

Borrisokane mum Aileen Hogan scoops top industry award

Not so shabby: how one woman turned her hobby into an upcycling empire, writes Niamh Dillon

A Tipperary mum of two who turned her hobby of repurposing furniture into a hugely successful business has been named the Irish Upcycler of the Year at a prestigious awards ceremony sponsored by Fleetwod Paints.

Aileen Hogan, founder of Shabby.ie, was presented with the top accolade at House 2019, Ireland's leading interior design event, in the RDS last weekend.

"When I was starting out all those years ago I didn't dream I'd ever be collecting an award like this. It really means a lot," says the Borrisokane based entrepreneur who has built a name as one of Ireland's leading furniture upcycling specialists.

Upcycling, the art of transforming a piece of furniture using paint, decoupage and fabric to create something new, was only just beginning to gather attention when Aileen first took up a paintbrush nearly a decade ago.

The former air hostess began her business following the birth of her second child and has since gone on to build a successful online enterprise selling tools and equipment for fellow 'upcycling' enthusiasts as well as delivering online how-to videos and tutorials, sharing her tricks of the trade.

The idea for Shabby.ie has grown over time but Aileen says its humble beginnings can be traced back to a family bonfire nearly a decade ago.

Scattered among the old bits of timber and waste, a piece of furniture that once took pride of place in the family home was next in line for the billowing flames.

Aileen recalls being immediately flooded with childhood memories and insisted on it being saved.

"I still can't explain it but I remembered sitting at the table when I was a young girl and remembering all these little details. I insisted my husband drag it back. Sure enough he did and then I was left with this old table in the shed. But I knew I had to save it."

Armed with paint brushes, furniture paint and a general idea of what she was doing, Aileen set to work restoring the family heirloom. Emboldened with her finished project, she gathered together four chairs and set to work breathing new life into them as well.

"By then I had a full set with no where to put it but the sense of achievement was something else. It wasn't perfect but it was an accomplishment and that's what the upcycling community is all about," she says.

She eventually found a new home for her revamped dining set after giving it to a young family moving into a new home but by then her upcycling addiction had well and truly taken hold.

"There's something very therapeutic about choosing the colours, cleaning the wood and getting to work," explains Aileen from her office at her home in North Tipperary.

Shortly after completing her first upcycling project, Aileen's friends and family members began dropping off pieces of furniture at her home allowing her to continue developing her skills, tackling bigger, more difficult projects each time.

Eventually she was encouraged to set up a



Upcycler of the year: Aileen Hogan from Borrisokane with her award

Facebook group for like minded individuals called Shabby Chic Projects and today this online community includes over 11,000 members and counting.

Around this time Aileen also began hosting demonstration days in community halls around the county and eventually further afield.

"I would show how to do certain things and I'd invite others who had different skills in stenciling that could show how to do that. They were really successful and each time the halls would be packed with people wanting to develop their skills or just starting out."

It was while hosting one of her demo evenings that Aileen spotted another gap in this growing market and set about building an online marketplace for budding

upcyclers to purchase everything they would need to take a project from start to finish.

"Upcycling was still a relatively new idea and it was difficult to get all the equipment you would need in your local hardware store or paint shop so that's why I created Shabby.ie," she says.

Stocking everything from paints to stains, varnish and sanding pads, Aileen was so convinced her online marketplace would be a success, she began manufacturing some of her own products and now supplies decorative furniture mouldings all over the world.

"I'm a busy mother so I know what it's like having to go all over town to hunt down that elusive item missing from the shopping list. I felt if everything was under the one roof as it were people would

come," she says.

Not one to rest on her laurels, in 2017 she went on to launch the 'Shabby School', the country's first online learning platform for restyling furniture.

From her home in Borrisokane which she shares with her husband Tommy, a former Tipperary hurler, and their two children Cathal and Alex, Aileen oversees the day to day running of the business which includes creating content for her social media channels, organising deliveries for her online shop and organising pop up classes and events throughout the country.

"No two days are ever the same but I enjoy every bit of it," she says.

Such is the success of Aileen's 'Shabby' brand that she was named as an All Star

design leader at the prestigious All Ireland Business Summit in 2018.

"The running joke in our house is that my husband might have two All Ireland medals, but he never got an All Star!" she hoots.

Despite an expanding upcycling empire, Aileen is adamant that part of her success can be attributed to her hobby growing 'organically' from the start, as she says she never intended to turn her upcycling skills into a business.

"At the end of the day I say I'm an ordinary housewife at home with the kids whose life veered in a different direction. I didn't plan any of it but I saw openings and opportunities and I took a chance. Every pivot the business made was organic and I think that's why it's been as successful as it has."