



KAY

WANG

"Creatively and professionally, I am in a spot where I feel much stronger as an individual and have a much better sense of self than I ever had before."

-Wang



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Brooklyn-based jewelry designer, Kay Wang, brings a unique outsider's perspective to her work with an intense scrutiny on craftsmanship. After working as a marketing executive for nine years, she founded the architectural jewelry line, The Things We Keep (TTWK), in 2011. The line is based on the idea that of all the things we accumulate in our lifetime, the things that stay with us are the things most dear to us. Kay's work is designed and fabricated by hand in New York City. Tell me about your path into jewelry design. I've done fabrication and wax carving since 2010, and the company has existed since 2012, but I haven't always done this—and I did not go to art school.

I actually went to school in Washington state where I studied business administration. I worked in marketing and advertising for nine years before I got to a point where I became disenchanted with what I did. The people I worked with were very different from me, and there weren't many folks I related to. It was an analytically-driven, quantitative job including lots of data analysis and sitting at a computer.

Have you had any mentors? Outside of the classes I took, no. Not really. I'm a big fan of trial and error, especially when it comes to tangible items. I've done ceramics and talked to a lot of people who make tangible items. I think a lot of it comes from doing it, screwing up, developing muscle memory, and learning over time. You have to find what works for you.

In terms of building a brand and growing a business, my small network of friends really helped in the beginning. One of my good friends, Ilana Kohn, makes clothing, and she was instrumental in egging me on. She'd say, "This is what I'm doing. You should try it, too." I didn't know any better, so I tried. Her line is doing great now. She was a good personal and business mentor because we figured it out together and bounced ideas off of each other. And she got started before I did, so she shared a lot of knowledge.

The more you talk to people, the more you realize that most people are figuring it out as they go and learning along the way— Or they have the same exact problem as you do, and they're open to ideas about how to solve it. I agree. As an independent publisher, I love talking to fellow publishers about similar challenges. That dialogue is helpful. Yes, and I also think about how we share information.

Marketing and jewelry design are very different fields. How did you become involved in the latter? I started in jewelry very casually. I took a class as an extension of Los Angeles Community College. My professor was a silversmith by trade and had worked for Tiffany's in New York way back in the day. He had lived in LA for a decade by the time I took his class. That class was my first taste of silversmithing, and I really enjoyed it.

So you hadn't done any jewelry-making prior? I had worked with beads. LA has a big jewelry district, so there's a ton of beading supply stores. Beading is very experimental and straightforward, but joining elements together is what's called a cold connection since there's no heat involved. You might use pliers, jump rings, and wire, but for the most part, it's easy and fun to figure out through trial .

“The common thread among independent designers who focus on sustainability is keeping what matters to you the most. It’s about keeping things sustainable so that we have something to give to our kids in the future.”

-Kay Wang

I'm curious about your initial career choice to go into business. Was this creativity apart of your childhood, or was it something you connected with later on? I grew up in a very traditional Chinese household, which has a lot of stereotypes—many of which are true. It was a household that stymied creativity and valued labor, financial success, and prestige.

The first dream my parents had for me was to become really good at piano and go to Juilliard, which didn't happen. (laughing) I hated the piano and everything that went along with it, so that dream quickly dissipated for my parents. Their second dream was for me to become a doctor or lawyer. None of those happened either. I always did creative things, but it was never a focus, and our family didn't foster creativity like I think a lot of families do nowadays.

You mentioned that you grew up in New York, but then moved to Washington state. What led to that move? I moved there with family. We lived in Flushing and then moved to Jamaica, which was the turning point for us. It wasn't the nicest neighborhood back then. At one point, my mom was home alone and witnessed a burglary at the house across the street. A month after that, our house was burglarized. My parents decided to move and they chose Washington because they had friends near Seattle. You finished high school in Washington state and went to college there before relocating to LA. Why LA? I wanted to get out of Washington. Seattle is really, really small. There's a separation of three to four people and they pride themselves on being a “little big city.” At that point, I'd lived there for 11 years, so I was ready to get out and go.