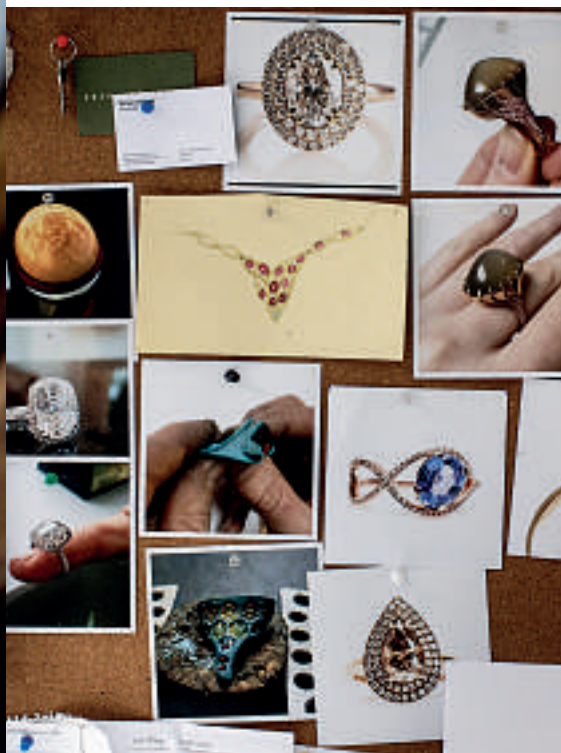
Mayo goldsmith Nigel O'Reilly's expert craftsmanship has seen him win international acclaim from *US Vogue*, *The Financial Times* and *The New York Times*, but **ORLA NELIGAN** is delighted to meet a master whose meteoric rise has not marred his ego.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **AL HIGGINS**

Football jerseys – Italia '90 ones to be exact – were what inspired master jeweller Nigel O'Reilly from an early age. He wasn't holed up in his bedroom sketching diamond rings or lavish necklaces. "I grew up in Mayo with three brothers, so I was never surrounded by jewellery, but I do remember being fascinated by the AC Milan soccer jersey. It was black with red stripes and just seemed so exotic," he laughs. While his brothers were watching football, he was designing jerseys in a sketchbook. In school, his severe dyslexia pushed him to seek out hand-based skills and subjects that didn't require written exams and, while his friends were out partying, he was diligently completing his apprenticeship in precision engineering, spending

any spare time making jewellery on a lathe at work. It wasn't until he was taken under the wing of the late goldsmith and gemstone cutter Erwin Springbrunn that he honed his skills. "The first piece I made was a ring carved from wood. I had to solder it using water to keep it cool and stop it from catching fire," he smiles, recalling the memory. It did catch on fire, he admits, but that only improved it, giving it "character".

For O'Reilly, jewellery is wearable art. Guided by the philosophy that jewellery should become part of a woman and complement her naturally, his pieces have character; they aren't shy, but colourful and bold. They make a statement, but don't shout too loudly. They aren't trend-led nor are they throwaway costume, but instead timeless gems,

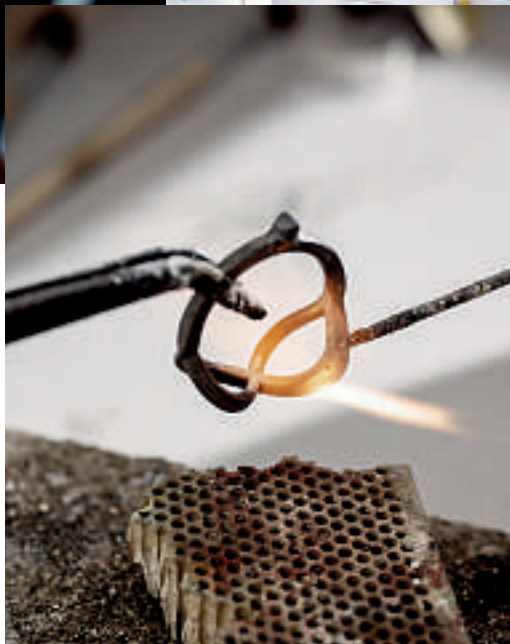


CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT
Argentus pear shaped 1.17ct diamond engagement ring, €10,800; Nigel's notice board with sketches of previous works and ideas; salon area in Nigel's studio; Plato's Beryl ring of 4.93ct green beryl set in 18ct yellow gold with 140 yellow, cognac and green diamonds, POA; an Infinity ring in the making.

