

Memoirs of a survivor

By Shirine Saad

Now in her 60s, Diane von Furstenberg is in the throes of a well-deserved renaissance





She dashes in, a lithe, golden body, her sun-kissed mane undulating wildly, her tan highlighted by a hooded, dark blue sweater. She is 64. In her bright penthouse conference room, fuchsia and white orchids bloom by the floor-to-ceiling windows; leopard-print rugs line the floor; zebra skins adorn massive wood chairs; the heavy conference table is scattered with colored pencils, images and books. As for the walls, they are covered with hundreds of artworks: Man Ray lips, a moody Anh Duong self-portrait, a picture of veiled women on a beach by Shirin Neshat.

Diane von Furstenberg sits straight on the edge of the couch, throwing her shoulders back like a ballerina. She puts down her iPad, with its lip-covered screensaver. She holds her thick locks in her hands for a moment, closing her eyes. It's a busy morning, as usual. Then suddenly she perks up again, beaming and talking about her business, her favorite topic. This year her resolution was

to expand in China; she is leaving for the country in a few days. In April, "Diane von Furstenberg: Journey of a Dress," a major exhibition of her work, opened at Pace Beijing after a stop in Moscow, featuring portraits of her by Andy Warhol, Francesco Clemente and Helmut Newton, her dresses and portraits she has commissioned from contemporary Chinese artists like Zhang Huan and Hai Bo.

Almost 40 years after the resounding success of her wrap dress, Von Furstenberg is still a muse and icon. Her brand has survived a series of ups-and-downs and is now sold in over 71 countries. It has grown to a full line of ready-to-wear, swimwear, handbags, footwear, eyewear, luggage, accessories, fine jewelry, watches, homeware and rugs. Von Furstenberg, who emigrated from Belgium to America as a young woman after marrying her first husband, Prince Egon Von Furstenberg, is now the president of the Council of Fashion Designers of America.



She heads her private company, which has been growing every year since it was re-launched in 2003, and employs 155 people in the Meatpacking District headquarters she bought and redesigned in 2005 with New York architecture firm Work ac.

Von Furstenberg has always been a fighter. When her mother became pregnant with her, she was under strict medical orders not to carry children – she weighed a mere 29 kilos after the horrors of the Holocaust. “I was born so close to the war,” says Von Furstenberg. “My mother was not supposed to survive the Holocaust. My birth was already a miracle.” The young Diane Halfin grew up to be fearless and stubborn. “My mother never allowed me to be scared,” she says. “If I was afraid of the dark, she’d put me in a dark closet all night.” From an early age, she had strong career ambitions. “I always knew the woman I wanted to be,” she says. “I wanted be independent and make my own money.”

She got her first break shortly after moving to New York with her first husband, at the office of Diana Vreeland, the legendary and eccentric editor of *Vogue*. Soon the



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wrap dress was launched; by 1975 the company was selling about 15,000 colorful, whimsically printed dresses every week. The DVF empire quickly expanded to licenses: luggage, accessories and home design brands started bearing her name. The designer's two perfumes and eponymous beauty line were equally successful. Von Furstenberg became a celebrity overnight, and in 1976 she graced the cover of *Newsweek*, which dubbed her "The most marketable woman in fashion since Coco Chanel."

Alas, her marriage, despite its glamorous aura, was not as triumphant, and the young couple divorced just a few years after having their second child. Years later, in a turning point in her life and career, Von Furstenberg was diagnosed with cancer, faced staggering financial issues and ultimately lost her brand. Resilient as ever, she re-launched her brand 12 years ago, after noticing that young women, including her daughter Tatiana, were hunting for wrap dresses in vintage stores.

Yes, she has a lot of courage, but most of all, what drove this intrepid entrepreneur throughout the years is her love of women. "My mission in life is to empower women," she says. "I have never stopped admiring women, I never met a woman who wasn't strong. We give life, and today the only solution for peace is to let women speak."

