

Teddy bears are back in vogue and following the trend a Durban woman has opened a speciality shop on the Berea. MELANIE MORGAN-GEORGE spoke to her.

# A love affair with teddy bears

**I**F you go down to the woods today and then turn into Gordon road on Durban's Berea, you're in for a big surprise.

Lining the shelves of Natal's only speciality shop of its kind, are teddy bears.

Hundreds of them in all shapes, sizes and guises can be found in Thread Bears.

And the woman behind this unique concept is Eunice Beaton.

Eunice explained that the idea for the shop was born following a resurgence in popularity of the teddy bear.

"There was such a turnout of bearmakers at a bear fair held last year, as well as record sales, that the idea of a shop was born," she said.

With more than 10 years experience in bear making, the Beaton family opened Thread Bears in January this year.

The business is very much a family one with Eunice's husband involved in restoration and her daughter in administration and the running of regular workshops.

A bear-making kit, which includes a pattern, joints and all the paraphernalia necessary for making the toy is also the brainchild of Eunice.

The Bearton range comes in a family of four, with one bear per kit and each one is named — Bearnard, Beartrice, Bearnice and Beartram.

For Eunice something which began as a hobby has become a passion.

She is passionate about her craft and loves the challenge of designing and making teddy bears.

Her love affair doesn't end with the creation of the toy — "they all have names and each one has a personality".

The shop is also a showcase for South African bearmakers.

"It helps to promote bearmakers, putting them on a professional level.

"There are some serious bearmakers in this country, and I look forward to the day when we will compete on an international level," said Eunice.

Arctophiles, those who collect teddy bears, are on the increase and, according to Eunice, there are many collectors in South Africa.

The toy bear has an illustrious history, going back to the 1800s when it was called a "bruin".

But the popular name of "teddy bear" was coined in 1902 when American president Theo-

dore Roosevelt refused to shoot a bear during a hunt.

A cartoon was published in the Washington Post and such was its popularity that a New York couple designed a toy bear, asking permission from the president to call it a teddy bear.

In Germany around the same time, a paralysed woman called Margaret Steiff made a toy bear and showed it at the Leipzig Fair.

Not much interest was shown, but just before closing an American businessman ordered 3 000 of the Steiff bear.

Eunice said although there was not much of a market in South Africa for antique bears, a Steiff bear recently fetched the equivalent of about R280 000 at a Sotheby's auction.

Apart from the obvious attributes which make the teddy bear such a well-loved item, Eunice cannot really explain her affinity for the toy.

Perhaps a small plaque on the wall of the shop best describes it — the teddy bear has its own value, and it has nothing to do with money.



Eunice Beaton surrounded by the toys that have become her passion.