expertly made with hidden details that only the wearer knows about, whether it's concealed diamonds or expertly crafted lattice work that only the wearer can see. "A customer once said to me that wearing my pieces was like wearing fine lingerie; you felt confident and sexy, and yet nobody knew what it looked like underneath," he laughs. "I think that's a great way to describe them. I think some jewellers miss the point that pieces should enhance someone's beauty. A ring has to flow with the hand. Earrings have to be comfortable and function well and not overpower the wearer. Any piece of jewellery should enhance confidence."

Earrings, in particular, fascinate him. They are, in his words, "the perfect combination of engineering and fashion. You could just stick a butterfly clip on the back, but the movement and function have to be right, and they have to be beautiful. Plus, they can be seen from the back and the front, so everything has to work." It is this attention to detail and expert craftsmanship that sets O'Reilly apart in the sea of mass-produced jewellery, talents he attributes to his favourite designer, Alexander McQueen. Without him, he admits, it might have been different. "He is by far my favourite designer. He worked as a tailor first, so he knew how to make clothes. Similarly, my engineering background has taught me that you need to know how things work to design. But McQueen's ability to push design to the limits while making it look like a second-skin was incredible."

Like McQueen, he clearly fits the fashion mutineer role, championing freedom of expression in favour of trends. Meetings with *US Vogue*, features in *The Financial Times*, *The New York Times* and a growing celebrity clientele show he has hit his professional stride, penetrating the thick-skinned industry pelt and yet, ask him



about his big break and he is quick to skirt the attention. "I don't feel that I've made it as a designer. But that's probably because I'm never fully happy with any of the pieces. I'm constantly improving."

A perfectionist perhaps? "Definitely," he laughs. "I find it difficult to let a piece go until it's absolutely perfect. It's one of the reasons my pieces could never be mass produced. I need to oversee every single piece."

Just recently he refused an offer from a large investor that would have taken him global. "I look back at the small artisan producers that started in Rome or Paris, who became known for being masters of their craft. If I go down the other road, I fear the quality will suffer. Plus, being here every day at the bench is fun," he adds enthusiastically. It's clear his meteoric rise has not marred his ego one bit. Self-effacing and down to earth, he talks about his craft like a proud parent. When probed on his favourite piece, he's evidently confused. "It's like asking to pick your favourite child," he laughs, finally settling on the Molecular Cloud ring. The moonstone was a gift from his much-revered mentor, Erwin, for his wedding. It sat in a safe for ▶

