

Need a challenge? Start a fashion business in the depression...

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Cele Peterson, founder and owner of *Cele Petersons* retail store, a Tucson landmark for fashion, was working in Mexico City translating Spanish documents. She met two women who would become her partners, albeit for a relatively short time. Her parents had a retail store in Bisbee when she was growing up and she was talking with her new friends about the possibility of opening a retail store in Tucson. One thing led to another and on October 19, 1931 *Cele Petersons* opened in downtown Tucson. A friend bet Mrs. Peterson \$300 she wouldn't last a year. The two partners left the business relatively soon but Mrs. Peterson is celebrating 75 years in business this year. In retrospect, anyone who knows Cele Peterson even slightly would not bet against her.

When asked how she got the courage to start a business in the depression, she shrugged off the question and replied, "A lot of things get done impulsively. You can't let obstacles affect your plans. I didn't think about the depression. You have to do whatever you want to do. If you want to do it, you are not thinking about hardships and problems, just challenges. It's the old thing of there being at least two roads and you just choose one. Fashion is something that changes every day – it's a way of life." It has been Mrs. Peterson's life and one that has presented change and challenge.

One big challenge came early in her business career. "By not giving me the loan I needed for my business the banker made me use my head", said Peterson. Mrs. P. as she is affectionately known, was talking about a time over 50 years ago when she asked for a \$5000 business loan and was turned down even though as she said, "A friend of mine got a \$5000 loan by the same bank to take people to Europe!" At the time Mrs. P. had a retail store on the corner of Stone and Pennington. The building was sold and she had to move the business across the street to a house on Pennington. She wanted the money to remodel her new facility. When the bank turned her down she couldn't create the showroom exactly as

she had planned. Instead, she had to remodel it herself and came up with what was at the time an exciting unique way of merchandizing. She created specially decorated rooms, for example one was decorated with tin and she turned closets into fitting rooms. "They pushed me up against the wall and I created fashion rooms," said Mrs. Peterson.

Responding to challenges creatively and being persistent are two best practices that Mrs. Peterson believes contribute to her 75 years of business success. When asked her age, she replied, "100 plus or minus. I don't believe in giving my age because people make it mean something and pigeon-hole you." It would be extremely foolish to pigeon-hole Mrs. Peterson. While her daughter Quinta manages the store, every working day you can find Mrs. P. sitting in her store at her well appointed table desk working on a huge assortment of community projects. If you sit with her for over five minutes she will capture your interest in one project or another and enlist your participation. While charm is obviously one of her strong suits, she credits her mother with instilling persistence and creative response to challenges by teaching two powerful lessons:

1. Every time you get kicked down one step, come up two
2. When you look at something, say an empty lot - look at the wildflowers, not the dirt

One of the few fashion trends that Mrs. P judged incorrectly was right after World War II when she predicted that women wearing pants was a short lived trend that would never catch on. Misreading one trend in 75 years is easy to overlook. In fact, we'd forgive this Tucson Treasure just about anything and wish her 75 more successful business years.

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