**Stylist**

**24.07.2018**

Notes – 43yrs, 2 children (6 boy & 12 girl), pushed out of NHS and used nana’s inheritance to retrain before the birth of 2nd child. Pulled by opportunity to do something she loved creatively and which she felt she could apply her professionalism to make a difference. Both her and husband are graduates. Income is essential to the family.

CG: So what was it that motivated you to start the business up?

XX: What is that, to become a stylist or to start up on my own?

CG: To start up the business.

XX: It was because of my children. If you part of an agency, which most stylists are, obviously they take a cut to get you the jobs, but then you don’t have to hustle which is really nice because I spend a lot of my time hustling for work. But if you are with an agency then they will ring you and say “Can you be in London Bridge at 9am this morning?” and I just can’t be because it’s too short notice and I have children.

By being freelance, I am my own boss. Ironically I am the worst boss I have ever had, because I don’t get any time off and I work weekends. But I love being a working mum, I’m not one of these Earth Mothers, I never aspired to be just a mum, I always wanted to work. I always wanted to be Donna. I didn’t want to lose my personality….my identity when I became a mum. My kids are very important to me but I need to work alongside them, I need that outlet. I am a better mum because of it.

My career has definitely taken a hit as a result if having kids, because I have to work around them. But that has been my choice and I don’t hold anyone responsible for it….well perhaps society in general and the lack of affordable childcare. When they started school it was so much better, that made a huge difference. Although in some ways school is not as helpful as nursery because it is so fixed at 9 till 3, but we do have after school clubs.

So often it’s me on a train, making frantic calls if it’s delayed or am I running late, trying to catch friends to help. Major panic attack when SouthWest trains decide to tell you they don’t have a driver! The juggle is stressful. But my husband does work from home sometimes and he can help out with pick up. But yes, it is my job really and so I have had to accommodate it and in doing that I would say my career has taken a massive hit.

I try and take August off as the pay off for being freelance, so that I can spend that month as quality time with my children. No distractions. Matching up the holiday is a benefit because if you are in a full time job you end up jugging the holidays between you and your husband and never actually seeing each other as a couple. For my business, summer is normally quiet for stylists, everyone is off on holiday, there are no red carpets or big fashion events. It all ramps up again in September for fashion week.

This year has been strange though. I was super busy after the Oscars, but oddly July has been really quite. It’s made me panic a bit so I am meeting someone next Monday about work even though that falls into August. It goes against all my rules, but I need to earn some more money. That’s the point I suppose, I have to be flexible when my income fluctuates so much.

CG: So when the business started, how old was your daughter?

XX: So I came into styling late, my background was, well I still am a qualified Speech Language Therapist. Again I chose a career path because it was women and because it was a profession many working class girls chose. I left that because of the cuts in the NHS, I just couldn’t bear it. My nana died and left me a small inheritance, so I used the money to retrain as a stylist and that was 6 years ago.

When I was at the NHS, I was band 7 which is the top of the grades before management. I couldn’t be promoted above that to management because I was part time. I was overlooked for so many things because I had to work part time with my daughter being young. All the courses that came up, they wouldn’t invest in me because I would only be utilising the new skills for 3 days a week. The NHS is a flexible employer but it I always felt looked down upon because I didn’t work full time.

CG: So in a way, you became so frustrated with your job in the NHS, you were not actually pushed but you had to find an alternative.

XX: Well yes in a way I was pushed out. I enjoyed working there when the Blair Government were investing in early years, but when the coalition came in the cuts made my job heartbreaking. Telling parents their children didn’t meet the criteria for treatment and yet the year before they would have done and their child clearly needed help.

When I lost my childminder at very short notice they showed no understanding whatsoever. I had at the time the typical young male manager with no care that I had short term childcare difficulties. My husband’s parents live in Ireland and my parents are divorced and live in Manchester and Newcastle so we are completely reliant on friends. That was the last straw.

CG: So it was kind of a pushed out by all those pressures and pulled in by the opportunity to pursue a passion?

XX: Yes, I feel like I have done my public service bit and I wanted to do something frivolous. Life is about balance and I have always had a creative side. I think when you find that life has taken everything out of you, sucked the life right out, relentlessly soul destroying, you search for the positive and for me that’s the creative. I wanted to see the beauty in life. My nana died at that time and we were really close. She left me a small pot of money and it was enough for me to pay for a training course.

I spoke to my husband about it and he was like “yes, go for it”. So I did it. I was the oldest person on that course, I could have given birth to every person on that course (36 years old). But I took it really seriously and I committed 100% to it. I loved it and I worked really hard. It was such a different experience from my Uni degree. When we did shoots on the course, I had photographers asking to work with me because I was so professional and so committed. You bring your life experience into play and I stood out because of that. My age was an advantage.

