

Wichita Chamber Business Accelerator

Episode 63

Robin Lies

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Don and Ebony: [00:00:00] Welcome to another exciting edition of the WCBA. Powered, of course, by Evergy First, thank you for listening. Don't forget to like us, love us, share us. We truly appreciate you checking us out today. We are excited to have Burnell's Fine Jewelry in the house, and she's going to tell us a little bit about her small business story.

E yes, we have miss Robin Lies in the house today. Robin, tell us a little bit about who you are and how long you've been with the business.



I've been with Burnell's 25 years. I've been in the business for about 40 years, 40 years plus, through a mistake basically. I was an art teacher and a psychology teacher before that, both have helped me greatly with in this industry. Being able to figure out people, help people, and create beautiful jewelry.

Robin Lies: So I'm really lucky to have had that background.

Don and Ebony: That's awesome. So now we're going to have to talk about that a little bit, right. I'm just trying to understand now. I love art. everyone does, I have a degree in psychology. so you taught and you've taken those two things and used it in your current industry. How do you get from being an art teacher to here?

Robin Lies: Okay. First of all, I made a lot of jewelry in college. and I actually kind of help support myself through college making jewelry. and then when I moved to Wichita, couldn't find a teaching job and realized I really, was ready to do something else anyway, could not find a job anywhere.

It was midterm. It was middle of winter. I went to Henry's and started selling jewelry at Henry's in Town East of all things. but as far as the psychology goes, it helps me on a daily basis. we're kind of like, bartending. you know, we, listen to people all the time and especially in COVID right now, people are lonely and they want to talk, you know, I mean, they, they want to buy jewelry. They're there to buy jewelry, but they want a relationship and our store is great at providing relationships where you can come back. And If you just want to visit and get rain cleaned or

something like that, that's fine. And hang out, have a cup of coffee, whatever. So we try to make it a very pleasant place to be. but as far as art goes, the jewelry that we like to carry is far more artistic and special? I mean, we have the, the diamond studs and, and everything like that that we have things that you will not see anywhere else in town. and maybe nowhere else in Kansas. We do a lot of custom work and I helped do custom design some of the design work.

Don and Ebony: That's a S that's pretty awesome. So you started, you know, 40 years ago in the business. And did you, how do you become a gemologist? What does that look like? What's that process?

Robin Lies: It's a lot of studying. It's a lot of studying. You can go To a GIA Gemological Institute of America for two years and spend a ton of money. There and on campus and everything, or you can do it by correspondence. You have to take four big horses.

there's a test after each course, on the gem ident test, you have to make 100% or you flunked. So it's really there's a lot to it. And then you also have to go to a special classes and things on, you know, like Kansas City or Dallas or, or places like that. So there is a lot to it.

Don and Ebony: All right. Well, I will thank you for sharing that. Cause I never knew what all it took to, you know, to do those types of things. Tell us a little bit about Burnell's where are you guys located?

Robin Lies: That is such a good question. Central and Rock road and we were still the best known secret. It is crazy. There are people that still do not know where we are and we have been there since [00:05:00] 1979. Same location. We got new owners of the, of the strip center and everybody had, black awnings and we put a bright blue awning on there and they didn't want that bright blue awning.

They wanted them to, they wanted us to put a black awning on it too. And we fought. Nobody knows where we are, you know, except through advertising and word of mouth. We're kind of in the corner a little bit. So it's hard to see from the street, but Central and Rock road people.

Don and Ebony: And Rock is where they are. What corner?

Robin Lies: Northeast corner.

Don and Ebony: Okay. Back in the day, what a grape used to be.

Robin Lies: Yes. Next door.

Don and Ebony: There you go. Yeah.

Robin Lies: I know. I wish they open one again. Well, isn't that fun?

Don and Ebony: Yeah. Shout out to my parents own that I believe. Yeah. All right. Back to Burnell's.

