

Passion plus mission: moving from aid to trade

kpmg.com/enterprise

I am an incredibly grateful Canadian. Though I have humble roots, this country of opportunity has allowed me to grow into a university educated woman with two successful companies. Not many countries in the world offer all their citizens the chance to experiment with learning and personal pursuits without judgment, or punishment for expressing themselves. In the same way Canada has unlocked possibilities for me, I feel it is our responsibility to swing open the 'doors to the banquet' and allow others to rise to their potential through economic empowerment.



I've worn a few hats in my career. I have been a journalist and a consultant. I have even run for public office. In 2008, I wrote a philosophy book and had begun making my living mostly as an author and public speaker.

However, a couple of years ago I felt compelled to start up a perfume business. The inspiration came from my long-time best friend and mentor, Captain Trevor Greene, who very nearly died on a peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan in 2006.

Trevor was in a small community called Shinkay, sitting with his fellow peacekeepers and the village elders, discussing how to bring clean drinking water, education and health care to the women and children. Suddenly he was attacked from behind, struck by the axe of a 16-year-old Taliban man who didn't want the people in his community to have free will – or even free thought. The man partially split Trevor's brain with that one awful swing before Trevor's fellow soldier shot and killed him. It is a miracle my friend survived. As you can imagine, the road he has travelled since then has been tremendously challenging.

I realize that starting a company may not be a typical response to a friend's horrible tragedy. After it happened, though, I was looking for ways to support his mission, part of which includes liberating Afghan families from terrorism.

I wanted to prove to the people of Afghanistan that they weren't alone and we were going to shine light on what was beautiful. I also wanted to show my best friend Trevor that his mission wasn't in vain; there are many of us who care deeply about freedom, literacy and economic empowerment.

Questions/contact

Dennis Fortnum

Global Head

KPMG Enterprise

T: +1 416 228 7232

E: dfortnum@kpmg.ca

If you make a mistake in your business, it's got to be fixed, one hundredfold. The customer must be wowed into making that 180-degree turn in their impression of your company.

I dedicated my 2008 book, *The 7 Virtues of a Philosopher Queen*, to Trevor. Then I found during speaking engagements I would talk about him and get a common reaction. Canadians would say, "When it comes to Afghanistan our hands are tied. As civilians, what can we do? How can we make a difference? How can we effect change?" I began to realize there aren't many ways, outside of charity, for citizens to be a part of the process of ending strife and war. You either have to be a soldier or a world leader.

One day I read an article about a gentleman named Abdullah Arsala, who was employing more than 2,500 farmers in his community to grow legal crops in Afghanistan as an alternate to the poppy crop. Since the illegal poppy crop represents the base for about 90 per cent of the world's heroin, and that heroin is on our own city streets, it's in our interest to care.

On the subject of Afghanistan we've been asking the wrong questions. Instead of "Should we be there?" we should be asking, "How should we be there?" When I read the article about legal crops I saw how I should be there.

So my book was the foundation and the fragrance is the thesis brought to life. We must flex our buying power in new ways to make positive and impactful changes.

Things started moving quickly. I travelled to Ottawa to meet with some executives who told me I would need to find and speak to Abdullah Arsala directly. They connected me with the right non-governmental organization (NGO) to meet with the ambassador to Afghanistan, soon finding Abdullah and making a deal to buy orange blossom oils through his company, Gulestan. I chose a perfumer and we soon had 1,000 bottles of our perfume produced and delivered to my garage. The 7 Virtues Beauty Inc. was born.

We launched just after in Toronto, Ottawa and Halifax. My friends threw perfume parties to give my product more exposure, and I stayed on their couches for the promotional tour. Fortunately we got a lot of media coverage. I decided to take my business idea to the CBC TV reality show *The Dragons' Den*. It was one of the best decisions of my life.

Of the 5,000 Canadian companies auditioning to be on *Dragons' Den*, 300 make it. Only 20 of those 300 get deals on air that ultimately pass due diligence. Mine was one of them. When I got accepted by three of the show hosts, I chose to go with investor/co-host W. Brett Wilson.

He was a perfect fit. Within the first 48 hours he had me booked in front of some Young Presidents' Organization (YPO) audiences. I had asked on the show for his wisdom and counsel and he jumped on board. He's helped in so many ways. We've even done an in-store blitz at The Bay together.

Three months after we'd passed our due diligence with Brett I cold called The Bay. In just 10 minutes they responded and agreed to sell my perfume in 91 Canadian stores. And I get paid in 30 days, unlike most suppliers, whose products are sold on consignment.

