

San Francisco Chronicle

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

STYLE

Sunday, December 7, 2014

By Carolyn Zinko

KILLER WRAP: Diane von Furstenberg talks tech, feminism, and the idea that jump-started her fashion career



Diane Von Furstenberg — fearless from the start

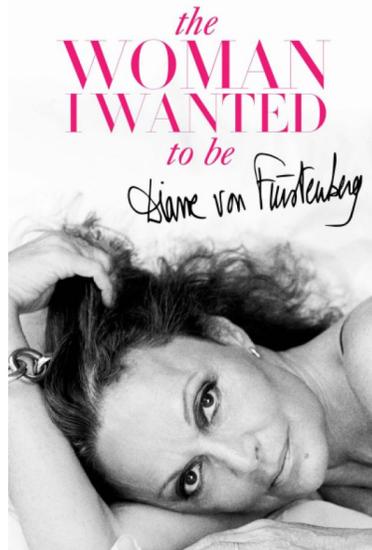
On a rainy Wednesday afternoon, Diane von Furstenberg emerges from the bedroom of her suite at the [Four Seasons](#) clad in a loose black shirt, black denim leggings and low-rise boots. Acting more like a teenager than the 67-year-old she is, she plops into a plush armchair, slides down low in the seat, tucks one leg underneath her and shoots the other one up in the air, her heel coming to rest on the arm of a nearby sofa.

She's in the Bay Area for three days of events at [Stanford University](#), KQED radio, Google and the [Jewish Community Center](#) in San Francisco, on a book tour that has taken her from New York to London, Seattle and Los Angeles, with Miami still to come.

"I'm so *tired!*" she exclaims, but moments later, she bolts up in the the coffee table. With a smile, she disarming to have the tables turned, Furstenberg likes a little disruption. For all her Belgian roots and New ultimate entrepreneur, Silicon success to near-failure and

In 1974, long before the word

created a simple product that market, they clamored for. It was knit with a belt that tied — sexy wear to the office.



Von Furstenberg's mother taught her, among other things, that "fear is not an option."

looks the picture of alertness and ease. A few chair and digs into a pear from a fruit plate on asks her interviewer to talk about herself. It's but it will become evident that von

York city address, von Furstenberg is the Valley-style, from early risk to stratospheric reinvention.

"startup" was part of everyday vocabulary, she

nobody knew they wanted, but once it hit the the wrap dress, a crisscrossing piece of jersey enough to be provocative but tame enough to

It was a hit back then, and today, too, with a new generation hungry for 1970s fashions. Von Furstenberg may not have the billions in profits that Apple reaps each year, but the iconic wrap dress, 40 years old this year, has endured decades longer than any single tech gadget, without a business plan or angel investors, to boot.

She's commemorated the anniversary with a memoir, "[The Woman I Wanted to Be](#)" (Simon & Schuster); a clothing exhibition, "Journey of a Dress," on display at the [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#) earlier this year (with a companion book published by [Rizzoli](#)); and a reality TV show called "House of DVF" on Sundays on E TV.

The memoir starts with the story of von Furstenberg's mother, [Lily Nahmias](#), a Holocaust survivor. She was only 59 pounds when released from a series of Nazi prison camps at age 21, but had an iron-clad determination to live, to fear nothing and to impart the values of self-sufficiency and independence to the daughter that doctors told her she was too frail to have. (Von Furstenberg's father, [Leon Halfin](#), was a businessman.)

Her mother taught her, among other things, the following: "Fear is not an option." "Don't dwell on the dark side of things, but look for the light and build around it." "If one door closes, look for another to open." "Never, ever blame others for what befalls you, no matter how horrible it might be. Trust you, and only you, to be responsible for your own life."



Fashion designer Diane von Furstenberg came to San Francisco Nov. 19-21, 2014, as part of a book tour to launch her memoir, “The Woman I Wanted to Be,” (Simon & Schuster) She was feted at a dinner on Nov. 20, 2014 at Foreign Cinema West by her stepbrother, San Francisco art gallery owner Martin Muller of Modernism. Inc. From left to right: Winemaker Lee Hudson, a relative of von Furstenberg’s, von Furstenberg, Muller, and Anne Wojcicki, of genetic testing company 23andMe.

