

**Keeping It Real**

**Donna Karan revolutionized the fashion industry by doing what any smart businessperson would do— focusing on the customer.**

By Marie Speed, *Success* Magazine, October 2011

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**Donna Karan is a real woman**, as well as a two-word brand that practically shouts New York. Donna Karan says urban chic, Zen simplicity. It says slim black pants with a well-cut trench. Clean lines. Inspired fabrics. It says understated style. It says “This is how we dress; this is how we like to look.”

Donna Karan’s sophisticated American spin on everyday fashion has defined women’s (and men’s) style since 1985. In doing so, she transformed fashion design from the contrived seasonal style dictated by an army of designers to a new wave of city and weekend dressing for the real world, for real people. Her genius was the kind that sometimes comes about as naturally as breathing, and it’s how a girl from Queens became the Queen of Seventh Avenue.

Born in Forest Hills, Queens, Donna Ivy Faske grew up on Long Island. Her mother was a model, her father a tailor, so it was no surprise that her career in fashion started at home and then continued when she was 14 selling clothes on Central Avenue in Cedarhurst. Karan later attended Parsons The New School for Design but left after two years to take a job with Anne Klein. That step ultimately launched a career that has spanned decades, with a loyal A-list following including Barbra Streisand, Hillary Clinton and Susan Sarandon, as well as legions of working women who have gravitated to the unstudied and easy sophistication of Karan’s clothes.

Despite the success and accolades, Karan never developed a sense that her work was done. “It’s what I haven’t done that excites me most,” she says. “As a designer, I’m always looking for what’s missing and how I can fill a void.”

That holds true for her philanthropy, as well, which took on greater importance following the 2001 death of her husband and business partner, Stephan Weiss. “Life is a journey, and how you define success changes too,” she says. While he was sick with lung cancer, “I saw firsthand how the patient is ignored while everyone is busy treating the disease. My frustration with the medical system gave birth to the Urban Zen Foundation, which is all about inspiring change in healthcare, education and culture.”

Karan also designs for Urban Zen, “where commerce meets philanthropy,” with proceeds from sales benefiting the foundation. She’s long been involved in AIDS-related charities, and she’s taken on new ones too, including efforts to create business opportunities for Haitian designers and craftsmen through the sales of their products in the United States.

**Death and Rebirth**

Throughout her life, Karan says her greatest challenges involved the deaths of people close to her—her husband, friends, her parents, her mentor Anne Klein. “You’re never prepared for death, even though birth of some kind always follows. I’ve gotten through such times through family, friends, my creativity, yoga, giving and sharing or by surrounding myself with love,” she says.

“Urban Zen was inspired by my journey with Stephan’s illness and wanting to make a real difference. Ten years later, his spirit still guides me and, in fact, the Urban Zen Center is in Stephan’s art studio in Greenwich Village.”

When Anne Klein fell ill with breast cancer in 1974 and subsequently died, Karan, then 25, was asked to step in. In fact, Karan was still in the hospital after having a baby when she was suddenly tapped to bring out the new Anne Klein collection, a task she wasn’t sure she could pull off.

“Was I scared? I was like, ‘This is the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard of,’ ” she said in an interview with Calvin Klein for *Interview* magazine. “I didn’t know what to do. I had just had a baby, so it was going to be about Gabby [her newborn daughter], not Anne Klein.”

Karan attributes some of her success to a series of mentors, most notably Klein. “Anne Klein was definitely my most formative mentor. She truly understood women and sportswear like no one else. She was a great teacher and I learned so much. She always said, ‘God gave you two eyes—use them!’ Liz Claiborne, whom I worked for in one of my very first jobs, also influenced me greatly. You meet many teachers along the way to help guide you where you need to go. The trick is being open to them.”

Another of Karan’s greatest teachers has likely been her own instinct. She admits she has never operated from some sublime aesthetic of her own; it has always been about the women.

“My philosophy has always started with the woman, not the clothes,” she says. “How can I make her life easier, simpler, more streamlined? She’s got enough going on personally and professionally. Yet she still wants to look sophisticated and pulled together. I know this woman because I’m her. I don’t have time to go home and change between work and evening events, between getting off a plane and heading to an appointment.”

**‘This Little Itty-Bitty Company’**

Designing the Anne Klein collections led to the creation of Anne Klein II, generally regarded as the first “bridge” line of clothing, with price point and quality between moderate and designer-level clothing. During this time, an idea began to take shape for Karan’s Seven Easy Pieces, a collection that would change everything for her.

