

Article as seen in the Philadelphia Exponent Spring 2005;

20-Year Itch. How an entrepreneur developed a business in Israel, then transplanted it to Doylestown.

by: Michael Pollock

Early in 1982, Terry Layman sat down to watch TV one evening, never anticipating that a dramatic shift would take place in her life. Looking back at that moment, this self-proclaimed Jersey girl, teacher, business woman and mother of three now realizes that she was primed for an adventure and perhaps a fresh start. As it happened, she'd actually seen a TV commercial about making aliyah a number of times before. But that night, something awakened inside her, something that felt almost like a calling.

Within months, Layman and her children had landed in Israel; and the moment her feet hit the ground, she understood that the Jewish state was where she had to be. Those feelings continued for 20 years. While raising her kids in the town of Eilat on the Red Sea, she worked first as a teacher and principal. In 1990, she changed careers, opening a fashionable eyewear store for the locals and jetsetters who flocked to Eilat's popular beaches. She was, in fact, part of the economic boom that helped transform that small desert community into the popular seaside resort it is today.

In 2002, however, feeling the tug of the past, as well as the economic pinch of the late '90's, she left Eilat and returned to this area, bringing her eyewear business to Doylestown. But she still visits Israel several months out of every year and is happy that her life is steeped in it's tradition and culture.

*How did you end up settling in, of all places, Eilat?*

I went to Israel first, to contribute. So when I got there, I followed all the procedures set up to for immigrants. But then the Israel Ministry of Absorption learned that I had a public relations background, so it was suggested that I move to Eilat, which was beginning to build hotels and develop the beachfront area. So off we went. We drove a pickup truck down and our friends made a sign before we left that said: " Eilat or Bust". That was 22 years ago.

*What was your first job?*

I started a language scholl when I got there. I was it's principal. Back in the states, I'd taught Hebrew, but when I got to Eilat I taught English. Also, I helped train employees at the big luxury hotels, because the staff needed help improving levels of hospitality.

*What inspired your interest in the eyewear business?*

I think Israelis' love of high end products comes largely from the stress under which they live-how they live their lives, a day to day mentality. Since we lived in Eilat, I noticed there were alot of young people wearing sunglasses down on the beaches, so I thought people would like an upscale store.

*Is running a business in Israel pretty much the same as here?*

No, It is very different. Unfortunately, the Middle East is known for it's bureaucracy. The taxes are high and the government monitors everything closely. You pay monthly, and they are very strict that you make those payments on time. It's a different culture and mentality. But it was very exciting starting a business there. I felt like I was really helping build part of the country.

*And in Doylestown?*

Starting a business here is wonderfully calm and quiet. In Israel the economic and political strains make you edgy. People here are calmer. Selling eyeglasses is a service and it is easy to do that here.

*Are certain eyeglasses popular in Israel that are not popular here?*

Most of our frames in Eilat came from Europe, which is popular there and less so here. That's a broad statement, but it seems as if Israeli's are a little bit ahead of Americans in style, maybe 5 years or so. Americans eventually catch up. Israeli frames tend to be more "goggley" for lack of a better word. What's popular in my store in Doylestown are the hand-painted Israeli frames that are one of a kind. A large percentage of my clients happen to be Jewish, so they love supporting Israel by supporting Israeli products.

*What do you tell others to encourage aliyah?*

It's a priveledge as an American that you can go back and forth. Not all Jews can do that, I understand. But if you go, you can learn to have the best of both worlds, take advantage of the good things in both societies.