

# Textile Love Affair

With her long jet-black hair, piercing blue eyes and flawless porcelain skin, one could easily mistake Charlene Lewison for a chic Parisian. She is, in fact, the home-brewed driving force behind a major golfing brand

by Thomo Setshogo; photography David Ross

I first met Charlene at her eclectic three-levelled home in the leafy suburb of Parktown West, Johannesburg. She was in the middle of a shoot and chuffed at the idea of being able to give insight into her unique style and her pride and joy – her successful clothing brand Birdi. I was there to chat to Charlene about her love for fine clothes and her business, but she quickly insisted on an interview at her Village Walk offices so that “you can get a feel for what I do, and have an idea of the scale of the work”. This was just an inkling of Charlene’s immense passion for what she does. When she speaks about anything, she wants you to be fully engrossed.

Charlene is the shareholder and marketing director of award-winning Birdi Clothing, the manufacturer of the Birdi Golf Apparel range of golfing gear for women and men. She joined the company, which previously belonged to her father, over 10 years ago, after dabbling in modelling and owning her own fashion boutique in Norwood for seven years. “I come from a family that is passionate about textiles, and moving into golfing clothes was a natural progression for me. After fashion, I wanted to take my textile knowledge to another level, and the company has done very well over the years.” It certainly has – it is the second biggest golf clothing brand in South Africa and is worn by top professional golf players nationally and internationally.

“Let me take you to our storeroom so that you can see what we are dealing with.” She’s dealing with a lot. I see tons of golf clothes on a zillion railings ready to be distributed. But what sets Birdi apart from other golfing brands? Charlene – stylish in a fitted cream leather blazer, funky Craig Native T-shirt and beige pants – responds confidently: “It has my own writing, as in my fashion sense. I don’t like to follow; I always try to be innovative. I always ensure that I have my finger on the pulse and

understand what the markets need, especially in South Africa where it can get really hot. Golfers need to be comfortable at all times, but they don’t have to look odd.”

She adds, “It also helps that I have an amazing team that always keeps me informed about what’s happening in the golfing world.” And the amazing team she works with are the same people who secretly entered her into the business entrepreneurs category of the Shoprite Checkers / SABC 2 Woman of the Year Award. “It was such a pleasant surprise to be nominated as it means that the hard work



and passion we put in is recognised.”

Another one of her passions is fashion. “I love clothes,” Charlene quips with a twinkle in her eyes that acknowledges she’s now discussing one of her favourite subjects. “I would describe my own style as sophisticated with an edge or contemporary chic. I dress depending on my mood and where I am going. I can throw together a tailored suit and wear it with takkies! Who wants to look like everyone else?” she chuckles.

Charlene buys her clothes all over the world, but she has a particular love for Parisian designs. Among her favourite Parisian designers are Teen Flow who specialise in suits, Sud Express, Surabaya and Kosatka for their beautiful cool fabrics.

“I also love shopping in London where my favourite stores are Prada and Gucci, and in Italy it’s definitely Cerruti.” Other favourites include Donna Karan New York, Marianne van der Walt who is based in Amsterdam, and locally she adores Craig Native. She also admits to a fetish for boots and underwear. “I love my Diesel boots. I also love beautiful underwear, lacy feminine sets. Oh, and I can’t live without my jeans and my music.”

Charlene has an enormous collection of music in her home. “I think music is so important. When I get home I put on one of my CDs to help me unwind from my day’s work.” And out of the blue she confesses with a hearty laugh, to having fairy baskets and crystals in her home.

“I like my home to be serene at all times. One of the reasons I bought my house in this area is because it’s a heritage sight; it’s leafy and calm – you can even hear the birds chirping.” When she isn’t relaxing at home or out with her friends or family, to whom she is very close, Charlene is travelling. “Travelling is the best. I love Los Angeles; I have lots of friends there and go as often as I can. Maybe I was a movie star in my past life,” she jokes. She also likes jet-setting to Phoenix in Arizona, Koh Samui off Thailand and St Thomas in the Caribbean. “My favourite locally is Phinda Game Lodge in KwaZulu-Natal. It’s situated in a beautiful forest and is just magnificent.”

With the mention of these exotic places, the beautiful home and enviable clothes, it seems that Charlene has it all, but what’s blatantly obvious is that success has come from the determination and resourcefulness that belies a true entrepreneur. □

hair and make-up Niqui da Silva of Glamour Mechanics