Drink and establish that from back in the day. Y'all come bring it on back. So you're right there at central on rock. Hello, this can someone in the Wichita or the greater region, find you guys, are you on social media?

Robin Lies: Where? yes, absolutely. We're on Facebook. We're on Instagram, if you Google us our name comes up.

We worked very hard on that to create more emails, we do a lot of email. We even do, some different, little fun giveaways and things on email. We recently. Last year or so, actually hired one of our staff. Now. does our social media and a lot of our marketing and she is absolutely fabulous.

She's one of my associates wives. She used to work for WSU,

Don and Ebony: That's awesome.

Robin Lies: Oh, it is.

Don and Ebony: You know, and that's one of the things that if you don't mind sharing.

for small businesses to decide that they need a full-time or a person who is specifically dedicated to social media and doing the marketing, as opposed to just, you know, the traditional sense of marketing.

talk to us about that journey for burnout and how you guys came up with, to that conclusion.

Robin Lies: Well, First of all, Burnell's started in 1979. Jerry Burnell started it, and it was very, very successful.

He's an amazing man. I have to toot his horn a little bit.

and it was all traditional media. You know, you had magazines, you had newspapers, you had TV, you had radio and everything like that. Well that just doesn't work anymore.

Robin Lies: It just doesn't work maybe a little bit but, had we not made the changes that we made over the last few years, we wouldn't still be in business. We had to really change a lot of what Mr. Burnell did in his.

Don and Ebony: With that being said, the end goal is to get people into the door. Yes. And, but your magic ever nails is the special types of gyms you have in the ability to really custom make

the pieces that someone has in their mind. And they're like, okay, I really want this special moment, Robin, can you help me? And that's when you start, that's when you go to work.

Robin Lies: Absolutely. Absolutely. And a lot of times people come in with an idea. that They think they know what they want, and then they start looking around. And like I said, we have things that are so special and creative and different that they end up walking out the door, with something completely different and they're thrilled, you know?

And it's not like everybody else has, but, one of the things that we've done a lot of the last couple of years with all the illness and everything going on is people have gotten a lot more sentimental and they may have some of the older jewelry that maybe their parents or grandparents had, but it's not for them.

And so they come in and we recreate it for them. And it's really fun. It's really special.

Don and Ebony: You talked about your story a little bit. Let's talk about the story. If you can share that, I believe you said it started in 1979. Can you talk about

Robin Lies: Yes, I can. And it's really a cool story. Jerry started the business. He, He's an amazing man.

and just brilliant, brilliant, but I think his jewelry business started because his wife wanted a pendant that he couldn't afford to do. So he started doing research and everything and he ended up buying.

Some casting equipment, everything it started in his basement. He started making jewelry in his basement and then it moved to where he was doing art shows. They lived in a RV and traveled. And then in 1979. he finally got the store. parently part of rock road was still a dirt road when that [00:10:00] was founded, which is pretty, pretty crazy. That's what I was told. That's what I was told. Yeah. So

Don and Ebony: remember

Robin Lies: I know

Don and Ebony: it's a long time ago. Okay. Well, cool. So he started, he started a business and in his basement, and then he'd started doing sh you said shows art shows.

Robin Lies: know, traveling around, the arts and craft shows and everything around the country.

Don and Ebony: Okay. And then how did they start at, central and rock?

Robin Lies: He just finally decided that he wanted a storefront and he was ready to quit

traveling. And, I think he did it on a dime too, you know, he didn't have a lot of inventory to begin with. He was actually robbed twice within a very short period of time. Had to replace inventory, had to replace inventory.

Yeah. But, back then as well, he did a lot of custom jewelry. So a lot of his money came from. Not the inventory as much as just doing special pieces for people, He was lucky enough that he, was able to get several pretty high end customers Pretty early on. And I think they really helped support him and make his business thrive.