It was the start of a terrific relationship. They even helped us design the stands for our perfume. They're easy to work with but more than that, they took a chance on us. They continue to mentor me because they feel this is a great Canadian success story.

Our goal is to encourage others, especially women, to trade with business people in Afghanistan, Haiti and other nations experiencing strife as part of the solution to building peace. The 7 Virtues Beauty Inc. does this by trying to empower women at the beauty counter. My book, sold alongside the perfume, is designed to let women empower themselves by using their buying power and natural, often untapped, abilities.

I took all the Stoic lists that I've been moved by, including Aurelius, Sir Winston Churchill, Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, Adam Smith and Plato, and I cobbled together a book for women. I took the four stoic virtues Churchill and the boys used when they were going through war and strife – truth, courage, justice, wisdom – and I added three more: wonder, moderation and beauty.

I want young women at the beauty counter to find my book and realize that they have enormous buying power – enough to effect world change – and that their beauty represents their inner strength and dignity. I want them to be empowered.

Unfortunately not everybody empowers others. One of the things that drives me crazy about our society is our concept of charity. I really think if we had the right policies in the world we wouldn't need charity; everybody would be empowered and nobody would be left behind.

I know that's idealistic and utopian, but deep down I believe when we simply give people things, we are not actually inviting them to the banquet. We feel better and we can dress up in our black tuxedos and go to the fundraiser, but we're still leaving people out.

I was raised by my mother who, for many years, was single and on welfare. She got some help from the community too, but people often just dropped off the Christmas hamper and drove away. I never appreciated that. As a result, I can understand, on a micro level, the feeling of being given something and being told "You stay over there." I don't believe in it. You have to engage people, invite them in. As a businessperson you say, "Come and trade with me, come and meet my friend."

As a person who does volunteer work, I make similar efforts. I've had speaking engagements for kids in second chance programs – those who were once prisoners in the justice system. A few times I've taken them, along with my kids and kids from a local private school, down for a tour of City Hall and out to a Chinese food buffet. Why? Because I know it makes them feel engaged. They get ignited just thinking about their city and their civic engagement – and from someone, quite literally, bringing them to the banquet.

A crucial aspect of the success of these trips is anonymity. Nobody is labeled. I am the only one who knows who is who. And these kids leave with fire in their bellies – all of them.

I take the same inclusive attitude to business and to our fragrance line. I work with the government through The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the federal agency leading Canada's international effort to help people living in poverty. I have met with ambassadors and with the Minister for Housing for Palestine. I'm building relationships with the key people in government who are truly connecting governments to citizens in a new way.

I'm inclusive with partners as well, whether they are internal or external. For example, while we've been designing a box for the six versions of the fragrance, the Bay has asked the beauty editors from *The Globe and Mail* to *More Magazine* and *Flare* to sit down with our perfumer, Brett and I – to decide which of the six scents will be our first unisex scent launched on September 21st, The United Nations' International Day of Peace.

All of these people – with the media involvement as a bonus – are creating this. The fact that my perfumer Susanne Lang is being included is a little uncommon in the world of perfume. But we all benefit from her excellent work and opinions. It's a two-way street.

But good partners are not easy to find. Part of the reason I went looking for investors/mentors on Dragons' Den was that no one else had stepped forward.

Nobody was willing to invest in the idea until they had proof it would work. So I did it myself. I put all the costs on my Visa card and stored the bottles in my garage when I first started. I knew the profit margin of perfume was quite high and if I could find the right perfumer this would be an exquisite product.

But other people tried to put up obstacles as well, including some of the journalists in Nova Scotia, where I live. When I was preparing to introduce my book, some questioned my ability to pull it off. Some were in fact quite cruel about it.

It was something new, so I understood where that kind of talk came from, but it still hurt a bit.

I remember, my mentor said to me, "Come on, thick skin, broad shoulders. You're a woman out there doing this. You're going to have detractors." So I didn't pay attention to the negativity that was all around me. Looking back, I'm glad I didn't dwell on what the doubters were saying because the book is now in its third edition and ranked a bestseller. That's why strong mentors are mandatory if you want to take risks.

I know my market and the response to my products is overwhelming. I realize I don't have to sell to everybody. It's a billion dollar industry. I just need a slice.

And if someone tells me, "You'll never get that into the beauty counter," I always respond: "Why, is that what happened to you the last time you made a perfume?" It stops them in their tracks. It's a little cheeky, but it's Socratic! It's also very much in the vein of another quote by philosopher Marcus Aurelius: "Why would you care about the opinion of 10,000 men if they know nothing of the subject?"