So yes it was a culmination of factors.

I have ended up in 2 very, very female dominated professions.

CG: When you started you obviously had goals for your business, how has that changed over time?

XX: I think I knew it would be a hard juggle. Back when I started I had to do work for free to build up my portfolio and contacts. We couldn’t afford for me not to earn, so I had work alongside with “Bank Speech Therapy”, a locum speech therapist to earn an income. My husband was really supportive of me starting my business up but we needed me to earn income. So it was tough I was trying to win clients where I could, still retain speech therapy work and look after the kids and house. So they say it takes 3 years to build a business, first year you don’t make any money, second year you break even and third you start to turn a profit. It has takes me so much longer than that because I wasn’t able to work full time and really go at it.

I thought age would go against me, but actually I have been able use that. People assume that I am more experienced than I am and I don’t disabuse them of that. I bring so many more skills and experience. Also from a point of view of the non-celebrity clients I have, the fact that I am not 21 is a bonus. I work with a lot of women, who aren’t 21, who aren’t size 6 or 8 and they want to work with me because I am like them and I get it and I don’t want to impose that “norm” on them. They know that I know what it is like, to not like a certain part of your body after you’ve had a baby and not had time to focus on weight loss because you are trying to earn a living whilst looking after a family. I know that, I get it. 21 year olds just don’t know it and can’t emphasize. So yes, being older which I thought would be a hurdle for me has been a great advantage.

At the beginning I had to do lots of free work and I had to say to my husband; you’re just going to have to trust me, this free work will pay off. I had to believe. It was a pressure. He was asking me why are you doing this, you’re not making any money….why are you going to those events, they are not paying you. So much of my work is based on networking; you have to get your face out there a huge amount.

CG: So when you started you wanted to pursue your creative side and build a new career away from a job that had made you unhappy. Do you think wanted to create not necessarily an identity but a new way of being you?

XX: Yes absolutely.

CG; And has that worked for you?

XX: Yes. That was why I chose the name; SDS. I wanted that to be stylist identity. Lots of stylists refer to themselves by name and you can’t necessarily remember their name, maybe the first part but not all. I deliberately picked something that was marmite, they either loved it or hated, but they remembered it. It meant something to me, it was my nickname at Uni. It has become my alter-ego to the point that when I’m at work people introduce me as SD. I get called it on shoots. It is almost like a different identity and I go into that mode at work.

CG: And what does that identity do for you, how is it different from you as D at home?

XX: I am still me, it’s just I have more … my friend called me London D. More gregarious, more kind of louder…..

CG: Is it more assertive? More confident?

XX: I think I let lose a bit more. I’m still professional but I can be more creative. I always make reference to the fact that I have children, but I definitely different.

CG: WE can find that women have to do “identity work” to become an entrepreneur as it’s independence is more associated with male behaviour. Men just don’t have to wrestle with the contrasting identity of mother / wife / business owner…

XX: Yes it’s about adopting a persona and if you go back to the beginning when I started I had D the speech therapist in me, the caring, and open, helping identity. I found very early on some people could tune into that and exploit it. The worst client I ever had was in a way the best client because she taught me an important lesson. Despite her wealth she used me for free (she was incredibly high maintenance) and promised to wear my outfit at a high level publicity event, she didn’t and I had to put that loss down to experience. I rang one of my good friends, who has been like my mentor throughout and she helped me learn the lessons and work out how best to operate after the event.

I think I have had to get much better at knowing my worth. I think men are very good at that, whereas women always under value themselves, they undercut themselves. I am not naturally a people pleaser and I am not naturally lacking in confidence, but if you pull on my heart strings I do respond to that, probably a man wouldn’t in a business environment.

I do a lot of community work; at least 3 charity events a year to raise money for good causes. Like Fashion Weeke, raising £1,500 and pulling in lots of favours. There is a lot of money in Winchester. I sometimes offer my service as a prize in local balls. I walk up to a £7m barn conversion and an Aston Martin in the drive and the public service Donna in me has to be crushed by the frivolous fashion Donna. I am getting better at it. I will always do charity work.

CG: Does that keep you balanced in a way?

XX: Yes, I feel like I have given to society with my NHS career, but I’ll always have the desire to keep helping and putting back in.

I am much better at knowing my worth than I used to be. You do have to be harder. Men just don’t do that, they just don’t undersell themselves.

CG: Men are “that’s my price, do you want to do business.”

XX: Yes exactly. It’s a creative thing as well and because more women are generally creative than men. I have spoken to photographers and they get it as well. You would never offer it in a differnt environment; you know I wouldn’t expect my car to be services for some images of it happening and publicity at a later event. The price is set.