Don and Ebony: Yeah. That's pretty cool. I believe if I'm right. That backs up to Vic Ridge. I believe the, the neighborhoods. So yeah, I could see why it

Robin Lies: What's a good location, Yeah. Yeah.

Don and Ebony: victories and lake point then. Yeah. And so on and so on. So, okay. Start a business 79. Grew it. is it still in the business? Is he still in

Robin Lies: No, he retired. He retired nine years ago basically. And he wanted to sell the business? He, he, and so he approached several of us That had worked with him.

He wanted to see the business continue. And, so, Nathan Regan, who is a jeweler there and his he's third generation jeweler, his parents, have a store in Garden City. So Nathan and myself, and a couple of others bought the business and it continued.

Don and Ebony: Very cool. Actually, that's a nugget. That's pretty cool. Nice,

Robin Lies: It was just, you know, I just couldn't, I, I didn't want to work any place else. I love my job. I love the store. I loved what we did and what we represented and I just couldn't see it slide by. So at 59 and a half, I decided.

Don and Ebony: That's what I'm talking about. Excellent. That's that's beautiful. So now that you're this big time entrepreneur, how do you, do you define success?

Robin Lies: Doing what you love doing what you have a passion for helping the community, helping individuals. That's what it is to me. and, in that context, we've been really lucky because we are doing well.

Don and Ebony: Yeah,

Robin Lies: I mean, it's the whole package.

Don and Ebony: E I mean, that is pretty cool. You know, you talk about helping people and that's what it's about. And I love how you frame that because it's not just about selling jury, right. It's

not about that.

Robin Lies: No.

Don and Ebony: And I love that perspective. Maybe talk a little bit more about.

to me, it is about relationship. absolutely about relationships. We just have great customers and I've made so many friends from it. and like I said, we help them celebrate.

Robin Lies: We, we get to be part of a celebration. If they're getting engaged. You know, anniversaries, birthdays, Even if someone passes away and once again, they bring in jewelry to recreate.

We get to be part of That And how cool is that? I mean, how many jobs do you have where you get to go to work every day and help people happy?

Don and Ebony: So for some of our listeners, that are, you know, now being introduced to your store and they may be younger in age. talk to us a little bit about, affordability. Do they, is there something in everyone's price range that can come to Burnell's and

Robin Lies: You that's such a good question. Good job. yes, absolutely. One thing that I've I, do most of the buying and one thing that we have done over the past three or four years. Well, something that's happened is we are getting tons of bridal customers. Mr. Burnell didn't really ever focus on that. And because he was more into pieces of art and, you know, just more unique pieces and the bridal business is booming. And a lot of our older customers, that [00:15:00] were very wealthy. were aging out. And So we had to figure out what to do to regenerate. this business. And so, we do have things in all price points. I mean, we have Beautiful. silver earrings for \$50. If you want to buy a hundred. thousand dollar ring, which we sold this year, we can do that too.

But what we do is we make it very personal. We sit down with you. If you wish, sit down with you. Give you all the information, you wish, talk about if it's a fashion piece, what looks good on you? Why it looks good on you. even colors, things like that, for engagement rings. What is is she going to have a job where It's going to be, hard used? You know, if she, if she works and, and, Puts a lot of pressure on a lot of things like that. We do that. We just, I mean, we really take you step-by-step But the young people are really coming in. We have developed an incredible reputation for engagement rings,

Don and Ebony: Wow.

Robin Lies: and we hope that they stay with us as they mature for other, you know, other occasions

Don and Ebony: events and things. Yeah. Well, thank you for sharing that friends. We are here with miss Robin Lies of Burnell's fine jewelry. We're going to hear a word from our sponsors, but we'll be back to hear more of their stuff.

Well, welcome back friends. We're here with Ms. Robin Lies and Burnell's Fine Jewelry and we are hearing a little bit about their story. So Ms. Robin, we just, talked about the success of the bridal business. before our break. Can you talk to us a little bit about, do you guys have a lot of multi-generation families who come in and grandmother spring and daughters, daughters bringing then their daughters and things like that?