“I went to the owners of Anne Klein and said, ‘Listen, I want to start this little itty-bitty company. I can still do Anne Klein and Anne Klein II, but this little company is for my friends, a woman-to-woman kind of thing.’ They said, ‘Donna, you can’t do anything small. You wouldn’t know how to if you tried.’ I said, ‘No, no. I really want to do just seven easy pieces. The concept is so simple. It’s the way that I dress. I like simplified stuff, and I think there’s a different customer for that.’ And guess what they said? ‘Well, you know what? Basically, you’re fired.’ ”

Karan laughs as she tells the story. In characteristic fashion, she moved forward, starting her own company, Donna Karan International. Then and now, she doesn’t see herself as a fashion maverick as much as a collaborator. From the start, she said she would never design anything she would not wear herself, a nod toward the ultimate collaboration—with her own market.

“I love collaboration,” she says. “Everyone has something to bring to the table, a new perspective, an expertise. For many years I collaborated with the jewelry designer Robert Lee Morris because, to me, his sculptural pieces were an integral part of the clothes. I could create the black canvas of the body, and he would bring that one big, bold piece of drama. Then there are the fabric artisans we’ve worked with, the embroiderers, the fine artists. If you stay open to inspiration, you never know what will unfold. It’s very exciting.”

After starting Donna Karan, she showed her first collection in 1985. The Seven Easy Pieces idea was central to her approach, and by 1988, already dubbed “Queen of Seventh Avenue,” she launched DKNY, a younger, more affordable—even androgynous—collection that would secure her position as a visionary in modern American fashion.



“I had already been designing Donna Karan Collection for over five years. Yet I had nothing to wear on the weekends,” she says. “The market offered only sportswear, made for much younger women, or something called Better, which was less expensive and tailored. I wanted something that would ‘bridge’ Collection and the sportswear market. A pair of jeans made for a woman’s body. A boyfriend blazer. A trench. A leather motorcycle jacket. Cool street clothes with tailored elements. I also wanted to dress my daughter Gabby, which was another inspiring factor to the birth of DKNY.”

**The Girl with the Dream**

When asked in the earlier Klein interview what the fundamental difference was between Donna Karan and DKNY, Karan summed it up: “All I wanted was to have these pieces in Times Square to show that this is New York and the streets of New York. People always asked me, ‘How does Donna Karan see New York?’ I’d say, ‘In a car.’ Then they’d ask, ‘How about DKNY?’ And I’d say, ‘In a subway or a bus.’ That was the difference.”

That difference and that vision helped build what became a clothing empire for Donna Karan. But she says she was never about empire building; she was always a girl with a dream.

“My dream was to design a small collection of sophisticated urban clothes for me and my friends. I always joke that I didn’t realize I had so many friends. But that was the vision, certainly not the global company Donna Karan New York grew into. You measure success by the whole, not the parts. Everything is constantly evolving forward. DKNY has grown so much bigger than me and my needs, and Donna Karan New York speaks to a universe of women.”

In fact, the company had grown so large and complex that, before his death, Karan’s husband helped arrange the sale of Donna Karan to French luxury conglomerate LVMH, Moet Hennessy Louis Vuitton, allowing her to focus more on designing than on the business of running an empire. Today, Karan remains very much on the move, in the adventure.

“There is always more to do,” she says. “At the end of every press release I put ‘to be continued’ because I always have more to say, more to create. In fashion you’re only as successful as your last show. It’s ‘What have you done for me lately?’ There’s no resting because the minute you think you’ve done it, it’s over.”

**The Journey Continues**

Karan as a work in progress extends beyond design and fashion into spirituality and philanthropy. “I’m a nurturer, a mother. It’s instinctual for me to help others, to bring out their best. It’s my path,” she says.

“Urban Zen is my passion. It’s where all the things I care most about come together: creativity, compassion and community. It’s a connection of past, present and future. Philanthropically, we have three initiatives: to create a new wellness model for health care (present), the preservation of cultures (past) and the empowering of children through education (future.) Diverse as these areas may seem, I see them as interrelated, the essence of life. These are the issues that move and affect every one of us. You can’t talk about one without talking about the other. Education affects health care, and we have so much to learn from the past before we can move into the future.”

The foundation has developed a pilot outreach and training program at Beth Israel Medical Center to train therapists and caregivers in various therapies, sponsored a nutrition speaker series, hosted a forum with the Dalai Lama supporting Tibet Nobulingka Institute to preserve Tibetan Culture, and a number of other initiatives to promote spirituality and well-being.

Donna Karan’s journey will continue to unfold, with a road map dictated by her own powerful sense of self. “You have to believe you have something to say and stay true to that vision, even if the feedback isn’t always positive. That belief comes from within, and it’s just a matter of being still and truly listening to yourself.”