Most people are living in fear. They don't allow themselves to share their gifts when in fact it's their responsibility to do so. It's not an option. And you get past your fears very quickly when you realize it's your responsibility. So when someone comes after you from a place of fear, hit them with the Socratic method. You hope they'll stop, but if they continue you need to remove them from your life. It's that simple.

Aurelius also said, "When you wake up, you must expect to be greeted each day with interference, ingratitude, insolence, disloyalty, ill-will and selfishness – Now lead!" I feel this is critical for an entrepreneur to hear, since some people think everyone else is supposed to like what they do. That's not the way life is.

Twenty per cent of people are never going to like you. That's reality. And if it's because you remind them of their cousin, it really has nothing to do with you. Just get on with your business. The noise this negativity makes won't be heard, and those opinions will have no bearing on what you do.

You can learn to be more skilled at shutting out distractions. It's fascinating how much the mind is like a muscle. Plato wrote about this in *The Republic*.

You take your muscles to the gym, work them hard with weights, and they rip and they strengthen because that's how they're designed. It's the same thing with our minds. We read books, we learn from wise people and our minds are strengthened. Spiritually, if we are ignited because someone else is doing well, we strengthen our spirits.

Similarly, when we get angry or jealous or sad, we bulk up our negative side. We become bitter, lost and jaded. It's sad – and it's limiting.

The most beautiful part is you always have the power to begin something new. I love that. You can start in your garage with a thousand bottles of perfume.

Today I don't need anybody else's money, only the investors I have. The funny thing is I actually have venture capitalists calling me now. You go from begging people to help you to having everyone wanting to be on board. Now we are our own capital and we generate our own momentum.

We're now sourcing our oils from Haiti through the Peace Dividend Trust, and our purchases are helping in the rebuilding of Haiti after the disastrous earthquake in 2010.

And I'm always working ahead on the next fragrance. We're now working with Israel. Meanwhile we've raised our purchases of oils from Afghanistan from \$2,000, to \$18,000, to \$50,000, continuing to inject a lot of dollars into the economy. If we can ignite others to come, we can get more farmers off the poppy crops.

The money goes to the right people because I personally wire it to the business owners. In the model we have, that will never be a concern. We prequalify the businesses we work with, so we know the money gets into the right hands.

People sometimes ask me what I'd do if suddenly my supply was cut off or severely delayed due to conditions in one of the countries we trade with. It doesn't concern me because, sadly, there are 33 countries facing some level of war or strife from which I can buy oils.

However, if a country can't get the oils, an opportunity is created. It lets me shine light on the story of why you can't get the perfume. If a citizen in Canada says, "I really want my Noble Rose perfume from Afghanistan," I'd answer, "We don't have it and we can't get any because of X, and you need to do something about it."

I'd ask them to speak to governments. Our policy as Canadian government has to change. We need to move from the model of aid to the model of trade. We need to empower businesses to be matchmakers. They should buy products from each other to bolster economies.

I'm only scratching the surface. I'm not in any way going to pretend I'm making the full difference, but the model is correct. I want others to do it too. I want a cavalry of hundreds, if not thousands, of businesses focused on trade that will cause positive change.

Brett, who met with Abdullah in Kabul because we want to increase our investment in his company, said Abdullah was one of the top 10 businesspeople he's ever met in his life, and he's dealt with more than a few.

Abdullah has also started schools for girls. These girls have gone on to run NGOs. They are incredible human beings in centres of influence. Of course they have very difficult days. Some days they lose young men to the suicide bombs in their tribe. It's an extremely difficult way of life.

Really, my business philosophy follows UNESCO's principle, which says: Don't sit back and wait for government to fix the ills of society alone. We are citizens with businesses and we have the power to do more.

People sometimes ask how they can tap into their own vision and follow it. I tell them to merge what they most want to change in the world with what they most want to do. Their burning desire to see change will drive them, while their newfound career control will bring them enormous satisfaction.

Trust that if it hasn't been done before, you're probably on your way to doing something unique and significant. Don't worry, there is no book, there is no guideline; you're going to create it.

Always do your homework before you start your venture. Meet with venture capitalists and business people with experience and be sure to ask questions. I am always asking people what they think. I may incorporate some of the answers into my strategy or I may not, but I'm always asking so I can learn.

I also like to have fun and a good time, so I incorporate that into what I do as well. For example, someone wrote me today from BC to let me know they had ordered one of my books and it hadn't arrived. I'm going to give them two options. They can receive two books, sent by Express Mail to make up for the error, or they can come and see us live on Tuesday at the Pacific Centre in Vancouver with Brett Wilson and I'll personally give them the two books.

