

Noonoo

Jo Ashburner is founder and Managing Director of Noonoo Design and the current UK National Businesswoman of the Year (sponsored by Grazia and O2). We managed to catch up with Jo while she was unveiling her newest range of Noonoo products at an international trade fair in London. "It's been amazing," she says, "we've broken all our sales records on the first day!"

Noonoo makes hand-made, ecologically sound comfort blankets from a patented machine washable felted lambswool developed by Jo. Noonoo design, manufacture and distribute their product range themselves and Jo is keen to stress their ethical philosophies.

Within months of its official launch Noonoo grew out of its garage workshop and Jo looked abroad for a manufacturer. Unable to find a

manufacturing base in Vietnam. "Initially it was a nightmare," she says, "but fourteen months on we've cracked it and I know that I have a great product being made by happy people."

All fabrics used in Noonoo products are 'toxin-free' - a term which Jo prefers to 'organic' - as products which are labelled organic can actually contain up to 40% non-organic materials, and she feels that this can be misleading.

Jo, a self-confessed hoarder, also sees Noonoo as bucking the trend for increasingly disposable consumer goods, "We want to provide an investment gift that won't break or be grown out of, and which is fairly priced and of a high quality." And it seems that people really don't grow out of their Noonoo's - apparently parents have even been known to buy them to give to their children to take to university!

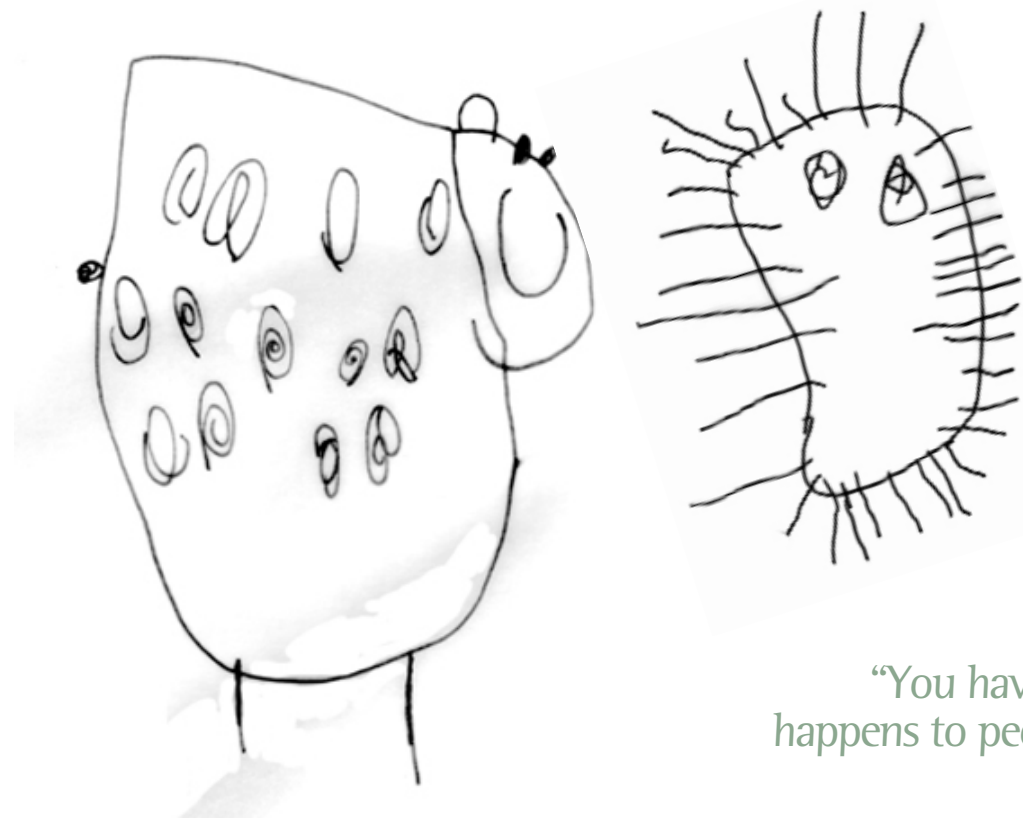
Noonoo's growth over the last three years has been phenomenal, but life hasn't always been a bed of roses for Jo. Six weeks before giving birth to her son, Zac, Jo became a single mum-to-be. She decided that she didn't want to go back to her pre motherhood job in the City of London and have to leave Zac in a nursery full time, so when he was ten months old, Jo enrolled in a design course at Swansea Institute (part of the University of Wales).

"Zac used to come along to lectures with me," says Jo, "he knew



to be quiet and everyone was used to him being around, so there was never a problem with juggling lectures or attendance." In fact it was with Zac, as a toddler, working alongside her in the studio that she developed the designs she now uses on Noonoo products, using Zac's own drawings. (shown above)

Jo graduated with a First Class Honours degree in Surface Pattern Design from Swansea and won a scholarship to do a Masters in Enterprise at the University of Manchester, where she is now a visiting lecturer, motivating students to make the most of their three years at university with her own inspirational philosophy. "You have to just go for it," she says, "life only happens to people who make it happen. As a single parent, I was living on a very very tight budget and frankly had nothing to lose - it can be very easy for students to spend three years partying, but I viewed it as a second chance to achieve, and I worked hard to make good use of the time. I wanted to instil the strong work ethic in my son, that my father, a farmer and businessman, instilled in me".



"You have to just go for it, life only happens to people who make it happen"

Despite being a successful entrepreneur, Jo says that she's by no means a control freak and that she's finding it easy to delegate now that her business is growing "I'm just a ditz blonde really," she says, "I couldn't do it without all the people who work with me. My assistant, Suki, is fantastic and she and the team make everything work so well".

Jo also attributes her success to a supportive partner and the help of friends and family. "My other half, Jonny, is a total rock. My parents are great, even though they live quite far away. We've maintained old and generated new friendships with people who support us unconditionally and are always there to help out, for which we are terribly grateful."

For Jo, though, Zac will always come first. "He's such a bright little thing and well travelled too, but now he's seven hanging out with Mum isn't quite so cool any more. When I'm at home we read together every day, and he tells me often that he loves the way I make Noonoo's. He's an integral part of the business, and knowing he's genuinely involved makes it easier for him to accept it when I have to go away on business."

In the meantime Noonoo is going from strength to strength. They have recently expanded their range to include the 'baby eye pod' and 'lamb's tails', soft and squishy play objects for preschool children made out of the same machine washable, felted lambswool

textile as the comfort blankets. They are also making 'cottonbugs', unbleached, freehand embroidered squares, a smart take on the ubiquitous muslin version.

Not content with being just a commercial success story, Noonoo products are also currently being used in a project involving psychological testing with special needs children "It's all very well getting carried away by the retail side of things," says Jo, "but in the beginning it was all about making something that children could relate to, not forcing them to deal with the world on adult terms, and I feel very strongly that our product development should stay true to the original concept."

For further information Tel: 01706 283 926 or visit www.noonoodesign.com

