

Interview: *Simply Soles & Lillybee*

Kassie Rempel is a certified public accountant turned entrepreneur who gained valuable skills in the finance world and applied them to her passion for design and fashion. She currently owns the designer shoe shop Simply Soles in Washington D.C., runs an extremely successful online storefront and designs her own shoe line, Lillybee. Read our interview with the lovely Kassie below.



Tell us about yourself!

I'm a shoe-addicted mom of two who loves watching James Bond, lusting over Robert Pattinson, sipping Chardonnay, devouring Krispy Kreme doughnuts, and dancing to the Backyardigans.

When and why did you decide to start Simply Soles?

I started SimplySoles back in 2004. Creating the company was a result of my love for shoes, my business background, and my comfort level with Excel.

I loved shoes as a child, but I didn't think much of it until I started my career in the tax department of Ernst & Young. The profession was conservative, as was the dress code. My fondness for shoes and accessories flourished because I felt that it was the only way I could express my personality. It got to a point where people in the office were placing bets on how many pairs of black shoes I owned! So it was then that my true passion (some would say obsession) with shoes was solidified.

In 2003, after helping to open and run an exercise studio/spa, I decided to find a way to make shoes not just my passion but to make them my profession. Opening a shoe store was my first inclination but where do you find a place in D.C. that has parking, foot traffic and also has affordable rent? Nowhere, at least not at the time. I decided that since I was a big

catalog shopper that I wanted to create the best-ever-shoe-catalog, and with that, an accompanying online boutique. Not knowing where to start, I reached out to the owner of my favorite catalog, Wisteria, and asked for any guidance he was willing to share about the catalog industry. He responded with a four-page blueprint. Because of his generosity and that of many others, SimplySoles mailed its first catalog in September 2004.

You were a CPA (Certified Public Accountant), what made you decide to branch off and do something completely different?

I transitioned from the tax department to the family wealth planning department at Ernst & Young. From there I left to manage a few families' assets. One of the families then asked me to work full time to help the wife open an exercise studio and spa here in DC.

While I wanted to figure out my passion and make that my profession, I thought that learning how to start a business on someone else's dime was as Mastercard likes to say, "priceless." So I transitioned my other clients and built and ran this



exercise studio/spa. That experience, combined with my experience as a CPA, was invaluable and gave me the confidence to follow my dream. I'm a firm believer of trying to learn as much as you can about an industry or occupation before you commit yourself to it.

What inspired you to start your own shoe line, Lillybee?

I had been watching our designer lines increase in price because of the rising Euro. So I was actively looking for new product lines to fill the less than \$200 void. Around that same time, a trade association in Brazil reached out to me and asked if they paid for mine and my husband's travel, if we would fly to Brazil to attend a trade show. This was in late 2007 and my daughter was just born. Leaving would mean leaving behind our 3 month old daughter, but how could we refuse such an opportunity. We went, it was amazing, and it was then that I decided to curate my own collection, Lillybee. We launched Lillybee in Spring 2008 and in its season debut, it was our number one selling collection (and every season since).

Where does the name Lillybee come from?

The name was inspired by my children: my daughter named Lily and my son who at the time, had a love for bees (he now loves Buzz

Lightyear so it still works in his mind).

How has having children changed your workday?

My schedule is much more defined, and also disjointed. Whereas I used to get to the office at 8 and work until 8, I now get to the office by 9:30 and leave by 5:30, with the exception of Wednesday when I leave a little earlier to meet my husband for dinner date night (a must for our sanity and our relationship). After getting them fed and to bed, I'm back on my computer until at least 11.

What advice would you give to women out there who are aspiring creative business owners, who may have families of their own?

Don't obsess over how you will get it done. When I was about to have my second child with 9 employees in my basement, and the UPS/FedEx/USPS guys coming and going at all hours of the day, people kept asking me how I was going to manage it all. I didn't have an answer. I just knew I'd get it done. The fright factor can be hard to overcome. So focus instead on the feel-good-factor of following your dream and pursuing your passion.

The other suggestion is if possible, try to conduct your research during the nights and weekends before you quit your day job. My experience starting and managing an exercise studio was crucial. As was taking the time to learn about the catalog industry. It took over a year of research before I mailed my first catalog.



PHOTOS, PAGE 14: Nancy in Gray, \$128. Austin in Red, \$168. Helen in Green, \$168. **PHOTOS, THIS PAGE, ABOVE:** Claire in Peach, \$168. Ashley Boot, \$288. Paula in Black, \$168. **PHOTOS, THIS PAGE, LEFT:** Danielle in Black, \$188. Gwyneth in Sand, \$158. **PHOTOS, PAGE 16:** Jenna in Orange, \$99. Laurie in Navy, \$168. Ellen in Black & Pink, \$168.

Where does the inspiration for your lillybee line come from?

All moms work! But oftentimes moms working at home don't have a dress code to adhere to. I design the lillybee line for working mothers who command both the boardroom and the romper room; they are stylish, but there's always an element of comfort for the multi-talented, multi-tasking woman on the run.

What designers do you look up to, why?

Ahh –so many! I've always adored Bettye Muller and her feminine collection. I manage to fall in love anew with each new season she debuts. Taryn Rose was really the first woman who really made comfort beautiful. And no one can deny the alluring appeal and mastery of Manolo Blahnik.

What is your favorite thing about owning your own business and creating your own line?

I love feeling like I'm making a difference in the lives of women – helping them look good and feel great. I also deeply value the interaction with the community and the ability to give back. We've partnered with a local nonprofit called Suited for Change (www.Suitedfor-Change.org) from the very beginning. I wanted to find a way to allow my business to give back to the local DC community, which was especially hard because I started from my dining room. We couldn't really host events, so we started a recycling program. If you donate a pair of gently-worn shoes you get 10% off your order. And we in turn donate them to Suited for Change. Customers win. The community wins. We win. And we've been doing this for more than seven years having donated thousands of pairs of shoes.

What plans do you have for the future?

We are focused on expanding the lillybee collection and are bringing in handbags this fall. Currently the

products are produced in Brazil, but we're excited that part of the Spring 2012 collection will be produced in Italy. Quality is important to me, as is the environment and human rights. So I'm working hard to produce a well-made, highly regarded line that retails for less than \$200 per pair that doesn't originate in China. For that reason, we don't wholesale the collection and look to pass those savings onto the customer.

In addition, I'm building a new website that parlays off of the interest in the Kassie's Closet section of SimplySoles. The new standalone site, www.kassiescloset.com will feature outfits that work with your SimplySoles purchases (and eventually with all your purchases). The website will be a shopping search engine as well as a styling resource. It's the direction I want to move in and my new-found passion – becoming more of a resource than just a retailer.



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