

Donna Karan Wants to Solve Your Body Issues

The designer who prioritizes comfort on the perils of fast fashion, why you shouldn't think too hard about your outfits and the one body part you should never cover up.

By

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Illustration by Toma Vagner for WSJ. Magazine



Success, they say, is inspiration plus perspiration. But what of sheer universe-vibration? We ask the most successful people we know to tell us what role luck plays in one's career.

Though tricky to confirm, Donna Karan is almost certain she's improved the sex lives of her customers. Her essential pieces prize comfort and confidence over constrictive patterns, putting men and women at ease with their body and look. And because she tries on all her creations herself (and, as she freely admits, doesn't wear a bra), most of her colleagues have seen her topless at some point. At times forgetting she was half-naked when someone popped into her office, she'd simply ask, "Yes? What do you need?"

Karan's authority blossomed early when she became the head designer of Anne Klein at age 25. It didn't hurt that she'd grown up on Seventh Avenue (both parents worked in fashion; as a girl she watched the Thanksgiving parade from her father's second-floor office at [Macy's](#)). In 1985, then 36, she launched her own company, Donna Karan New York, with seven pieces that moved gracefully from day to night, from work to socializing. For women, this meant bodysuits, wrap-and-tie skirts, tailored jackets, suede wrap jackets and camel coats. For men (after the launch of DK Men in 1992), black crepe suits, sportswear, knit T-shirts, tailored trenches and cashmere sweaters that Karan knew "women would steal."

In 2001, Karan sold the company to [LVMH](#) and stayed on as chief designer until 2015. Now she's focusing her energy on Urban Zen, a lifestyle brand she founded in 2007 that combines fashion, accessories, home décor and wellness. (Its integrative-health initiative is a legacy of the cancer treatments Karan's husband, Stephan Weiss, received before his death in 2001; toward the end of his life, Karan performed Reiki on him every day.)



The designer Donna Karan is focusing her energy on Urban Zen, a lifestyle brand she founded in 2007 that combines fashion, accessories, home décor and wellness. Photo: Jason Lowrie/BFA.com/Shutterstock

The designer isn't shy about her spirituality. While reviewing documents for the sale of DKNY, she told the assembled group that Mercury was in retrograde—a terrible time to enter into any contract—and that they should put it off. Having none of it, her lawyer urged her to sign, saying, “This is the best f—ing deal I’ve seen in my whole career.”

When Anne Klein died, you became the head of the company at 25. What qualities had you exhibited at work that made them feel comfortable with the choice?

They didn't have a choice. I was the only designer there. They could have poached someone, but the pre-fall collection was due, and we were deciding how many buttons to put on the navy blue blazer. I was eight months pregnant.

Did you always know you wanted to design?

I did not want to be a designer. [After I had my daughter Gabby] I told people, “I’m going to stay home and be the mom that my mother was never to me.” But that did not happen.

When you look back at your first collection now, do you think it was good?

I’m not a normal kind of designer. I love artistry. So when Anne told me, “You’ll do this collection,” it had a felt skirt, shearling coats, embroideries, fur coats, fringe suede skirts. It was my first and favorite Anne Klein collection.



Donna Karan with models wearing Anne Klein. Photo: Lynn Karlin/Penske Media/Getty Images

Were there any women designers who'd made an impression on you before you started your own label?

When I opened a book and I saw Coco Chanel on a vicuña suede sofa, with her Great Dane, I freaked. I screamed.

When did your company first take off?

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After I said I want to do seven easy pieces—really simple and stupid.

Did you feel that you were being a pioneer?

Women at that time were wearing jackets, shirts and ties. I wore a bodysuit. I was a traveler.

Why do you think the company was successful?

Because I understood women. I understood what they need. It's not just clothes.

So you see clothes differently from your peers.

Everybody sees it the way they see it. Women understand women's bodies. I am not just a designer. I see a problem and I see a solution. Design is not just what you're wearing; it's how you're *feeling*.

Do you think you were a calm executive when you were running the company?