Robin Lies: We do. And that's one of the most fun parts is seeing the history that this industry can entail knowing the grandmother and then the mother, and then the daughter or the son that we do.

We absolutely. do, Especially with bridal or maybe a special birthday or something like that. But we do a lot with bridal and we hope that continues because it's just fun. I actually have a customer that lives in Arizona and her her mom, was a customer of ours and she is a customer of ours, long distance from Arizona and then her daughter was getting married. And so through the internet and everything, I sold the daughter's fiance her engagement ring.

Don and Ebony: That is awesome.

Robin Lies: It is.

Don and Ebony: That that's the type of story I like to hear.

Robin Lies: Well, hopefully, you know, it it shows the trust that people have in us. the honesty and integrity that this store has.

Don and Ebony: Yeah, and I couldn't, I, it has to be the experience. Cause I couldn't imagine. I'm not trying to call out a store, but I couldn't imagine somebody going to a big box store. Thank you. Okay. You went there big box store and say, yeah, you know, I bought my ring from here. Daughter, you going to buy your ring from, I can't imagine that as an experience.

I mean, it's a different kind of experience, but I can't imagine it as a motherly experience. I guess

Robin Lies: I wish more young people really understood how much, more we give to them as far as the shopping experience and a lot of people think because it's an independent store that. We are much more costly. it's not true. And for instance, if, a gentleman comes in and he has X amount of dollars to spend on an engagement ring, we sit down and talk, we figure out, you know, the mounting and what he wants for the diamond. And if we [00:20:00] don't have the diamond in stock, we go shop. And I love to shop and spend other people's money. And I work really hard. Yeah. That I work very hard not just me. all of our staff works very, very hard to find

exactly what they want and try to respect the budget as well. Now, other stores just don't do that.

Don and Ebony: You're right. And, and I think that is part of it, right? How do we overcome that barrier or perception, for younger people or for people of any age to think that if it's an independent store that is out of their league, you know? and, and I think that's important. So thanks for sharing that. And, I, I think this is a great platform to share that story, to say that, you know, this is a place for everyone.

Robin Lies: Oh, it is. It absolutely is. it just cracks me up to watch a gentleman walk into our story, a young man. And he's got this look on his face, like, oh my gosh, what am I getting into? Because he's getting ready to spend a lot of money on what are the most important things in his life. you know? And it is our job to make him feel comfortable and honored and listened to and find the perfect ring.

Don and Ebony: Yeah, thank you for that. So let's talk a little bit about COVID we've come through some hard gears, being separated from our friends, not knowing what the pandemic was going to bring. How did you guys make it through? COVID

Robin Lies: it was crazy at first. Absolutely crazy. you know, we were shut down. for like six or seven weeks, just boom, One day.

Okay. You're closed. Every non-essential business is closed and we had no idea what was going to go on from there, with. Terrified. so Nathan and I just kinda kept things going as far as paying bills, and, you know, getting repairs done and, and things of that nature. oh, by the way, we have a full repair shop and we do appraisals. So, after that, we opened back up and that's when we started thinking about hiring a full-time marketing person. and once again, that was huge, huge for us. and then we had to close down again, several months later, we had just hired a person and she got COVID.

So we had to shut down again. And then in January of the next year, four of us got COVID all at once and we had to shut down again. even with all of that, we had the two best years we ever.

Don and Ebony: Wow. Even with all that you shut down like six times and you still,

Robin Lies: Tell you we're rocking it. I'm telling you,

Don and Ebony: That is amazing. Kudos to you.

Robin Lies: Well, thank you. Well, you know, and it's not just us, but I think it is as to but people had money. There was, you know, a lot of money floating around for some People But, people with money, they couldn't travel, they weren't going out to dinner. I mean, so there was income. and, I think people that did well with each other during, COVID really began to respect and

appreciate each other a lot more.