I will consider all offers but it has to be equivalent value. In this industry women get taken advantage of all the time.

CG: Yes I think creative products are so subjective, so it all comes down to your confidence in its market worth and that’s hard if you are on your own and trying to get a foothold in a market. Society probably knocks you more than a man, you have less legitimacy somehow.

XX: Yes your right, although I am a confident person, especially initially because I had come to it late I felt I had to make up for my lack of experience by maybe be really “nice” and “pleasing” to get people to accept me.

CG: Do you feel now you don’t have to do that? I now feel confident in knowing what you’re “worth”. Has it taken this long?

XX: Yes it really has taken that time. In fact I only feel I have reached it recently, with the Oscars. Again for the Oscars what you have to do is approach fashion PRs to either gift or loan pieces. You don’t want to go to the Oscars in Zara and this was a very low budget film. So we had to call on people, it’s what everybody does. I have reached a point where I am at a certain celebrity level, I now get people who are above that level coming to me, but they want it for free, because of the exposure it would give me. And sometimes it is worth it, but other times it just isn’t. That’s a hard call and sometimes you just want to say to them, you can write this off a tax expense.. it won’t cost you anything, it’s image consulting…and I use that income to live off.

Anyway, before the Oscars most of the fashion PRs were not returning my calls because I was too not important enough, after 90% of them called back.

CG: Do you think they’ll come back now regularly?

XX: Some will and some won’t, but I don’t care about the ones who don’t. They have no integrity and I think integrity is everything. There was a really big one who had already lent out and was very apologetic; Vivien Westwood wrote me a lovely rejection letter. If they are like that, then you can see a continuing relationship. I mean Marks and Spencer were awful and when I heard about the sales tanking, well some of that is because they have really bad fashion PR.

CG: If you look back at the milestones building up your business, obviously the Oscars was the big one are there any others?

XX: Quite early on in my career the biggest campaign was Bare Minerals. They really invested in me and it was a 2 day shoot working with professional photographers and models on an international campaign. Before then I had worked really locally with individual clients and small events. That was a turning point, it was next level stuff. It was one year in, they thought I was more experienced than I was, I fitted in terms of the demographic and I knew some key contacts.

It was also important because I could show my husband that all the networking I was doing, without earning income from it, was going to pay off. I could day “You see, it does work, I can do this.”

CG; So networking is a central part of what you do?

XX : Yes and also social media. It’s the bane of my life; I have to have a presence and I have up have updated content. It does get me work and I’ve met some fantastic people, but I’m not sure it’s worth it, although I have to do it; effort and payback. Although I did get a client through instagram, from Australia, she found me online, lives in Australia but came to visit her son in London for 3 months. I met her and she was a great client, she paid me my worth as she sought me out. Also I get the occasional shoot from it, but the strain of constantly getting content is a pain.

The good thing about it is I can look at other stylists I really rate and learn from them. That is my target level.

The battle in social media for me is that people aren’t necessarily interested in my specific work, they just want see what a 43 year old, mum of 2 stylist actually wears. I end up putting up my pictures of me, me as my own brand which I didn’t initially want to do, but actually it gets me work. If you want a stylist, you want to know you like their style. You have to be aspirational.

CG: So you moved away from the NHS and after a year picked up the Bare Minerals campaign, did anything come along, did you sustain that step up?

XX: Yes I got access to national campaigns and new clients. I now works on Champneys too as they liked what I did. Once you have a really good campaign you keep on winning work from it.

CG: So how did the Oscar work come about?

XX: Actually from bring a speech therapist, one of my old team working as an advisor on the film, I styled the whole team. It was a mad process getting clothes for size 14 team members. They were glad it was me running it and not some 21 year old gill sourcing their clothes. I get the post child body or the non conforming size 6/8 normal human is a 14/16. I am always body positive.

The producer of the film was on the larger size and she sent me a photo afterwards saying she had never felt so beautiful and that’s because of you. That’s why I do it, to make women irrespective of their body shape, feel beautiful and confident and positive. I know then I have done my job.

CG: Do you enjoy that the most? Is that part of your “success” helping women?

XX: Yes, I think it is another form of therapy. There are often tears and tantrums when you style someone; you are going through their wardrobe in their bedroom. Clothes evoke strong emotions because they are often associated with feelings and events; pre and post children, divorce, weight gain and loss etc. You take them on a journey and the best compliment I have ever had is that “you should be available on the NHS”!

CG: Is you husband supportive?