That's why I called [my lifestyle brand] Urban Zen, because I'm trying to find the calm in the chaos myself. You feel your feet on the floor, the energy goes up the legs, into your stomach. Take another breath. All of a sudden, you find yourself sitting up a little bit straighter. I believe that every school, every class should start this way. I'm crazy, I know it.



‘They didn’t have a choice. I was the only designer there,’ says Donna Karan about becoming head designer of Anne Klein at 25. Photo: Donna Karan

You're not crazy, you're just spiritual. Were you communal with your colleagues?

With all my designers, we had fun, every time.

Do you think you're a good boss?

Yes. Because I'm a beautiful person in my heart. I care about this country. I care about the people. I care about what's happening in fashion. Though I'm not happy about it.

What are you most unhappy about?

The fashion industry is going in the hole because they built it to a point that is not realistic. In the fashion world, it's what's new, what's new, what's new, what's new. I do not believe in showing the world the fashion six to seven months before it hits the stores. I am completely against it. Because everybody knocks it off. We work our butts off as designers, and they take one picture of a garment and it's already being made, three days, four days later. And it's too much of everything. The days of Donna Karan, Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein, Oscar de la Renta. Everybody was their own thing. Now it's all mixed up.

Were you informal in the way you dealt with employees?

[There were times] when they walked in and I was topless. I'd be in my office, trying the clothes on, but then someone had to see me, and I'd simply say, "Yes? What do you need?"

Do you have parts of your body that you don't feel great about?

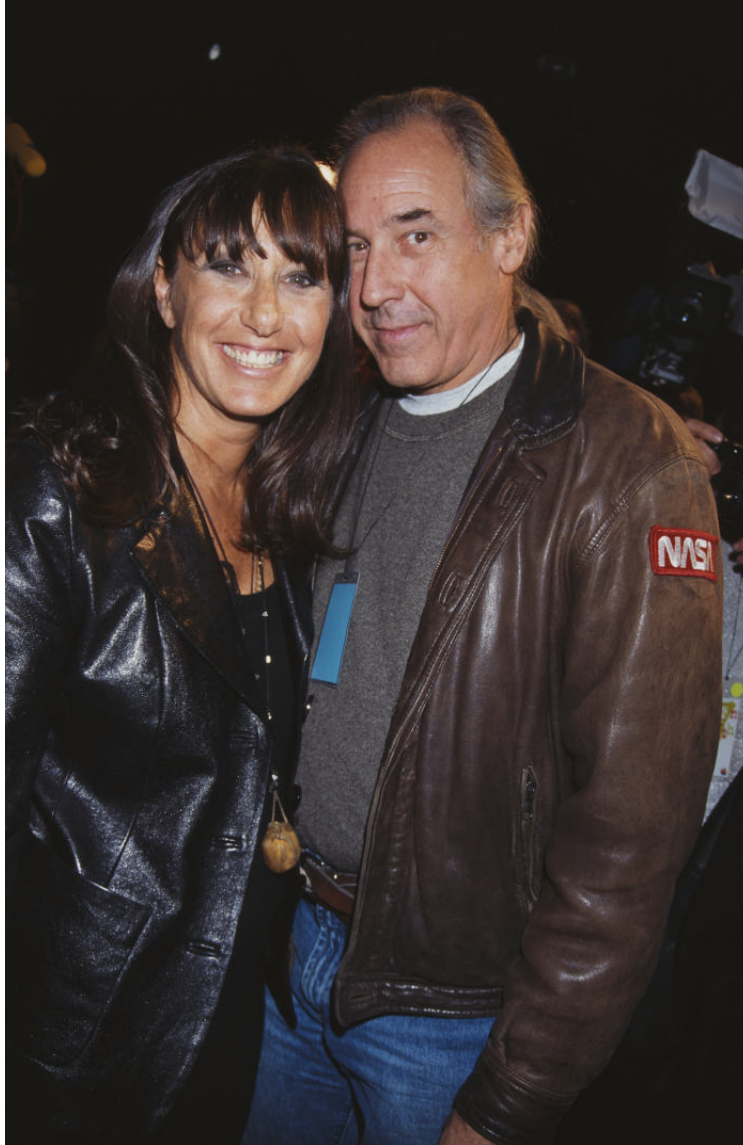
I don't feel great about any of it, OK? But I have to work with it. Like everybody else. When I was at the Parsons School of Design, they had all these clothes that didn't fit. I said, This is unacceptable. For me, this is the most important thing in clothes: Do they fit? Because you have to move, you have to feel good. It has to be like it's not even on you.