And how better than to give something that's lasting that special. that maybe even can be passed down to a son or daughter or something like that. It became really personal again and, pretty romantic. So, Yeah.

Don and Ebony: So I'm going to turn it over to Don, but I have one last question that I want to ask is what scares you?

Robin Lies: Getting lost, but what scares me. the world right now. The world right now.

Don and Ebony: Yeah,

Robin Lies: With the economy and, and, and Russia and, and still COVID and just so many different things, you know, I think I have tremendous faith in our business, but you only have so much control over the world. So yeah. That.

Don and Ebony: Thank you for sharing that and being vulnerable. Excellent.

I don't like to assume. Cause you know what they say about assuming, but I take it. Mr. Burnell is an inspiration for you.

Robin Lies: Yes. Yes. Like I said, that gentlemen is he's, he's a genius type. He was also a photographer and won numerous, numerous awards all over for his photography and he was just smart, just smart and creative and a very nice man.

Don and Ebony: Excellent along that line. Who else is an inspiration in the Wichita area first? And then let's look at the national landscape.

Robin Lies: Well, as far as retail goes, I think the former owners of Aspen boutique,[00:25:00] James and Monica Schmidt Smiths, because they had such a unique store again and it was kind of artistic and, such a variety of things and it was just always fun. It was fun to go in there. So as far as retail goes, Jenny, Don sellers. Oh my goodness. What an amazing woman, What an amazing woman and what she has done in such a short amount of time.

Don and Ebony: What about Wichita's business ecosystem? You've been here a minute. How would you like to see it? Change or evolve?

Robin Lies: Well, of course, You know, one of the big areas to grow, is younger people, keeping younger people here. And I know that there are different organizations that are really trying hard with that and to make people appreciate Wichita. Wichita's a great town. I thought I would be here three or four years and I love Wichita.

It's so easy to get around in. economically it's wonderful.

We have so much culture and arts and parks and, you know, it's, it's just a great city. I think we need, as far as transportation, or transportation, I feel is poor. like buses buses and also getting in and out of Wichita is huge.

Don and Ebony: Like flying. One more question. if you can tell us not trying to be proprietary, anything what's next on the Burnell's frontier?

Robin Lies: I am slowly backing down a little bit at a time. I just started working four days. a week. this February I will still actively be involved in the business, but it's time for others to start kind of taking over some different areas.

And it's been. Difficult and it's been good, both.

Don and Ebony: So she works four days a week, E I mean, she's coming down. Can we get you steady up four days?

Robin Lies: This is my day off, by the

Don and Ebony: Oh, cherry on top. Boom. I tell you what, it's a good thing. You have a degree in psychology. I may have to come talk to you after this segment.

so I hear that you have a hobby that, you know, this hobby dates back to like during the Renaissance period. can you talk to us a little bit about what that hobby.

Robin Lies: Glassblowing is magic. It is magic. it is performing magic. You've got this gooey hot 2000 degree liquid that you work with and all you have between you is a long pipe, you know, even a lot of times you shape it with wet newspaper. You've got this Big glob. incredibly hot glass and you've got a wet newspaper and you're playing with it.

And it's like this far from you. it just, oh gosh.

It's just fun. It's just absolutely fun. And it is magical.

Don and Ebony: How'd you get involved in that? I mean like what made you say, you

Robin Lies: I was lucky enough when I was 17, I got to go to Italy and I got to see The glass blowers and it was just fascinating. And. when it came here, city arts, which is incredible by the way. And another one of the wonderful things that Wichita has, but, it's rare that a city, this size rare that larger cities even have a facility.

And it's not that we have a real sophisticated facility, but they're working on it all the time. so I

told my husband for my birthday, I wanted a glassblowing class. Well, it's expensive. he said, okay, you can take a class. And he did not know that I was going to continue taking classes. Yeah. I didn't know I was going to continue.

I thought, okay, this be fun. You know, just do it once. And, and, oh man, the bug bit me.

