

It starts with a love story

SUNRISE Beach resident Donna Webster's resume is so varied and interesting, and her personality so bright and engaging, that your coffee goes cold listening to her life story.

She's on the verge of really big things with her unique Kimono Collections handbags. That's right, top-end handbags made from real Japanese wedding kimonos. She refers to the bags as rare wearable art.

To understand her inspiration, you have to step back in time more than 20 years to when Donna was an 18-year-old dancer and wannabe actress, based in Japan.

"That's where I fell in love with the Asian culture", she said. "Japan really mesmerises me."

Drama and the performing arts were early influences in Donna's life, but she soon moved into teaching, completing a Bachelor of Education and then her Masters back here in Australia.

An opportunity to return to Japan to teach arose later and she grabbed it.

That's where her life path took an abrupt left turn, then a right, and then a U-turn at the lights.

She fell into work at Noosa with a tour company, started up Dynamite Dance Productions, then went

into human resources with an international hotel chain based in Borneo then Singapore.

And then came the kimonos.

It was in 1997 when she found her first authentic silk wedding kimono, or uchikake, in a Japanese antiques shop.

"It was a very precious, precious thing," she recalls.

Donna says some Japanese brides pay up to \$10,000 just to hire a kimono for their wedding and brides are expected to change up to four times on their special day.

So she began collecting them and had 40 kimonos in camphor laurel storage chests, each of them blessed by Shinto priests on the bride's wedding days, when she realised something special had to be done with them.

Initially she thought they'd make great wall hangings. Then she found a tailor in Thailand and went about incorporating pieces of kimono fabric into clothing. When that didn't work, the prototype kimono bag was born.

"I thought this has got a life. It's



Donna Webster's love of Japan inspired her Kimono Collections handbags.

Picture: Brad Marsellos

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got energy, she says. But I'm not a seamstress, I'm an ideas girl."

Two years of trying different factories in Thailand and Australia, only to come up with more headaches almost had the spark stubbed out.

However, three more trips to China and another trip from Hong Kong to Japan uncovered the dream team of craftsmen to make

her own dream a reality. Japanese artisan Tone-San painstakingly produces each bag by hand, a Queensland wood craftsman hand cuts and turns every wooden handle, and a Gympie-based company brands the handles with the Kimono Collections Classic insignia.

It's a time consuming, international logistics nightmare, but

Donna wouldn't have it any other way.

Donna can produce seven or eight bags from one kimono through careful cutting and no two bags are ever alike.

"Each handbag is alluring and special in its own wonderfully individual way - just like every woman," she says.

Depending on the quality of the kimono, the bags range from \$1800 to \$2200. As an added touch, every handbag supports a charity that supports women.

■ Visit www.kimonocollections.com.

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