

## **LoLa Boutique**

### **Providing Something for Everyone for Seven Years**

by

Brian Campbell

Lorraine Penman and Lauren Smart run a unique and interesting family business in the heart of Tuxedo. Two things make their business unique: the first thing is that, rather than the usual parent/child or sibling business, Lorraine is Lauren's Aunt; secondly, both Lorraine and Lauren say that the thought of starting their business anywhere else was not even a consideration.

According to Lorraine, the family has always been ingrained in the Tuxedo area. The family's Tuxedo legacy began when family matriarch Joan and her husband Doug Speirs moved to Boreham Blvd. in 1963 and raised daughters Lorraine, Leslie and Barbara. Joan is still living in Tuxedo and just celebrated her 85<sup>th</sup> birthday in December.

The family continued to expand throughout Tuxedo as Lorraine and her husband Scott raised their three children, Steven, Jill and Holly, Leslie Speirs and her husband Don Slough raised Matthew, Andrew and Kristy, and Barbara and Jim Thiessen raised Lauren and her brother Brett. Lorraine and Lauren said that everyone grew up in Tuxedo and every one of them went to Tuxedo Community Centre Preschool and were involved in the community centre. Lorraine said, "I was on the board of the community club and was the convener of the preschool."

According to Lorraine the biggest draw of Tuxedo was that the whole family was always there. She said, "We were on every other street. Once we had families the grandkids could all walk to Grandma's house."

Although not everyone stayed in Tuxedo through the third generation, several family members, including Lorraine, still do. All the family has stayed close, although Lauren has ranged the farthest from Winnipeg, moving to Stonewall with her husband Morley.

While Lorraine was raising her family, Lauren worked several years in retail. Lorraine claims to have had, "a secret desire," to go into business and when she decided to get started she said that, "Lauren was the obvious partner."

Once they put their heads together and started the planning process, everything happened very quickly. As Lorraine puts it, “A couple of glasses of wine on the dock at the lake, and LoLa Boutique was born.”

They made their plans at the lake in July and had their business name registered and were on their way to a gift show in Vancouver in August. Lauren said, “We were there (at the lake), and then we were at the gift show.”

In fact, they started so quickly that they had inventory even before they had their location. Lorraine said, “We actually set up in my basement a preview of what we were going to carry and invited people to come Christmas shopping.” They ran out of Lorraine’s basement for the first few months until they finally set up in their current location at #11-2090 Corydon Avenue in February.

Lorraine and Lauren felt that the type of store they were planning was needed in Tuxedo and they knew exactly where they wanted it to be. They had their hearts set on their current location from the very beginning. “We didn’t even look anywhere else,” Lorraine said. “It didn’t make us the best negotiators, but we’re still here.”

“Everything was sort of clicking at the right time,” added Lauren.

That was seven years ago and they haven’t looked back since. LoLa Boutique takes its name from the first two letters of Lorraine and Lauren. “People ask, ‘are you Lola?’” Lauren says, and depending on who you are talking to, “you would get either the Lo or the La.”

LoLa Boutique is a jewellery and giftware boutique servicing a broad range of clientele at various price ranges. As Lorraine says, “We have everything from a \$5 gift to a \$500 gift.” Their focus is to be their customers’ “one stop gift shop” and so far their plan has worked very well. According to Lorraine their customers like the idea that, “No matter how much or little they want to spend they can find the perfect gift.”

Much of their product line is based on customer suggestion. If a customer tells them of a product line they saw in Toronto or elsewhere, they look into getting it at LoLa. In fact, when they started out, their products were all \$100 and under, but their customers asked if they could get higher priced gifts for special occasions, so they brought some in.

But they didn’t want to switch to only carry high priced items. Lauren says, “People like that about us that we have your \$500 gift, but we haven’t lost our \$10 gift.” Lorraine adds, “Because the same people who buy the \$5 gift will also get a \$500 gift.”

They have children coming in with their allowances to buy birthday and Christmas gifts for their Moms. Lorraine says, “Their parents send them, because they know that we can find something.”

Lorraine and Lauren take time to get to know their customers, their likes and dislikes. Lorraine says that, “Lauren has an amazing memory and knows everybody’s name and what they like and what they have bought previously”

Lauren runs the store and Lorraine does the books, but both go to the gift shows and work together to decide on the products that best suit what their customers are looking for. They are constantly upgrading and adding to their product lines, but also make sure that they have all price ranges covered while they are doing it.

Their desire is to provide something for everybody, for every occasion, every taste and for every price range. Lauren said that their slogan is, “A unique collection of jewellery and giftware for all tastes and budgets.”

Lauren says, “We love what we do, we love where we are, we love our customers.” Their customers recognize and appreciate this. According to one customer, “I don’t buy a lot of expensive things, but they never make me feel that it was a waste of time. They’re just lovely and make it very welcoming.”

LoLa Boutique is celebrating its seventh birthday this month and neither Lorraine nor Lauren have any plans to make any major changes in the business. They don’t plan to expand, but neither do they plan to go anywhere. Lorraine says, “We plan to be around for a long, long time.”

## **A Passion for Grads at LoLa Boutique**

by  
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For many young ladies, High School graduation is the highlight of their young life. A chance to get dressed up and be involved in a ceremony that highlights their achievements, followed by dinner and dancing with their fellow graduates. But not for all young ladies though. In 2009, staff at St. John’s High School discovered that girls were not attending their own graduation. The reason was that they could not afford to get a nice evening gown to wear.

From this problem Gowns for Grads was born as a potential solution. Gowns for Grads is a project which provides gowns, shoes, handbags, etc. for high school girls who could not otherwise afford to get dressed up for their graduation. From St. John’s High School it grew into the Winnipeg School Division and now the program is a Laura Milner White project encompassing all of Winnipeg.

Lorraine Penman from LoLa Boutique got involved five years ago and became so passionate about the project that she ended up chairing it for the next several years. Although she no longer chairs, she and her business partner Lauren Smart are both very involved. Part of their involvement is using LoLa Boutique as a drop off location for gowns, shoes and handbags.

As Lorraine says, “These are dresses that most girls wear once, and then they hang in their closet forever. You hang on to it because you don’t know what to do with it, but if you know that it will make some girl’s dream come true...”

LoLa Boutique not only acts as a drop off location, the ladies also raise funds and source brand new jewellery to go with the gowns, shoes and handbags. They make bookmarks that they sell in the store to cover the cost of the jewellery and source deals for a good price. That way each girl not only gets a dress, shoes and handbag, but can also pick out a new piece of jewellery to round out the ensemble.

Girls register for this event through their school to verify that they are graduating and become part of a three day event held at the RBC Convention Centre at the end of April, where they get to select a gown, shoes, handbag, a piece of jewellery, and get a manicure pedicure and up do.

Lorraine says, “What greater feeling to know that the dress that you wore and loved will be worn and loved again.”

“This is the best thing I have ever been a part of,” adds Lauren.

Gowns for Grads needs modern style gowns, shoes and handbags. There is a great need for petite and plus sizes gowns. They also need money donations to go towards the jewellery and any items that may not be donated, including dresses in sizes that have not been donated. But Lorraine says, “Our dream is to never to have to buy a dress.”

Lorraine and Lauren ask you to please drop off any items you have at LoLa Boutique. If you don’t have anything to donate, please spread the word to others who may be able to help.

You can donate at LoLa Boutique #11-2090 Corydon Avenue anytime they are open. Check Gowns for Grads out at: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Gowns-for-Grads-Winnipeg/318028538249919>