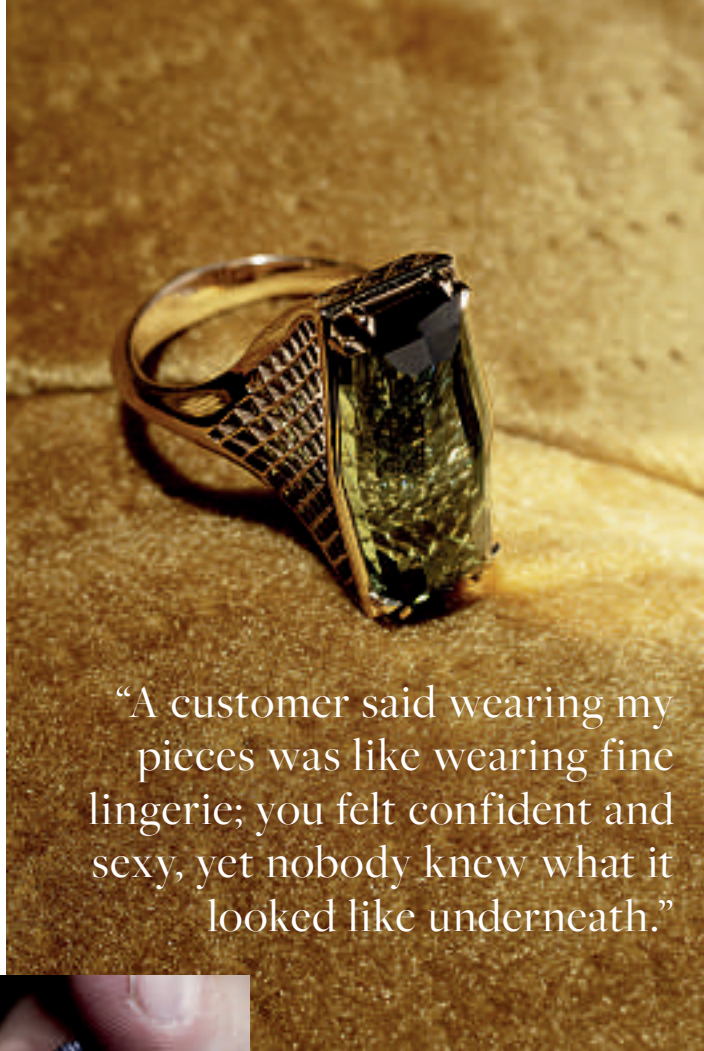


nine years before he felt confident that he wouldn't "mess it up". In the end, it was David Bowie who inspired his idea to create a ring placing the moonstone in the middle and other gems around it, mimicking a solar system, set on a bed of pink sapphires and rubies. The stone is set from the back so that the cabochons look like they are floating. It was more challenging technically than most of his designs, but it doesn't look like it, and that's the point. Representing personality is integral to the design process. If he had to design for anyone, it would be an edgy, geometric, gothic creation for Lady Gaga, who, like McQueen, always pushes the boundaries.

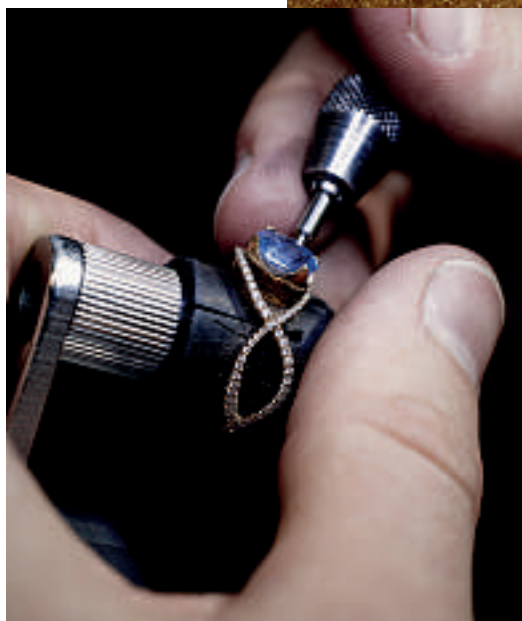
As the business grows, O'Reilly spends less time than he'd like on "the bench" making jewellery, but still manages three to four days a week. It is working with the materials, in particular 18 karat rose gold, and designing the pieces that excite him most. There is only one project he can remember that really challenged him in a way that he'd rather not repeat. "A designer commissioned me to make a neck piece for the Hong Kong Jewellery Fair. It had 15 components and 1,400 stones, and I only had five days to complete it. That wasn't much fun," he adds with a sigh.

All this chimes with the fact that O'Reilly takes huge pride in his work, never taking for granted the responsibility he has for the end result and for the person who will be wearing it. "It probably sounds vain, but I really believe that if you're looking at something beautiful on your skin, it will make you feel better. Jewellery is so personal, and I take great responsibility in ensuring it's perfect for that person who will be wearing it every day."

With collections that have riffed on everything from the landscape of Louisburgh in Mayo to his love of fashion, inspiration is found in his



"A customer said wearing my pieces was like wearing fine lingerie; you felt confident and sexy, yet nobody knew what it looked like underneath."



growing collection of fashion magazines and the beauty of the West of Ireland.

