Shock and tributes as Bead Gallery owner dies

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Laurie Johnson is being remembered by friends and family after the owner of Nelson's Bead Gallery died unexpectedly on Saturday night.

The sudden loss of Bead Gallery owner Laurie Johnson has shocked the Nelson community, but his death is not the end of his jewellery legacy. Tim O'Connell reports.

"A world without Laurie is only half a world."

This small online tribute echoes hundreds of similar sentiments posted on Laurie Johnson's Facebook page as friends and family mourned the loss of a real character in Nelson's business community.

Johnson, the owner of the Bead Gallery, died peacefully in his sleep of suspected heart failure at his Nelson home on Saturday evening. He was 49.

Johnson's wife of five years Michelle Johnson was coming to terms with the sudden loss of her partner, but said the support shown from the wider community had been overwhelming.

"It's just incredible, the amount of love shown - I'm predicting a big funeral," Michelle said.

"Everybody's devastated over the loss, but it's nice to know you're not alone."

The couple had been together for fifteen years and shared many special times travelling the world extensively in sourcing jewellery for the business.

Michelle said Johnson's magnetic personality endeared him to everyone he came in contact with, including herself.

"It was major charisma that attracted me to him, and also how caring and generous he was - that's what warmed people to him."

Laurie's funeral is planned for Friday family and friends have begun to gather and pay their respects, including his son Finley and step-children James, Matthew and Melissa.

The genesis of the Bead Gallery began when Johnson was a teenager travelling through Europe, making and selling jewellery to fund his adventures, before returning home to a regular spot at Nelson's weekend market, Michelle said.

A poignant photo on display in the shop demonstrates those fledgling days, with a fresh faced Johnson selling his wares on a beach in Greece.

Since 1991 the Bead Gallery has become one of the more unique shops on the Nelson retail landscape, occupying a small cottage in Parere Street for many years before moving to its present location on Hardy Street.

The shop offers the chance for customers to buy or create their own unique jewellery using interesting beads and findings sourced from all over the world. Its idea soon proved popular among locals and visitors to the city.

Testament to his entrepreneurial ambition Johnson eventually owned five Bead Galleries spread between Picton, Wellington and Nelson.

Personal tragedy struck in 2010 when his son Daniel was was one of three teenagers killed in a car crash in Marsden Valley, an event that understandably took a huge emotional toll on Johnson's own life.

While the Picton and Wellington Bead Galleries were sold and shut down respectively in the proceeding years, increased support from Nelson locals kept the doors open at the Hardy Street store.

"People have been telling us we can't close the iconic shop, that's given us a bit of motivation to carry on," Johnson said in December last year.

The popular Hardy Street store was open for business on Monday and with both Johnson's parents and Michelle keen to continue the legacy, the Bead Gallery's future is assured to remain a part of the city's retail makeup.

"I'm going to find it a struggle to start off but fortunately I have got amazing staff so they'll help me keep it going," Michelle said.

Longtime friends Dave and Patty Klein had arrived from the United States just a week ago and have been offering assistance at the store and to the family in the days since Johnson's sudden passing.

 "He was a top guy and a major asset to what makes the character of Nelson so unique," Dave said.

"His passing will leave a special space in the community that will hard to fill - his knowledge, personality and generosity will be missed."

* Johnson's funeral will be held on Friday at 1.30pm at the Shone and Shirley on Tahunanui Drive.

- Stuff