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BULLIED SCHOOLGIRL TO GLOBAL ICON

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BRITAIN'S LEADING MAGAZINE FOR ENTREPRENEURS AND BUSINESS PROFESSIONALS

BUILDING A DESIGN EMPIRE

HOW KELLY HOPPEN CBE ESTABLISHED A GLOBAL BRAND HER OWN WAY

She has an unstoppable worldwide brand, her name has become a verb synonymous with class and style, she's a former *Dragon*, a renowned presenter and author, and a champion of British enterprise, Kelly Hoppen is without doubt an icon.

However, Kelly's story isn't one of overnight success. She was relentlessly bullied at school, she's dyslexic, she suffered from severely low self-esteem, and her father passed away when she was just 16 years old. At 16 and a half, she convinced her stepfather's friend to let her redesign his kitchen. Around this time, her friend was having an affair with a famous racing driver, so she became the interior designer of his house as a front to their affair... and the rest, as they say, is history.

Over the next four decades, Kelly has done work for some of the most well-known names on the planet, from the Beckhams to P. Diddy, and worked with homes, yachts, jets hotels, restaurants, and more. She's written over a dozen books and won numerous awards. We met up with Kelly at her studio in West London to talk about how business has changed, building a global brand, being a *Dragon*, and much more.

YOU STARTED YOUR BUSINESS BEFORE THE AGE OF GOOGLE AND SOCIAL MEDIA. DO YOU THINK YOU'D STILL BE SUCCESSFUL IF YOU STARTED YOUR BUSINESS TODAY?

If I could rule the world for a day, I would shut down technology, because I think people need to really understand what it is to go and find creativity and use your imagination. When I started my business, I would look at magazines, go to libraries and I would get in my little beaten-up old car and drive to find things like fabric. My style came from my travelling and my imagination, whereas today, you go on Pinterest, social media, or Google and you can copy it.

I wouldn't want to change my journey. I like the way my business grew organically, and I still feel it grows organically to this day. I think everything today is so instant, and I'm not sure that I would have had the same life and the enjoyment that I got out of it. If you're good enough, you can be very successful very quickly today, but I think there's also a massive amount of competition.

I am so glad I didn't have to see what everyone else was doing when I first started out because I was just following my own path and my own destiny. I remember over the years being asked, "what great designers do you admire?" and I didn't know because I was in my own little bubble.

YOU'VE MENTIONED BEFORE THAT YOU WERE QUITE SHY GROWING UP. HOW DID YOU OVERCOME THIS CONSIDERING NETWORKING HAS PLAYED A BIG PART IN GROWING YOUR BUSINESS AND BRAND?

My ex-husband Ed (Miller) was really good for me, in that he was almost part of my team. I would host these events, and I would be so nervous, but he would be right there with me. There was an incredible PR company called Camron PR, and I worked with Judy Dobias to start this networking thing that really took off. The events were quite forward-thinking because everyone had to come with a business card, and I would say, "you cannot leave without exchanging cards because something will come out of it." People really respected me for sharing, and to grow anything in life - it doesn't matter what it is - you have to share. If you give, you get back.

Cont. >>



WATCH THE FULL INTERVIEW HERE





Another key moment came from working with David Zelman, who is a life coach in New York. I had one session with him in his corner office in New York, and he explained to me that if you run a business and your name is at the top, everybody underneath has to feel like it's their business. He also showed me that if you share every piece of knowledge you have, your business will become bigger. This is part of why I started writing books. I came away from the session thinking that the sky was the limit. I had to just keep on going because I thought I had reached that point of success, and he showed me I hadn't even started.

YOU'VE NEVER RAISED EXTERNAL FUNDING FOR YOUR BUSINESS. WAS THAT A VERY SPECIFIC CHOICE?

I'm a grafter. I get up every day at 5:40, have my black coffee, and I'm in the gym. That's my moment to prepare for the day, and then I come to work. People have asked me for years why I still work, and I just say it's my life and I love it. It never ever occurred to me to go and ask somebody for money, I just worked to make money. Maybe sometime down the line, I might look to sell some of the business, but for the 40+ years I've been doing this, I've wanted to own it 100% myself.

DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF A COMPETITIVE PERSON?