I'm interested to know how home informs his work. "It's everything about here: the rugged landscape, the colours." The Labyrinth ring, for instance, is a nod to Louisburgh in Mayo, where he married his wife Tracy, combined with his love of architecture. "I tried to capture that burnt green landscape of Louisburgh. There's intricate latticework all around the ring and hidden diamonds underneath. The ring is a representation of everything that's beautiful about here." O'Reilly credits having grown up in Ireland, a country on the edge of Europe, and in particular Mayo, the last

stop relatively speaking, as integral to his design. If he was to listen to all the "advice" urging him to move to New York or London, he may not have the same business he has today. "Living and working here has built up a certain level of resilience," he says matter-of-factly. "Success for me had nothing to do with geography. The important part is creating, and I do that best here in the West of Ireland."

His studio in Castlebar, designed by his artist wife Tracy, is a space that imbues the same casual luxury of his jewellery designs, a combination of his innate colour sense with a healthy dose of cool. "My friend once said to me that he'd rather choke on brilliance than cruise on the coat-tails of mediocrity. That kind of stuck with me," he muses. "Cool" may not be his choice of words, but it's clear that his designs are a world away from mediocrity. "My personal fashion motto? 'Just not look too scruffy,'" he laughs amiably. "I prefer the jewellery to do the talking." ■



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT
Nigel in his studio; Dante's Zircon ring of 14.56ct orange beryl, 344 coloured diamonds and sapphires set into 18kt rose gold, POA; setting sapphire in an Infinity ring; Labyrinth signature ring of central green tourmaline with 62 diamonds set in 18ct yellow gold, POA.



Nigel O'Reilly rings start from €5,000. nigeloireilly.com, nor-design.ie

FREE EDUCATION

Alternative schooling is on the rise, as we acknowledge that one size does not fit all. **ORLA NELIGAN** visits the Sudbury School in Sligo, where the founders believe that children are their own best teachers.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **ISABELLE COYLE**

It's 10am on a Tuesday morning and 12-year-old Sean Boni has arrived at the Sligo Sudbury School. He has no set timetable, no official "class" or "classroom" to attend; he is free to do whatever he wishes for the day, whether that's playing outside, practising maths or learning a new musical instrument. It's called a school, but the Sligo Sudbury School (sligosudburyschool.com) – one of two currently established in Ireland – bears no hallmarks of the traditional school as we know it. It's every helicopter parent's worst nightmare, but research has shown this democratic, child-led approach to education to be highly beneficial for fostering learning, growth and confidence in children. Modelled after the first Sudbury Valley School set up in Massachusetts in 1968, it allows children to be free to follow their passions and interests in a self-directed way; the more traditional school skills, such as reading, writing and maths, acquired at their own pace, after they begin showing an interest in them. Not when a staff member dictates it is time to learn.

As different as parents may be, most would agree that they would want schools to teach their children about core values such as responsibility

and respect. Most would encourage an environment that fosters creativity, empathy and independence. These values underpin the foundation of democratic schools like Sudbury and yet most of us baulk at the very idea of sending our children somewhere where essentially the school is run, in part, by the children themselves. Cue nightmarish visions of children running amok, playing computer games all day long or barely able to string a sentence together by the age of ten. But the opposite seems to be true, giving plenty of worthy credit to children's willingness to learn. "Children are naturally curious," says Gayle Nagle, who co-founded the Sligo school with Maura Duignan.



"We are all hard-wired to learn and absorb stimuli from a young age, and there's a lot of research that confirms how, in today's fast-paced society with plenty of distractions, doing nothing is important. Allowing space and time for the child to figure out what they are really interested in can be more fruitful in the long-term." It is based on an existential view of life that you are the sum of your choices, but democratic schools have taken the angst out of education; students like going there, exactly because they get to choose.

Maria Montessori, responsible for the method of education that bears her name, once wrote: "The teacher's task is not to talk, but to prepare and arrange a series of motives for cultural activity in a special environment made for a child." At the turn of the century, this ethos could be considered revolutionary, but today, it still burns bright, challenging the current mainstream model and opening parents and





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT The Sudbury School in Sligo – one of two currently established in Ireland; co-founders of the school Gayle Nagle and Maura Duignan; schoolchildren Dylan and Clariana play in the school grounds; Clariana builds a den

families up to alternative schooling options, whether that’s in a democratic Sudbury School or at home.

