



■ Clockwise from top left: Candice Chan and Leonard Chao's wedding in 2012; with her husband and children; with her husband, brother, sister-in-law and parents; having fun by Yayoi Kusama's artwork in Japan; enjoying family time on the Repulse Bay Beach; and the couple's New Zealand trip in October.

D DESIGNING A DREAM

Life is pretty good if you don't sweat the small stuff, interior design firm founder tells *Lisa Kao*

Candice Chan is the owner of an interior design firm and the mother of three children – all before her 35th birthday this year.

Although she doesn't stress it about being an interior designer, entrepreneur and mother all at the same time, nothing comes without hard work.

"In today's world, women have to wear different hats," she said. Celebrating J Candice Interior Architects' 10th anniversary this year, Chan believes women should dream as big as they wish.

Chan's dream began when she was only 14. "By then, I had already decided to become an interior designer, and to one day establish my own firm," she recalled.

Her passion for interior design flourished when she attended an international school.

"My primary school was all about homework, but at the secondary level, they encouraged me to find my passion," Chan said. She then came to realize that was sketching spaces and buildings.

She also attributes her dream to her father, Cafe de Coral chairman Michael Chan.

He would bring her to visit shop locations pre-renovation. "They were empty and dusty. I was often asked to imagine the design – the ceiling, color, structure, texture – of the sites," she said. "Most of the time, our weekend family activity was visiting the restaurants."

With a goal in mind, Chan began planning how to make it all happen, starting with enriching herself through summer activities. "I went to youth camps in Hong Kong and also spent several summers in Tokyo and New York to learn the things I was interested in."

After secondary school, she read fine arts

at Syracuse University in the United States, majoring in interior design.

Then after two years at a New York-based company specializing in restoration and preservation, Chan decided to chase her dreams and established her own firm in Hong Kong. This was in 2010 when she was just 25.

Yet her age and inexperience proved to be no barrier. "It's a quick thing. All you need is a piece of paper, a pen, a laptop and your ideas," she said. "The capital needed is not as much as investing in retail or restaurants."

Although the daughter of a prominent businessman, she didn't want to be in his shadow. "My parents never asked me to work for the family business. They encouraged me to do what I was really interested in."

But there was also mutual benefit, as she helped design some of her father's eateries.

Her first project was designing a friend's restaurant. Since then, J Candice Interior Architects has built a portfolio that includes restaurants, public spaces, education centers, offices and retail spaces. "We are constantly growing and improving, but the most recent project is our proudest one."

She and her team renovated the Mandarin Oriental cake shop into a space with natural lighting and atmosphere. "The design was actually done five years ago. I am proud that it has stood the test of time," she said.

As Chan's business grew, so did her family. She was blessed with three children who brought her lots of joy, though they also take up a lot of her time. "My husband and I were only able to go on a trip to New Zealand recently. It was our first in six years."

The key to striking a balance between her



family and her business is multitasking. "It is about prioritizing what is important in my life," she said. "To me, family always comes first. Once I establish an idea of what is important, everything falls into place."

Her evenings are reserved for chatting with her family and looking over her children's homework. "I might show the older ones the restaurant or retail space I am designing and talk about what I did for the day in the office."

Though her children might not fully understand, they still share some laughs together. "I tell them about the challenges I encounter, such as when clients don't like my work. We compare adults' and kids' worlds."

When family time ends, it is back to work. "After looking at their homework and putting them to sleep, I will work if there is a lot to do."

Though it can be tiring, Chan has no regrets. "I enjoy being a parent. When I hang out with them, I am contented," she explained.

It helps that she doesn't see the need to be the perfect mother, designer or owner.

"Life does not have to be perfect," she said. "If you are constantly trying to be perfect, that stresses you out. Sometimes life's imperfections are something beautiful."



■ Clockwise from top: the Mandarin Oriental cake shop; Japanese restaurant Kishoku's dining area; the Hong Kong Jockey Club room and foyer; and Kishoku's washroom area.