Von Furstenberg said beginning with her mother’s story was instrumental because “how she was explains the woman I wanted to be, and became.”

In her jet-setting 20s, von Furstenberg married the young [Prince Egon von Furstenberg](#), a Swiss aristocrat, had two children and divorced three years later. To pay the bills, she created a dress from stretch fabric she’d seen at a textile mill in Italy. Vogue editor [Diana Vreeland](#) embraced the dress, which became a sensation and put von Furstenberg on the cover of [Newsweek](#) at 27. Her ups and downs, both personal and professional, are detailed in the book — including a near-bankruptcy, forays into makeup, QVC and HSN, and the resurgence of the brand in 1997 thanks to support from Rosemarie Bravo, then the president of [Saks Fifth Avenue](#).

Her story is not widely known to the younger generation, but the book tour may change that, if her experience at Stanford is any example.

On Nov. 20, von Furstenberg is onstage at Cemex Auditorium with venture capitalist [Annie Kadavy](#) for an event organized by Stanford Women in Business that draws 500 students, many of them female. Von Furstenberg self-effacingly tells them, “I am the perfect example of the reverse of the lessons you got — I did not go to business school; I did not have a business plan. But I came up with a product that turned out to be special. It held on so long and touched so many generations — that has not happened to a dress.”

She pauses, surveys the brainpower in the room, and then adds for dramatic effect, “If I had come here, *my God*, I could own the world!” The crowd breaks out in laughter and applause.

Later, in San Francisco, von Furstenberg is applauded again at a candlelight dinner hosted by her stepbrother, gallerist [Martin Muller](#), at [Foreign Cinema](#). Among the 40 guests are [Anne Wojcicki](#), founder of the genetic testing company 23andMe, and winemaker [Lee Hudson](#), whose mother, a Houston philanthropist, was married to Egon von Furstenberg’s father.

As Muller toasts von Furstenberg as an icon of the fashion world, she waves off the accolade and redirects him to tell the group how they’re related.

When Muller, known for his sense of propriety, hesitates, she blurts out, “My mother left my father for Martin’s father,” with a matter-of-factness that catches guests by surprise, and makes them laugh.

The two spent a portion of their childhood together in Geneva, where Muller said she was a “meaningful stepsister” who kept him out of trouble, and, like her mother, was fiercely strong and independent.

“On several occasions, I saw her step in when witnessing elderly or poor people being abused,” he recalls. There were good times, too. “Another time, we went to the movies together, during a vacation in Brussels,” he says. “We laughed so hard, that as a kid, it was the only time I remember peeing from laughter — or ever since.”

The next night, after appearances at KQED and Google (Google Glass debuted at her spring-summer 2013 show in New York), she’s onstage at the JCC in San Francisco, where 470 people — most of them women — sit in rapt attention, many wearing wrap dresses.

She talks about wanting to empower women at first through her dress, and now through philanthropy. Asked if she considers herself a feminist, she says, “Absolutely! I am a feminist with many, many m’s. You can be a feminist and feminine.” The crowd cheers. She’s had many lovers in her life, but advised, “The most important relationship you’ll ever have is with yourself.” Asked what she thought of the people at Google (co-founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page are friends) she says, “They’re nerds.” She adds: “They’re like Julius Caesar on steroids, taking over the universe. I told them that this afternoon.”

She breezes through the interview and questions from the crowd, until she’s stumped by a young woman who asks her to define the word “community.”

“The definition of community? I don’t think I’ve ever thought about that.” She answers that a community can be two people. “But I just love the way you said that word, with your accent, *community*,” she mimicked, stretching the word out.

Once again, the disruptor has turned the tables, and the audience laughs.

Carolyn Zinko is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. E-mail: czinko@sfgate.com Twitter: @carolynezinko