

Uplifting women with Inner Secrets matriarch Penny Parolis

By  Lauren Hartzenberg

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Penny Parolis has been in the luxury lingerie business for nearly 30 years. With a background in education, she switched her career focus in 1993 when she founded PDL Distributors with her husband and children, specialising in importing and distributing heritage brands of lingerie, swimwear, shapewear and hosiery to the South African market.



Penny Parolis

In 2005, the business grew a retail arm in the form of Inner Secrets Lingerie. Launched and run by Parolis and her son Dimitri, the specialised lingerie boutique provides South African women with professional, personalised service in the fitting and styling of intimate apparel.

The four Cape Town boutiques – including the new outlet store in Mowbray – house a premium range of undergarments and swimwear from global heritage brands like Simone Perele, Best Form, Mura Collant, Hanky Panky and Spanx. With staff trained extensively on lingerie and shapewear fitting, shoppers are equipped to leave the store with a better understanding of what suits their natural shape.

For Parolis, who is a breast cancer survivor, the ultimate goal is to uplift women. As such, Inner Secrets has been designed to be an inclusive space where the female form is celebrated. “The motto of our retail business – which was borne from our passion for this industry – was to make a difference in the well-being of every woman, uplift her psyche and make her feel beautiful,” Parolis says.



In the spirit of [Women's Month](#), Parolis reflects on the motivation behind Inner Secrets and lessons learned along her business journey.

■ ***As in introduction, describe Inner Secrets Lingerie in a nutshell.***

Inner Secrets Lingerie is a lingerie boutique that houses exclusive collections of heritage world brands of lingerie, swimwear and shapewear chosen to enhance and uplift women of every shape, age and size. Clients are treated to personalised, skillful and professional service by trained corsetieres upon entering Inner Secrets Lingerie.

■ ***From owning a distribution company in the 90's, you and your son then branched out into customer-facing retail. What drove this decision?***

Passionate about our brands and understanding the difference they make not only to a woman's appearance but also to her psyche, we were determined to spread our dream and philosophy, making it accessible and to empower women far and wide; hence the birth of the retail arm of our business, Inner Secrets Lingerie.

■ ***Can you share a bit about how the Inner Secrets brand has grown since then?***

The Inner Secrets Lingerie brand has grown its retail presence in three of Cape Town's prominent shopping areas, and we have a strong online presence that appeals to clients countrywide. We have built up a list of regular clientele through this platform and it continues to grow steadily.

Furthermore, we are positioned with our best sellers of lingerie and shapewear brands in a national chain of women's clothing, particularly focussing on markets in Johannesburg and Durban. We have also very recently opened our first ISL Outlet store offering end of season ranges and discontinued lines at discounted prices.



Inner Secrets recently opened its first outlet store in Mowbray Cape Town, which stocks end-of-season ranges and exclusive sample styles.

■ ***In your opinion, what impact can the right lingerie have on a woman's day?***

Lingerie, like perfume, is intimate and close to a woman's body, and exudes a certain aura about her. Her choice of correctly fitting lingerie suited to her body type not only inspires comfort but goes a long way in enhancing her self-esteem and empowering her in her personal and professional attitude towards life.

■ ***What inspires you, personally and professionally?***

I am inspired personally by seeing women today confidently asserting themselves and rightfully becoming movers and shakers in society, seeking their truth and trying to make a positive contribution and difference to the planet we live on. Professionally, I am always in admiration of people who follow their dreams, are passionate and who believe in what they do, delivering expertise and service to the best of their ability.

■ ***You've trained employees as professional corsetieres. Explain the importance of this training in your line of work, and do you find these skills to be lacking in SA when it comes to selling lingerie?***

It is a known fact that 80% of women worldwide (not only in South Africa) wear the incorrect size bra and there are many testimonies of women complaining about uncomfortable bras that give them no support.

Therefore, with this knowledge at hand, having listened and seen many dissatisfied South African consumers, we have

trained our staff in corsetry thus enabling them to confidently use their talents, knowledge and experience in the art of fitting. It is a specialised skill which one does not find readily in the market place, hence we train all our staff.

We have had countless ecstatic clients who have seen the visible difference to their figures when they have been correctly fitted. In fact, many leave our boutiques so excited at their newly found transformation and youthful figures, that more and more often, they end up discarding their ill-fitting bras in our store. We have actually started donating this collection of unwanted bras to women's homes and centres.



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■ ***What have been the hardest lessons learned on your retail business journey? Any unexpected pitfalls along the way?***

One of the hardest lessons is that not every brand offered in the world is compatible and suitable to the South African market, and that as a retailer you have to listen to your clients and understand their needs, whilst pre-empting newness and latest trends when choosing the appropriate brands/ranges.

Retail has changed so much in that bricks and mortar stores alone cannot survive and a comprehensive seamless online service is necessary for retail to expand. This must be supported by a personalised knowledgeable service as well as the addition of an ongoing marketing campaign which creates brand awareness and targets all popular forms of social media to promote and encourage active engagement with one's audience.

■ ***How has your experience as a breast cancer survivor shaped your outlook on life and business?***

As a breast cancer survivor, I have searched for answers and I feel blessed, being given a chance to view life with a deeper meaning and purpose. I like to face each day with gratitude and an awareness of helping to make a positive difference in other women's lives.

■ ***In light of Women's Month, what advice do you have for other budding female entrepreneurs?***

Follow your dreams, be passionate, work hard and never give up. Know with each obstacle there is a new beginning and you are one step closer to your ultimate goal.

Shop [Inner Secrets Lingerie](#) online or in-store, and connect with the brand on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#).

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