I wouldn't class myself as competitive, I would say that I don't like to fail. I'm not somebody that goes up against people because, under this stern businesswoman, I do have a nice nature, but I don't like to fail. Any entrepreneur will know that if you fail, it doesn't matter because you've already got another idea. That's something I try and teach young people that you shouldn't hold on to something so much that if it doesn't work or you'll never move forward.

"PEOPLE HAVE ASKED ME FOR YEARS WHY I STILL WORK, AND I JUST SAY IT'S MY LIFE AND I LOVE IT."



WHEN YOU GOT THE OFFER TO BE ON DRAGONS' DEN, DID IT COME AS A SURPRISE AND HAD YOU DONE MUCH INVESTING BEFORE?

I did invest in small businesses but the call to be a Dragon definitely came out of the blue. I thought it was a great opportunity but then I thought "what am I doing?" I remember the night before filming, I got a reassuring call from Duncan Bannatyne saying that I'd be fine.

I do wish that I could do it now. I almost feel like I was too green behind the ears to do it and I've learnt so much since then. I loved doing the show, I loved all of the Dragons, but I hadn't factored in that it wasn't just the 21 days of filming. Once you invested in something, you had to run those businesses. My thing was I wanted to invest in young entrepreneurs, which I did, but they need a lot of time, so I had to employ more people etc. I still watch the show though, I think it's brilliant.

MENTORSHIP, NOT JUST IN THE DEN, IS VERY IMPORTANT TO YOU. WHY IS THIS?

Maybe it's because I started my own business so young. I have a large following on social media, and I came to the realisation of how powerful it was, especially after the Covid-19 lockdowns. Every day, I walk down the street and people stop me saying, "if it wasn't for you, and what you were saying and teaching me, I wouldn't have got through it." I'm one of those people that doesn't quite understand social media, but I started to understand how powerful it could be as a tool to help people. I still do the teaching and mentorship on Instagram, and I think it's really important because people are struggling right now.

"I BELIEVE THAT EVERY CULTURE SHOULD OWN WHAT IT HAS. WE HAVE A RICH HISTORY IN BRITAIN, THAT'S WHO WE ARE."

YOU RUN A GLOBAL BUSINESS AND BRAND. HAVE YOU COME ACROSS ANY PRACTICES THAT YOU WISH WE APPLIED HERE IN THE UK?

As the world has become smaller, I think you find fewer things to discover. What I've always loved about travel was that you would go to New York, and you'd go to a diner because you hadn't been to one in London, or you go to China and the food and their manners would blow you away. I believe that every culture should own what it has. We have a rich history in Britain, that's who we are. I think if we changed and became like another country, then it becomes less exciting.

HOW DO YOU COMPARE THE DOOM AND GLOOM WE HEAR ABOUT THE CURRENT CLIMATE TO OTHER ECONOMIC CRISES THROUGHOUT YOUR 40-PLUS-YEAR BUSINESS CAREER?

I've lived through a global recession before, and I think that was very frightening. When you suddenly hear the word 'global' and knowing that it's bigger than just our country. But we survived our previous global recession, and we will survive this. Everyone said after Brexit "give it eight years", but we didn't factor in Covid-19, which has probably been the worst thing I've lived through.

Everything always works itself out, and inflation will plateau. Unfortunately, the cost-of-living for people is where the problem is. The bigger the divide between rich, middle, and poor, the bigger the problem is, so we have to try and make that work better.

HOW HAS YOUR BUSINESS BEEN AFFECTED BY ONGOING SUPPLY CHAIN ISSUES, SUCH AS THE WAR IN UKRAINE?

Across the board, things are taking longer. Brexit hasn't helped and there are some companies that will not supply at all. If you take our business, for example, say we're building a 50,000 square foot house in Hong Kong, or Miami to get things from A to B, with the price increases, and the lack of stock... Who would have known that when you went to buy a sofa, it would take six months? That is a small price to pay compared to real-world issues, but in terms of my business, it has definitely affected us.

That's where you learn to factor it in, and you find other avenues. I am one for always looking to find a way. If something doesn't work and you've got a dead end, there's got to be another road somewhere, because there's always somebody that's using that opportunity to create something. I've always said in my talks that there is an opportunity here for young new businesses and new entrepreneurs to take over some of this production line. I'd like to be producing more in Great Britain. I'm a great advocate for the GREAT Campaign, because we just sold our soul, and everything went overseas. We have to be more in control of what we do here. ■



▲ Kelly with Boy George, who she worked with recently at his home