This throws some shade on the current mainstream education model, which some believe has reached its sell-by date. Designed during the industrial revolution, it smacks of factory-management: students segregated into groups, bells to determine when they can move from one subject to the next, clocking in and clocking out at particular hours... The result can be disengagement as a result of a lack of autonomy. “There’s no one size fits all,” says child psychologist Julie Meehan, whose daughters Clariana and Amie attend Sudbury in Sligo. “My feeling is that this way of teaching – that there is a right way to do things – can instill a huge amount of conditioning in kids and unfortunately, conditioning can take a lifetime to undo.” That’s not to say Sudbury is rule-free. With freedom comes responsibility, and everyone must work towards upholding the school principles, which are based on freedom, trust and responsibility. All behaviour falls in line with a culture

of respect, consideration and trust in the school, and everyone has the right to go about their day unfringed and in a peaceful way. Parents must also trust that their child can make their own decisions. There is structure too, and the students create every bit of it. It is a democracy in its purist form. There is no principal or teachers, just staff members. The school is governed by a weekly meeting that every child and adult attends and where school matters are debated and voted upon, from starting a carpentry class to whether to allow screen time – a six-year-old’s opinion as important as an adult’s. “Despite what people may think, it’s not a free-for-all,” notes Nagle. “It’s about respecting boundaries and living in a community. But rather than set limitations, we try to bring awareness to issues.”

Gayle’s position as a former principal of a mainstream school has afforded her a dual perspective, and ►



“The school principles are based on freedom, trust and responsibility. Everyone has the right to go about their day unfringed and in a peaceful way.”



Whether it's music, art or sport, children at the Sligo Sudbury School are free to follow their passions; the more traditional skills, such as reading, writing and maths, acquired at their own pace, after they begin to show an interest in them

to be an important ingredient for education. “Boundaries and structure allow children to feel safe, even if they rebel against them. Without boundaries, children actually have nothing to rebel against, and even the act of pushing boundaries is part of growing up and maturing. Traditional schooling gives children the safety net, the routine and structure, to worry less about the unknown.” Child psychologist Dr Malie Coyne agrees that children thrive on rules at schools, but also thrive on boundaries set by their parents at home. “As long as there is some structure within their day and they know what to expect, children can do well in any educational environment.”

Some parents who homeschool their children would tend to disagree. Brídín Nic Dhonncha has been homeschooling her two sons for the last two years and follows the “unschooling” method. There is no curriculum, no structure or “teaching” as such. Instead, her sons Lucas and Peadar-Jim discover what they want to learn each day. “I like them to learn how to learn,” explains Brídín, who might guide them towards books or information, but allows them the freedom to do it themselves. This loose structure is one that works well for Lucas, who struggled in mainstream school. “He wasn’t great in groups and got very distracted and frustrated. He’s way more focused now and shows genuine interest in the things he wants to learn.”

Similarly, Jennie Clarke, who is currently part of the management team developing a Sudbury School in Galway, opted to homeschool her middle son after discovering his anxiety was directly linked to the more formal school he was attending. “He’s a very curious boy and loves learning, but felt stifled in school. ▶

while she garnered huge experience and respect for the more formal system, she favours a model that adapts to the child as opposed to the other way around. “I have huge respect for traditional school methods, but believe it’s not a great fit for all. I’m more interested in finding a way to move the system around a bit rather than expect the child to adapt to it.” On paper, there is plenty in the formal education system to light up passions in students, but because the end game is the Leaving Cert and all the assessment and competition that comes with that, Nagle believes it runs the risk of narrowing the vision of students, with a lot of lip service being paid to get points instead of following passions. Liz Caffrey, principal of Mount Anville Secondary School in Dublin, has seen how an over-reliance on a formal curriculum without reference to students’ preferences can dampen curiosity. “It can lead to negative behaviours,

but our job as educators is to help children be excited about learning, to inspire them.”

Caffrey advocates a structured environment for learning, as long as it takes into account the individual strengths of the student, teachers taking a less directional approach as students become more responsible for their learning in what she describes as “scaffolded learning”. Psychotherapist Siobhán Murray also believes structure



“Nothing motivates students more than when they find meaning behind the subject of their own accord.”