



A problem-solver who dresses and addresses others throughout the world,

# DONNA KARAN

embodies the true meaning of passion.

*By Lola Thelin*



When Donna Karan announced her departure from her self-made empire, shock waves rippled through the fashion world. This is the businesswoman who created a billion dollar empire from nothing, starting with the launch of Donna Karan International in 1984 and followed by DKNY in 1989. Yet on June 30, 2015, Karan announced she was leaving the company, stepping down as chief designer and CEO. In due time we learned that 'out' only meant out of that particular game.

Only a handful of fashion designers have achieved the game-changer status Karan is awarded: Her designs, blending sensual with comfortable, helped women embrace their curves rather than hide them: "I've always worked to make clothes flattering, which means elongating the body by accentuating the positive and deleting the negative," she explains. Her success may make her departure from the fashion world hard to understand, but this is Donna Karan, who last year landed at No. 31 on *Forbes'* inaugural list of America's richest self-made women. To put it simply DKI and DKNY are not her last career hurrah.





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The most important fact is that this wasn't a sudden decision. Although an emotional moment, it was a long time coming. “I had been juggling my passion and commitment for my two worlds—Donna Karan International and Urban Zen—and it was challenging. Those close to me know how much I wanted Urban Zen to grow and thrive. DKI is a grown child and runs so well on its own. UZ is a young one and needs me to be there and be focused,” she says, about Urban Zen, a multi-pronged business concept that includes a lifestyle brand that helps artisans build self-sustaining businesses and a foundation.

Karan has always woven philanthropic pursuits into her daily fabric and is deeply involved with Seventh on Sale (AIDS), Elizabeth Glaser's Kids for Kids (pediatric AIDS) and Super

Saturday (ovarian cancer), among others. Urban Zen is yet another extension of herself and her heart. In fact very much embedded in UZ are the spirits of two people close to her: her husband and business partner Stephan Weiss (d. 2001) and friend Lynn Kohlman (d. 2008), a photographer, model and DKNY creative director. Both faced cancer and untimely death. During their time at hospitals, Karan noticed a missing piece in the country's health care system: the lack of integrative medicine. No one gave personal touches or paid attention to the patient's mind, body and soul.

Thus Karan launched the Urban Zen Foundation in 2007. Within a few months of its debut, the foundation donated \$850,000 to the Beth Israel Medical Center in New York

City for a yearlong study about integrating Eastern healing methods with traditional medical practices.

From there, the foundation's Urban Zen Integrative Therapy (UZIT) was launched. “From the start of Urban Zen, we've had three interrelated initiatives: preserving culture (the past), integrative health care (the present) and empowering children (the future),” Karan says. “Preserving culture speaks to learning from the past wisdom of those before us; our wellness initiative is about ‘putting the care in health care’ as practiced from our Urban Zen Integrative Therapist program; and our education goals are to integrate mind, body and spirit into the school system.” Since its initial Beth Israel program and the 100 graduates it trained in its first year, UZIT has trained

and certified more than 700 participants at varying levels nationwide. “We did a study at Beth Israel Medical Center and calculated that the effects of having our UZITs on hand resulted in a savings of \$900,000 on just one floor,” Karan adds.

Real-world adversity fueled Karan's desire to give when Haiti suffered a catastrophic earthquake in 2010. After the quake, Karan and Urban Zen mobilized a coalition of hoteliers, fashion, music and entertainment influencers to support Haiti. Known as Hope, Help & Relief Haiti, this next evolution of Urban Zen raised funds for temporary housing for some of the 1.5 million people displaced by the quake and provided support for international emergency relief workers. “I flew down to better understand the situation and available resources, and



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that’s when I really fell in love. Among all the devastation, the island itself was beautiful, but even more so were the people. Their spirit, vibrancy, energy took my breath away. Where others saw great problems, I saw great promise and potential. I still do.” In June 2014 an e-commerce division was launched for the Urban Zen brand that includes Haitian-made products. “Conscious consumerism is a trend for a great reason—people care. They want to do better. You educate by example and create the desire for others to follow your lead,” Karan explains. The UZ program supports numerous Haitian artists and artisans.

The vetting process, which ensures the hiring of talent that follow fair trade practices, involves a network of people and organizations, including the Clinton Global Initiative, which helps UZ develop and support Haitian business opportunities for U.S. consumerism. Other times, Karan follows her gut. Some UZ-supported artists emerged as a result of the designer seeing their artwork and going out to find the person behind the piece. Her trustworthy Haitian circle introduced her to a handful of “amazing artisans and guardian angels,” including graphic artist and painter Philippe Dodard, accessories designer Pascale Theard, artisan Carolina Sada, social entrepreneur Shelley Clay, ceramics Marie-Therese Dupoux and accessories designer/businesswoman Paula Coles, to name a few.

As the Urban Zen network grew, so did Karan’s vision. She revisited the needs of UZ and realized it was time to create a space in Haiti for artisans to meet, collaborate and learn: “a true vocational center. I dreamed of having a Parsons School of Design in Haiti,” she says. Inspired by Parsons School of Design in NYC, her alma mater and where she also sponsors an MFA program, Karan brought Joel Towers, executive dean of Parsons, and Alison Mears, dean of the School of Design Strategies, together with artisan Paula Coles and director of

UZ Partnerships Marni Lewis, for a meeting of great minds. In June 2015 Design, Organization, Training Center for Haitian Artisans (D.O.T.) opened its doors. Based in Port-au-Prince, D.O.T. is a partnership between the Urban Zen Foundation, the New School’s Parsons School of Design and Coles; it further instills UZ’s mission for the preservation of culture and education. Under the Parsons Design Fellowship, created with the foundation, three Parsons design students (current, graduate and post-graduates) have the opportunity to work at D.O.T. for six to eight weeks in the summer. The school has five full-time employees and hosts approximately 300 artisans, designers and visitors per year.

A true marriage of philanthropy and commerce, Urban Zen is a work in progress. “We’re still very early into this, but we’ve created the opportunity and training for growth,” Karan says. “We sell many of the items in our Urban Zen stores to raise awareness of the incredible work coming out of D.O.T. We’re moving toward a soulful economy, where our purchases help support our beliefs because it benefits others, including the individuals and communities who make the product.”

A true sign of Karan’s urge for real change, she hopes UZ becomes a model for other businesses on how to use creativity and commerce to further the philanthropic causes people care so much about. “Urban Zen connects mind, body and spirit, a philosophy I try to work and live by every day,” she says. “In many ways, Urban Zen has been the most creative thing I’ve ever done. We collaborate, communicate and connect with many people around the world, and that alone is beyond inspiring to a creative soul like me. If Urban Zen is the most creative thing I’ve ever done, it’s also the most challenging because there’s no road map for what we’re trying to do. Every day is a learning and growing experience.”