Don and Ebony: Well, that's, that's really fascinating. I've I think you are the first person that I've met. Who's an actual.

Robin Lies: I was The first female teacher at City Arts, which I think is really cool. And now there are absolutely. it used to be kind of the good old boys club and there are, at least as many women now taking glassblowing classes as men.

Don and Ebony: That's amazing.

Robin Lies: I think it's just wonderful.

Don and Ebony: And so do you just do this for yourself or do you share the art when you're done? Do you make, you know, things for other organizations.

Robin Lies: For the chamber.

I do their small business awards [00:30:00] and humankind ministries. I've done awards for them as well. And then there are several galleries that I show at. and of course, if somebody wants a piece, I'll make it for them, but I do it truly. I do it for my own pleasure. It's my get your y'all Yaz out time.

You know, it's very Zen. You have to totally concentrate absolutely, or you will number one, making mess, number two, burn yourself. So,

Don and Ebony: Well, speaking of Zen, what other types of things do you do to find your center? You do your art. Is there anything that you read or listened to that helps you get there?

Robin Lies: I feel very honored. I'm in the first women's Wichita book club, it started like. 1920s or something like that. And I wish I had, all the history on it, but it's been going full time. since then. And there are just so many women that are chosen, it started initially to get library books for the library and what's done now is there so many people in and they keep it at that number.

Until someone retires from that. And then you have to be nominated to the, in there. And the cool thing about it is these women are amazing. hopefully, no one's offended. Most of them are older and sharp and just fascinating to be around. some of them really pillars of the community through Wichita. So I've really, really enjoyed that. I love to read. And, I have two big golden doodles that I love to play with and yeah. Yeah. It's all good.

Don and Ebony: Cool. Thank you for sharing that hard parts over you dealt with Ebony. Now it's word association. I'm going to give you one word. You give me one word back. It's not wrong because it's your word. Are you ready?

Robin Lies: No.

Don and Ebony: That's one word go, oh, we'll start out. Easy leader.

Robin Lies: This is going to be hard leading

Don and Ebony: Okay. College.

Robin Lies: Fun

Don and Ebony: Ooh, be a story there, but where your identity to show. So we got to continue, entrepreneur.

Yes. Failure.

Robin Lies: Try again. That's two words.

Don and Ebony: That's okay. Success

Robin Lies: It's hard. Work. Two words again.

Don and Ebony: That's all right. All right. A hero.

Robin Lies: My daughter

Don and Ebony: Ooh,

Robin Lies: keep on saying two words.

Don and Ebony: That that's. All right. It's your show. We just happy to be here. Fun

Robin Lies: Awesome

Don and Ebony: family,

Robin Lies: Wonderful

Don and Ebony: the, the chamber.

Robin Lies: Amazing.

Don and Ebony: Wow. Wichita

Robin Lies: incredible

Don and Ebony: vacation.

Robin Lies: Oh, yeah,

Don and Ebony: hyphenated by the way and last but not least. And you have to tell the truth on this one beverage.

Robin Lies: Wine

Don and Ebony: I knew that was coming. You served it up early with Jenny Dawn. Excellent. Thank you for being on show today. Thank you very

Robin Lies: Thank you. It was fun. It was fun. You guys are awesome.

Don and Ebony: So we are so thrilled to have you here and you sharing your story and telling us a little bit about you as a person, as, as an artist and where we can find you so we can find your work at, Burnell's Fine Jewelry, but also your glass blowing work at different galleries.

Robin Lies: 12, primarily, which by the way, It's a nonprofit and it's just run by different individuals and it's a great Gallery downtown. So if you work downtown the weather's nice. Take a little stroll during lunch and go by Gallery 12.

Don and Ebony: Yup. I agree. Well, thank you again for being here. Friends. If you would, please leave us a message. Let us know how you enjoyed the segment. Share it with others who you may, who may find value in this. And till next time.