Offering this choice makes things a bit more fun. And why not? We'll be there Tuesday and I'd love to meet them.

Besides, if you make a mistake in your business it's got to be fixed 100-fold. The customer must be wowed into making a 180-degree turn in their impression of your company.

I share stories about past failures in my conversations and speeches. I don't like to focus on my mistakes or on sad things that have happened, but I do demonstrate my humanity to share relevant lessons with others. I admit I am not perfect. No one should, or would, believe otherwise.

If I do something I don't think worked, which can happen any time, I go back and say "I could have done that better. I don't want it to happen again." But I don't dwell on it or get down on myself.

I felt that way after working with my perfumer on the original order of 1,000 perfume bottles. For her it was a small order. However at the time I thought, and probably acted, as if I was the only customer. In truth she had many clients.

When we recently made the commitment to do 10,000 bottles I phoned her and said, "I just want to say thank you because I realize that I unduly taxed your operation when we were working on my 1,000 bottles. I'm so sorry. I was new to the business and I won't do it again."

Still, I have a style, a way that's very strong and aggressive – I like everything I do to be excellent. For example, when we put out the latest edition of the book, the 3rd edition sticker probably had 10 revisions. My poor designer got used to my tendency for waking up in the morning and calling with yet another change. I am pretty particular about my vision and how I want to get there, so I can be difficult to work with. I'm not negative or unkind, but I have a standard I see very clearly. But if people stay with me it's worth it.

To stay positive, I only surround myself with people who are positive. The naysayers and the "you can't do it" crowd? Removed. Gossipers – they can't come over again. I'm that severe, and so in some ways I suppose I'm harsh but I will not tolerate people tearing others down or taking pleasure in someone else's pain. There are enough dark places on this earth and I'm not creating more. With my actions I can help make the world – and my world – more peaceful so that's what I choose to do.

For some, a business deal that falls through or a setback in the marketplace is a catastrophe. That's because they put all their energy into the negative experience. They get completely sucked into the vortex.

On Dragons' Den, host Kevin O'Leary called an investment in my company an emotional investment. He said there's plenty of room in the market place for businesses like mine but it wasn't for him. I agree. I don't think one has to make a choice between the two. I don't force others to think like me and I'm not going to become like them.

It was a pure profit play, not an emotional investment. Brett will get his investment back in dividends by year's end. When you make a thousand bottles of perfume and half of them sell in two months, even though nobody in the perfume market knows who you are, you've achieved something.

Our products were selling well before I went on Dragons' Den. Of course after the show it sold out very quickly. Then it was 'all hands on deck, get it out, get it out.'

Another way to keep negativity out is to keep your home life separate from your work life. You may have sick kids, a relationship that's ending, or thinking about putting your father in a home. We all deal with these types of challenges, but they can't interfere.

Clutter and all the personal troubles have no place in your work; they will end the whole dream. Keeping those separate is very stoic and very important. That is the way you get through them.

If I were to meet people and whine about my circumstances they would shut off. They would be worried if I were more focused on my own problems than theirs – and who could blame them. However, if I choose to talk about what's achievable, what's happening and what's exciting, people will get excited.

And getting excited is easy when my book at the beauty counter might help a woman go all the way to the Senate. I think about young women going to the beauty counter – where promotion is typically dominated by movie stars or stick-thin models – and finding my book there. It thrills me to think of little girls growing up and wanting to become ambassadors or Prime Ministers.

Since we launched the book, I have given close to 300 talks, sometimes having done as many as three a day. It doesn't matter if I'm at a women's shelter or talking to former prisoners or to the CEOs at the Young Presidents' Organization (YPO), the philosophy and stoic wisdom is accessible to all people.

Your faith, gender and socioeconomic background are not relevant. You must work on your character, your vision, your dream and your life, and get rid of all of the junk that stops you from really doing what you are supposed to be doing on this earth.

The way I talk about the 7th virtue is a shift of thinking around what beauty is. The beauty in my book is the type Michelangelo made with his clay. The vision is already there; you just chisel away and let it emerge. Your beauty is your power and dignity and you are never to hand it over or strip another of it.

If young girls could realize their beauty is their power and their dignity, maybe we'd have different kinds of behaviours, achievements and expectations for women in governments and in business.

Special, strong, intelligent, committed women are out there. I want to help nurture more of them. And in doing so, I want to change the world.