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BOLD MOVES

From cruise lines to fashion designs, the transition was smooth when this mother/entrepreneur jumped ship.

"I wrote myself out of the script," laughs Allison Haworth-West of her decision to move from a successful career in the family cruise-line business and launch her own venture, Kuki Kids. "I think I've always been a frustrated designer. I've always had the desire to be creative," she says by way of explanation.

That may be, but not many people would take the leap from the familiar world of tourism to the fraught environment of high fashion (albeit for kids) quite so lightly. However, you get the feeling that Allison is someone who takes life on, head first. "I had an idea in my mind about what I wanted to do and that was basically to use bold fabrics that you wouldn't normally see on kids' clothes – and make kids' clothes with them!" The tagline for her line, Kuki Kids is "Loud and proud", and it certainly sums up the design ethos of the brand, which has become known for its graphic prints and simple lines.

"I've been fortunate to have a product that has really resonated with people because it's a bit unique, because it's high quality and not mass market. People who like it, really like it and that has driven the business," she explains. Since starting Kuki Kids in 2006, Allison has seen sales jump by leaps and bounds, and her designs can now be found in stores across Hong Kong, Australia and New Zealand, the US and Canada, and one of her biggest

markets, Japan, where customers can't get enough of the sixties-inspired prints.

"One of my high points with Kuki was when I received my first order from Japan for 13,500 garments," Allison says. "Ironically, it came just as I was being wheeled into hospital to have my second child!" Talk about balancing work and motherhood is met with a shrug. "The fact is, having started the business with young children, my time has been limited and I haven't pushed the business as I might have otherwise done. Instead, I've rather followed where it's led me – and that's been great."

"I'm sure I would not have done Kuki Kids if I had not had children," Allison admits, "but I would have done something." Business is in her blood. Her parents started a boutique cruise line in Sydney Harbour, which has since grown to offer cruises throughout Australia and Fiji, and Allison enjoyed her demanding role with the company as Executive Director. "Having my business background has been extremely useful because it has made me think about things in a commercial way. Although Kuki is a fun thing to do and I do what I like with it, I also listen very carefully to my customers and what they are asking for."

Few mothers find the challenge of balancing their home and working life easy or guilt-free. Allison is no exception. "As

a mother, it's always difficult to balance work and business. Working for myself means I can always be working. There's no clocking off! Fortunately, my kids are pretty good at dragging me away from the computer.

"The upside of running my own business is that I can make my own decisions about how I do it. While my kids are small, I want to control the business, I don't want the business to control me," she stresses. "However, as my kids grow up, I see more opportunities to allow Kuki Kids to grow as well."

These days, she works as and when she can – "when my son's asleep or my daughter's in school". Having help in Hong Kong is invaluable, of course. "When things are really hectic and I need a day to get a lot done, I'll ask my helper to take my daughter to school and my son to his activities so I can focus. That's one of the great things about living in Hong Kong! In some ways starting a business in Hong Kong has been easy. It's a world of opportunity because so many things are easy to do here, setting up the business, having access to manufacturers and so on. In other ways, it's been difficult, because of the language barrier and finding things are done differently here."

Certainly the shift from working in the international family business with a staff of 500 at her disposal has been an adjustment for Allison, who admits she has purposely kept things "skinny and streamlined" at Kuki Kids. "This is my own business and I don't have to answer to anyone. I can do what I want and that's good." She still runs the business from her family home and has a small support staff to keep her overheads low.

"The best thing about having Kuki Kids is the flexibility. It's a wonderful creative outlet for me and I love the ability to be spontaneous, to come up with new ideas – and just do things. Right now, for example, we're looking at a collaboration with another design company in Hong Kong to do wall art for kids."

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The immediate future will see Allison launch her latest collection of jersey and cotton pieces for kids up to the age of six. For the first time all the fabric in the range will have been

designed by Allison herself – "a big undertaking", as she puts it. She's also launching a new range of boys' and girls' pyjamas, which will hit stores in October. "Now is the time to invest more in Kuki," she muses, "to keep the business growing – loud and proud!"



THE SCOOP . . .

My proudest parenting moment was . . .

Skating with my 4-year-old daughter from the top of Blackcomb Mountain to the bottom on Christmas Day. Having been a ski instructor at one time in my life, it was a real high point!

An activity I don't love but I do anyway because my child loves it so much . . .

Listening to endless repeats of their favourite music CDs. I guess I only have myself to blame – I have tried to encourage them to love music!

I define downtime as . . .

When my kids are happy to amuse themselves and play at home, allowing my husband and I to relax and enjoy reading the paper or a book.

I wish I had more time for . . .

Everything! My family, my business, plus doing everything else I want to do and experience in life . . . the list is endless! There are not enough hours in the day!

Bedtime is always smoother when . . .

We get started early and when we have not been to a birthday party in the afternoon and filled up with sugar! My kids love to read books, so the more of them that we get in the better!

My meltdown-prevention tactic is . . .

Talking to the kids in advance and explaining why we are doing or not doing something, and the reasoning behind it. Prevention is better than cure – but when meltdown happens I try to react as calmly as possible. Being consistent and sticking to the rules is always important. On the other hand – if all else fails – I try a diversion!