



## Chasing a sustainable dream

# Pure Pod

Designer Kelli Donovan has switched her focus from designing clothing for mass production to creating a label she had dreamt about pursuing for years. Dawn Adams reports.

Kelli Donovan admits to two passions; one is for fashion and the other is for sustainable manufacturing to build a stronger and healthier environment. Donovan has been designing clothing for the past 20 years since she finished formal study in 1989 and moved to Melbourne, where she created childrenswear for a number of companies.

"Later, I started a design studio in Melbourne that I operated for six-and-a-half years creating products for lots of clients for men, women and children to licensed ranges," she says. "I was flat out, sometimes creating a storyboard of designs, and I had a couple of girls working for me including a graphic designer. We'd do yardage prints or textile prints and computer art for the clothing industry in Melbourne."

In 2001, Donovan pursued a seachange with her partner Sean Watson. They bought a combi van and travelled around New South Wales and Queensland for

several months before taking on another childrenswear design job in Melbourne. In 2004, the couple moved to their current premises in Byron Bay, where Donovan taught yoga and pilates for some time before developing Pure Pod, its name symbolising "a seed that can grow into anything".

### A passion for the environment

"Pure Pod was something I wanted to do all my life," she says.

"I have a passion for the environment and a passion for fashion. In mass production, I felt like a fish out of water and I had an inner struggle about creating designs in that area because of the waste and pollution."

She has come a long way since being given her first 'Holly Hobby' sewing machine at just six years old when she made clothing for her Barbie dolls and other toys.

"My Holly Hobby machine was made out of plastic but it still worked; for a six-year-old, that was pretty good," she says.

While her interest was sparked from that young age, it was her work in the more mass-market area of the clothing sector that she credits with teaching her valuable skills.

"It taught me a really good trade and how to run my own business, keep to deadlines and be really organised," she says. "Being creative, it's been

harder for me to be organised but they drummed it into me because they sold to large department stores. That work also helped to develop my commercial eye for products and I travelled overseas once or twice a year."

However the relentless demand for new product in the sector also took its toll on her creative abilities.

"From a creative level, it probably stagnated my creativity because I had to pump stuff out every day whether I felt creative or not," she says. "It got to a stage where I couldn't think of anything more."

### A responsible manufacturer

Today through Pure Pod, she lives her passion for the environment and her commitment to being a responsible manufacturer.

"As designers and manufacturers, our responsibility is to educate the public about what they're buying and educate them not to overbuy," she says. "Pure Pod is a lifestyle brand. It's not fast fashion. We don't need people to buy the next trend; that creates huge wastage. We probably have enough clothes on earth that people could wear for a couple of hundred years."

Donovan points to the fabrics she chooses as contributing to a more sustainable environment. She offers consumers a dyed rather than natural

fibre look, however low amounts of heavy metals and no formaldehyde are used in the fabric and the dyeing process.

"We choose companies that use less chemicals in the fabric," she says.

"We decided to dye fabrics to educate a wider range of consumers; if we did just natural colour or plain fibres, I don't think as many people would purchase our product."

Donovan consults with bodies such as TESTEX (Institute of International Association for Research and Testing in the Field of Textile Ecology) to better understand the environmental credentials of fabrics she selects. She acknowledges that more options will become available to the company as it becomes a larger force in the industry. She also places an importance on asking questions about the manufacture process of, for example, trims like coconut, wood or shell buttons from her suppliers.

"I believe if we can create a healthy planet again it will be for the good of future generations," she says.

"If everyone adopts that philosophy, there will be less loss of habitat for animals and plants species; we don't have a choice anymore."

### A better alternative

Donovan has even asked herself the tough question about whether she should be involved in a manufacturing process at all. Donovan justifies her decision on the basis that her products offer a better alternative to many clothing selections on the market which she argues use many more chemicals.

Donovan is convinced that being involved in the environmentally friendly category makes her stand out as different, and perhaps makes the path to success a little easier than for her rivals in the general marketplace.

"It's a lifestyle brand, relaxed easy weekend wear," she says.

"You can wear it to work but it's also for everyday use."

Donovan is also convinced that her target market is less interested in fast fashion, being aged from 20 or 30 years up. This age group, she believes, is increasingly focused on clothing made from sustainable fabrics.

### Removing the novelty factor

Donovan looks forward to the day when 'organic' clothing will be readily available alongside other fashion items and not be seen as a novelty. She sees that time approaching, with department stores become increasingly open to the idea and devoting whole areas to eco clothing.

With plenty of growth opportunities emerging across Australia, among Donovan's key aims is to find stockists in Sydney, where she claims to have among her largest following.

"We have a big following in Sydney but we don't have any stockists," she says. "People from Sydney have been contacting us through our website, where they can register and we send them details of online stockists."

The firm's Australian-made collection is now sold in around 20 stores nationwide, compared to just two this time last year. Assisting this significant increase has been participation in Fashion Exposed, the Organic Trade Expo in Melbourne and Green Expo in Brisbane, as well as a listing on the Green Pages.



Donovan says Pure Pod offers a better alternative to many clothing selections on the market.

## Reducing the footprint

Several steps have been introduced at Pure Pod to ensure it is adopting an environmentally responsible attitude throughout its business.

Founder Kelli Donovan said the entire business has moved into Mullumbimby to reduce the need for transport. She walks or rides her bike to work.

"We recycle as much as we can including paper and plastic, while fabric scraps go to a mattress manufacturer," she says.

Fabric offcuts are also used to produce other items, while electricity use is limited by rarely turning on the air conditioner, choosing energy conserving light globes and adopting green power sources.

Any printing is completed on recycled or partly recycled paper and digital printing is used.

"We try to recycle as much as we can to look at ways to reduce wastage in our studio," she says.

The firm is also in the process of applying to carry the 'No Sweat Shop' label

"We don't push ourselves as organic but we are a sustainable brand," she says.



Kelli Donovan