Where are you on plastic surgery and the lips and the Botox and all of that?

Honey. Yes, yes and yes.

Tell me about Barbra Streisand and Hillary Clinton and other iconic wearers of your off-the-shoulder designs—or what you called the "cold shoulder."

You never gain weight on your shoulders. It's a guarantee. I tell everybody, cover everything up in the world except never cover your shoulder.



With her husband, Stephan Weiss, who died in 2001. Photo: Rose Hartman/Getty Images

What made you most stressed about the economics of your business?

The problem with financial people is that they give you the money at a different pace. A designer needs it all, twice a year, because we open in September and we open in June. That's how we have to buy the fabrics. So the money draw is huge, and you're always conscious that it has to sell.

It's safe to say you proved that comfort plus a classic fit sells.

If you can't sleep in it, go out in it, whatever, I don't want to know from it. I really don't. You might have a lot of clothes, but when I get up in the morning, I don't want to think about, Oh, what should I wear today? Women who are working just want to throw on their clothes. They have to get to work and be able to go out at night.

Did you have to explain this to people around you at the office?

No, I just did it. And if they didn't get it, they wouldn't be there. I mean, I'm not going to hire an Oscar de la Renta frilly person, you know. You pull it on. You don't have to worry about it.

But don't women sometimes want to wear something a bit sexier?

I think there's a difference, and I've certainly discussed this with a lot of people, between sensuality and sexuality. Sexuality is you're putting it out there. I'm sorry, I may get into trouble for saying this, but, you know, putting your boobs up like this? Let's not do that.

So then what's sensuality?

Sensuality is when you're comfortable and you feel good and you show what looks good, and you hide what doesn't. You're as strong as your clothes. You're in a partnership, you and your clothes. Oprah used to wear all my clothes, and because she felt like a woman, and she felt sensual—sensual, not sexual—she looked fantastic.

What's a management trait or a behavior as the leader of your company that you don't love about yourself?

I think I'm a little tough in that I have high expectations. We're all here for a reason. If you don't feel that something has to be finished that night, or that day—you can't leave it for another day. It has to be ready. I'm 24/7. Nobody's going to say, Oh, we've got to go home at 6 o'clock.



Karan says her company took off 'after I said I want to do seven easy pieces—really simple and stupid.' Photo: Mario Ruiz/ZUMA Press/Alamy

Did that get complicated for your employees with kids?

I had a daughter too. So what did they do? They became part of the fashion show. "Mommy, could I have my makeup done? Mommy, can I have my hair done?"

So you allowed kids on the set?

Always.

When you stumble professionally, when you screw up, how do you handle that?

I mean, there's not a day that I don't stumble.

Do you think women admit that more than men?

I think men are a little linear. Women care about the kids. We care about the food, we care about this and that. We have to be flexible.

Did you have any luck in your career?

I wasn't going to be a designer. And I became a designer. Was that luck? Well, it wasn't lucky that Anne [Klein] died of cancer. It wasn't luck that I wanted to start a company for myself.

Is there life after death?

Absolutely.

How do you know?

Because I know how many lives I've been living. That's why I think I'm a bit young.

Are you an optimist?

No. I have a vision. I see a problem. I see a solution. But I still want to do things that I haven't done—I want to see places I haven't been to, I want to go with my family to those places, I want to show them the world that they haven't seen.

How do you remain pure in your vision?

I like what I like, and I don't like what I don't like. I'm very clear about that. I've always been like this.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

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