

REBEL WITH A CAUSE: HOW AUDETTE EXEL IS BRIDGING WORLDS

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Passion, grit and gratitude: Inside the non-conformist double life of the Adara Group's founder and fearless leader.



Though she'll squirm at the comparison, Audette Exel is something of a rock star in Australian philanthropy.

Armed with the rare ability to electrify audiences, she marches unapologetically to the beat of her own drum, yet her physical presence isn't necessary to induce awe. Drop her name into a conversation and watch the energy levels in the room heighten as people light up and start searching for superlatives. Her keynote presentations routinely set Twitter abuzz.

A key member of philanthropy's New-Gen movement recently described Exel as "off the charts awesome." Others cite her honesty and humanity, her boldness and willingness to take a risk as inspiring. (Indeed, Exel's keen sense of adventure has seen her bike across Europe, plummet from a plane almost 1000 times as an accomplished skydiver, and dance in Berlin as the Wall came down).

Despite the standing ovations from adoring fans and the accolades (of which she has racked up many), Exel has neither the time nor inclination for artifice or ego. In keeping with her famous generosity of spirit, the light she radiates illuminates those around her rather than casting them in shadow. Somehow, she reduces the distance between people.

In July this year, Exel was the only Australian woman to be named a '**Hero of Philanthropy**' by Forbes, yet when I point out the buzz that surrounds her name, she laughs good naturedly but will have none of it.

"Isn't it interesting that being authentic is considered extraordinary," she says. "As if being a nice, normal human is exceptional! I have an unbelievably lucky life. I do work that I feel passionate about – if you have that, the passion bursts out of you."

Game changer

Crediting her father with teaching her how to think and her mother with teaching her how to give, young Audette spent plenty of time at protest rallies in pursuit of social justice. After leaving her native New Zealand, she finished a law degree at the University of Melbourne and established herself as a specialist in mergers and acquisitions, earning a reputation as a fearsome negotiator.



At age 30, Exel was Managing Director of Bermuda Commercial Bank, and later chaired the Bermuda Stock Exchange. The World Economic Forum named her a **Global Leader of Tomorrow**.

Her billion dollar deals made a lot of money for a lot of people, but by the time she turned 35, Exel knew that for her, it wasn't good enough.

"I grew up knowing that success was not all about making money but being the best person you can be," she says.

"For me, the social activist became the business woman so I could learn to effect social change with multiple tools. The decision to start a self-funded nonprofit was like bringing the split parts of my life back together, making the circle whole again."

Her decision to establish a for-purpose business was met by incredulity not just from her private sector colleagues but from the nonprofit sector too.

"When the ISIS Group and The ISIS Foundation started 17 years ago people thought I was either crazy or lying. They'd say to me 'come on Audette, it's a tax dodge, isn't it?'" she recounts with an uproarious laugh.

"The development community didn't know what to do with us either and pretty much said 'get out of our valley'. We didn't fit any paradigm back then but now the world is awash with these variations."

Modelling greatness

Adamant that the business world is "capable of greatness," Exel champions engagement as the prerequisite for lasting change.

"I believe that to make change you need to engage," she says. "If you don't get down from the hilltops or the moral high ground and engage then you won't effect sustainable change."

Reaching across the divides with an investment banking corporate finance business to advantage the disadvantaged Exel says is a privilege, even if switching between the two can be disorientating.

"It does get a bit weird sometimes going from the street in Uganda to a board room on Wall Street," she concedes. "It occasionally bends my head a little bit."

Never one to shy away from a challenge, Exel focuses her attention on health and education, particularly for women and children, in remote communities in the land-locked nations of Uganda and Nepal where The ISIS Foundation's work has saved thousands of children from human trafficking.

"In very remote settings there's almost guaranteed to be no government services and not as much support from NGOs because per capita it's less bang for your buck," she explains.

