

Interview

Profile:

45

Years old
Born in Auckland
Partner: Mikhail Gherman
Child: Valentina, aged 7

As well as creating clothes, designer always aimed to build a business, she tells **Holly Ryan**

KAREN WALKER



Picture / Nick Reed

'Listen to that little guy in your head'

In a functional, dark grey block building in the back streets of Grey Lynn, fashion designer Karen Walker sits in her office drinking ginger tea and talks about starting out.

It was 1988, she'd begun with \$100 and made a shirt. The punchline of this story is that the last time she told it, to a university student, they promptly asked if she then sold the shirt online.

In those distant pre-online days, the shirt was for a friend who was in a band. Other people liked it, they asked Walker to make some for them, and so began one of New Zealand's most enduring fashion labels.

Walker's affair with fashion began long before that shirt. "My grandmother taught me how to make a circular skirt for my Barbie when I was about six and that was one of the places where my love of fashion was triggered," she says. "But it also gave me that sense of 'oh, I can make this' so for me it started as actually making the product.

"In some ways [fashion] is kind of easy because you can do that, it's not like if you want to be in the business of aeronautics or something, which is a little bit harder," says Walker. "Fashion is just one of those fields where you can actually learn how to

make the product yourself and start it in your spare room."

Creating the product is one thing; running a business is something else, and a new fashion business is as challenging as any start-up.

"I came out of school straight into this so I had to learn about design – self-taught design, and I'm a self-taught business person," she says. "I just had to figure it all out. Really fast. When I came into it at age 18 I knew nothing about nothing, so really the first five years was total cottage industry and just trying to figure it out – totally winging it."

Today, 28 years since the brand began, she spends half her day as managing director, the other half as head designer, and says she feels natural in both environments. That is thanks largely to having launched the business herself. In true start-up fashion, Walker has done almost every job imaginable at the company.

"I was sweeping the floors, picking up the pins, cutting the fabric, paying the bills, sewing it, selling it, designing it, delivering it, everything.

"It grew organically. It was Auckland in the late 80s and there was a bit of a scene, a cool little scene, but a little one. Really little," she says.

That scene, and selling through word of mouth and directly to friends, helped grow the small business to the

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Karen Walker

point where Karen Walker clothing was being sold through shops. About 21 years ago, its first official store opened in Newmarket.

There are now five Karen Walker stores in New Zealand, and her products are also sold in more than 200 cities in 38 countries.

Along the way, Walker has branched out into other fashion products, including sunglasses, jewellery and perfume. Although the private business doesn't reveal financial results, Walker has been quoted as saying eyewear sales alone are expected to total \$35 million this year.

For an 18-year-old who "knew nothing about nothing", Walker had good business intuition. She says the plan was always for it to be a business – and a global one. Even in the 1980s, before online shopping – before online at all – Walker wanted to be selling around the world.

"From day one the intention was for it to be a real business. It took a while until it really was anything you could call a business, but it was always profitable, every single year, so that's something.

"I knew if I wanted to have the business to a scale I wanted and the product I wanted, I couldn't just sell in New Zealand, the audience is too small.

"We're not saying we want to appeal to every single person in Auckland or New Zealand; we want to have a small audience but a global one. That was a really clear decision."

For every Walker-style fashion success story, there are hundreds of designers trying to make it. To succeed, says Walker, those aspiring designers don't necessarily need strong business skills from the beginning. What they do need, she believes, is a good idea.

But when asked how she knew whether her idea had potential, she comes back to business. "I have always been very aware that I'm in the business of fashion, so yes, it's about ideas – unique ideas, ideas that make you different to the millions of other people out there who are also making tops and bottoms – but it's also about running it as a business.

I have never confused this being a business with this being art. It's industrial design, it's designed to be used. Even from day one, I wanted that product to be on the street, on a person. Not an art piece – that was never what motivated me."

Her husband and business partner Mikhail Gherman is her mentor and not much gets done without the pair consulting. Her main piece of advice? "Trust your instincts," she says. "Get all the information, but listen to that little guy in your head – he's usually right."

Q&A

Career highlight?

Nineteen seasons showing at New York Fashion Week, I guess. The problem is, I can't really give you that because business is about lots and lots of little successes and little failures so there's not one thing. I guess still being in business 20-something years later is a highlight!

Toughest thing you've ever done?

Be in business for 20-something years, create a brand. That's really tough.

Best advice you ever received?

I've had lots of great advice from lots of different people. When we were first approached to start selling in New York, we thought about it and then we said no, we're not ready. And they said, "you'll never be ready". And that's kind of true, if you only did something when you thought you were really ready, you possibly wouldn't ever get around to doing it. And that's not saying go into anything unprepared and it'll be fine,

but it's kind of about getting over that fear because sometimes that's all that's holding you back.

Favourite way to relax?

Yoga. Definitely yoga.

Dream holiday weekend?

Just a weekend? Queenstown is amazing. But a few weeks before, me and Mikhail had a holiday on Dolphin Island in Fiji, over a long weekend, and that was pretty incredible. I like the warm weather, so probably Dolphin Island for a weekend.

What are you reading right now?

I just started reading Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*. I got it from the community library up the road where you swap books. The last five books I've read have all been from there.

Do you ever wear trackpants?

Oh yes. Yeah, they're my home clothes. They're cashmere, but they're still trackpants.