XX: He is with a caveat; incredible supportive on an emotional level, he doesn’t always get it and he’s proud of me but he wasn’t (and I think I will thank he for it in the long run)…it was never a vanity project for me. We were / are never in a position to do that. I have always worked my entire life. He didn’t say to me you can focus on it 100% and not earn, I had to earn whilst I was getting established and that why I did the locum speech therapy. I needed and will always need to generate x income a month. He never says to me, like month has been really lean and he didn’t say to me, he could tell I was quite stressed and he asked why and I said well I know you are going to ask me where the money is this month and he said, it is what it is, let’s just work it out. So he doesn’t, there is an expectation that I will provide every month and what he really wants si a consistency of contribution that you just don’t get in this business. So that can be difficult, but yes he is emotionally supportive and my children have been incredible.

My kids are very supportive, although my teenage daughter has her moments. Her friends think I am cool, especially when I went to the Oscars.

CG: Is how your children view you an important part of this?

XX: (tears) I get frustrated by how I am not able to show them financially that it is really worth it. It is trickling through a bit now. But certainly back when I qualified I had been an Uni for 4 years and my husband said “you are only being paid the equivalent of 15 grand” to do what you do. But that was me I wanted to be a speech therapist in the NHS. It is part of who I am and my mum worked so I never knew anything different, so I never had a stay at home mum. But I miss stuff, I miss assemblies, I miss nativities, I miss sports days, but I don’t think they’ll hold it against me. I do have this pay off, that now I take August off, so a full month covering the summer holidays when I am just with them. I do try to get to as many school events as I can and I have some lovely friends who video it for me. I struggle with it so much and I don’t think men feel guilty about it in the way that we do.

CG: Mother guilt.

XX: Yes I work weekends and very evening, it can be an anti-social profession. I just hope that when they are older, they will look back and they will say that they are proud of me and that they thought it was worth it.

But I feel like I am a better mum for doing what I want to do, sort of on my times. I worry even though I feel that, they might feel it wasn’t worth it because I missed ballet rehearsals or football, you know, I hope they don’t hold that against me because you know it’s not ideal, but quality and not quantity…right?

I kind of make a joke about how I am always the last time know about school events; world book day, cake sales all these things are just make working mums feel like total failures. I live in a particularly judgey place, nice schools, close to London and all the rest of it..

CG: Is it very mother-earthy, strong gender role accepting type locality?

XX: It’s an interesting demographic in Winchester where you have a lot of mums who left having children late, worked in London in highly professional roles. Come to Winchester because of the schools and because they can afford a larger property here and they have been very driven in their career and they just channel that competitiveness into child rearing. So they are the mums that don’t work (they would probably be better if they did work a bit and get some of that aggression out) and they are like “oh you didn’t bake for this bake sale, you just bought those jam tarts…” I always say if you have women on your side you can do anything, there is nothing more powerful but if they are against, there really is nothing worse.

Actually I could turn round and ask them what they have earned recently …but of course I don’t. My kids always know they are not loved and adored any less because …..Mummy went to the Oscars!!

CG: Well you can always drop that in.

XX: And I do!

CG: How would you judge your success?

XX ; I think I have done really well in such a short space of time given that it wasn’t a vanity project and I didn’t really have any money to start it up with and I came to it late and I’ve not been able to go hard at it because of kids and income requirement. One day I would be working on social skills of an autistic child and the next I day I was on a fashion shoot; real extremes.

A friend works for Nars and her husband is a fireman and she earns so much more. She introduced me to her bank manager, a premiere service (earn over £150k pa), I did some styling stuff for them. They added me to the service saying “we’ll call you an emerging customer” and I spent whole time apologising for how much lower my earnings were than my friend.

My career has given me is fulfilling on so many levels (creatively, personal happiness and challenge, better mother, contributing to the household pot, earning my children’s respect) but I don’t have the jaguar on the drive and the 5 bed house. So by those standards I am not a success, but do I feel I made the right decision and I am happy – yes. Do I want to earn more money – yes I do and I think I’ll get there, I am so much better at asking for more money now, I am getting more established. But by the narrow standards I probably don’t look hugely successful.

CG: Yes I think that is where we can broaden the scope and assessment of success.

XX: I suppose it is less measureable though? My kids were a certain age when I started and so I had adapted and my youngest has not known anything different.

**Personal Details**

Age: ~~16-29 30-39~~ 40-49 ~~50-59 60+~~

Nationality: British (white)

Country of origin: UK

Mode of working: Full Time: ~~Part time:~~

Children: (1) ~~0-2 3-4 5-1~~1 12-18

Children: (2) ~~0-2 3-4~~ 5-11 ~~12-18~~

Children: (3) 0-2 3-4 5-11 12-18

Children: (4) 0-2 3-4 5-11 12-18

Highest educational qualification: Degree

Location of business: Winchester & London

Home working: Yes

Last position held in employment: Speech therapist

Husband Occupation: Manager in a Bank

Husband highest educational qualification: degree

Household income: Dual ~~Single~~ (Both income not required.)