"We're not constrained by the same issues as donor-driven groups because the business covers all the core operational costs which means 100 per cent of our donor funds go straight to the projects – our donors love that."

To date, Exel's businesses have contributed \$7.84 million for the development projects while other donors have chipped in a cool \$16.9 million. The separate funding sources also bring a certain level of independence.

"The financial viability of our projects is never threatened by donor-dependent funding which means we can ensure development integrity," Exel says.

"Development work is hard and it's complicated – you can get yourself quite lost in the issues. If you don't approach this work with humility, you're potentially going to do real harm," she cautions.

"If there's only one thing I hope I've learned in 17 years it's humility. The communities we work with are incredible. These people are bloody amazing – I stand in awe.

"How is it in the west we think we know all the answers? I'd put an entrepreneur from these communities right up there with their Wall St counterparts."

Knowing what not to do, Exel insists is just as important as knowing what to do. "As part of our **development philosophy**, we've got a whole list of things we don't do," she says. "We're real contrarians that way. We're weirdos and we're proud of it."

"In everything we do we ask, 'is this best for the kids?', and if the answer's 'no' then we don't do it. It's like the acid test for us – nothing else matters.

"We do huge amounts of continuing research and knowledge sharing though – really honest knowledge sharing, mistakes and all. That's really difficult for NGOS to do if they're hamstrung by their donors."

The pressure for nonprofits to operate with minimal administrative overheads, Exel says, "drives her crazy" because she passionately believes a properly resourced HQ leads to better outcomes for all.

A rose by any other name

When she first heard about the terrorist group operating under the same name, Exel's heart "sank a million miles deep."

"It was just a sense of total disbelief," she says. "The goddess Isis was a great feminine archetype and it's a family name for us, not a brand. So it's quite a big deal to say our family name needs to change."

The process of reaching consensus on the new 'family name', as with all round table family decisions, involved "lots of voting and debate". The winning name was Adara, a reference to one of the brightest stars in the sky.

"It was quite an emotional day for me when we relaunched," Exel says. "It was an ending but also a new beginning. It's important to me that we transfer the energy from ISIS to Adara and that everyone feels like they're on the journey with us."

There are upsides too. "It's going to be very nice to get on a stage and not have to make joke about being the founder of ISIS," she says with another belly laugh.

Looking further ahead, Exel expects big things from philanthropy in the not too distant future. "The whole definition of philanthropy is changing," she says. "It's no longer the domain of wealthy old men who've 'made it' and 'give back'."

"You know, I often talk to the titans of business and sure, they give me a polite hearing, but when I talk to the young crowd – they uplift me, I always get a real kick out of it.

"Their brains are so open, their world view is so much bigger because they've had the internet their whole life and they want to do good in the world. They'll change the planet.

"They have so much enthusiasm that I think traditional philanthropy and private sector engagement is at risk of being left behind."

Shine and smile



"Every life we've been involved with or touched is important to me," Exel says, singling out the first triplets, Martin, Marvin and Mildred, to have survived in Adara's neonatal unit in Uganda as one of countless highlights.

Exel is quick to point out that she hasn't done it alone. "It needs to be clear that I am one of many in this whole journey."

"Gratitude is so important," she continues. "If you feel grateful then you get a joyous world."

"People want to be connected to things, they want to be the best of themselves. If you give them the opportunity to be the best of themselves, they'll step up. People are really bloody nice. If you shine and smile, they shine and smile back.

"I walk into the office every day and think it's a miracle we're still standing! With all the mistakes we've made, the uprisings we've encountered, the lack of planning, the joy and the tears and yet here we are, in our own little way, touching more than 30,000 people a year in poverty.

"I think to myself: my God, what a lucky life!"

Exel might be the most unassuming of rock stars, with no flashy entourage and no diva demands, but Generosity has it on good authority that she does a mean rendition of 'Gangnam Style'.

To learn more about the Adara Group, visit its brand spanking new website [here](#).