



Well versed

Writer Kelly Van Nelson says it's important to strive to be "the best version" of yourself

Story by Rosamund Burton

To be the Australian managing director of Adecco, one of the world's largest recruitment agencies, while also a successful poet and author is a phenomenal accomplishment... but Kelly Van Nelson is an extraordinary woman.

She grew up on a council estate in one of the most impoverished parts of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne in the UK. Her sister and she were raised by a mother who worked three jobs, and having separated from their father aged 19, remarried three more times.

"It was challenging," Kelly says in her Geordie accent. Sitting in a high back armchair, with her black spoodle Benny beside her, at her home in Elanora Heights, she describes arguments

between her parents every time her father came to collect his daughters, until he moved overseas when Kelly was eight years old. She didn't see him again for 10 years, and he died when she was in her early 20s.

But the arguments continued at home, both between Kelly and her mother, who she recounts, did not see eye to eye, and also between her mother and her stepfathers.

"I was always trying to block those out, so I would create a tent under the duvet and lose myself in books from a very young age. I was a huge reader."

The family moved and Kelly started at a new high school, where she was bullied relentlessly by a group of girls.

"So, it was troublesome at home and

worse at school. I kept my head down and studied, and I did well at school. Luckily, I had a couple of very close friends."

She left school aged 16, having not completed A-levels, had several casual jobs, before landing a full-time position as a secretary in an auction house.

"I felt good about myself, and realised I could achieve something other than what was being dished out, so I gave it everything I had." By the time she was 18 she had saved £90. She bought a one-way bus ticket to London.

Having worked in a hotel, while attending a computer studies course at night school, she landed a position doing secretarial work for an IT recruitment company. On the eve of her 19th birthday she met Shaun, a South

African backpacker, who she describes as her “soul mate”, and they married on a beach in Cape Town a year later.

The young couple lived near Edinburgh for a decade, and Kelly built up her career working for the IT and recruitment arms of Eurolink, becoming the regional director for Northern England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. But at the end of 2007 she decided to take a break from the corporate world, and Shaun and she moved back to South Africa with their young son, Kayin, and daughter, Imani.

Kelly tells me that she is very close to her South African in-laws. However, through her choice she has been

estranged from her mother for over a decade, despite being very close to her sister.

For three years the couple lived in a house in Cape Agulhas overlooking the lighthouse on the southern tip of Africa and opened a restaurant there.

“I’ve got a love/hate relationship with South Africa,” she says. “It’s beautiful and vibrant and Africa gets under your skin, but it’s also turbulent, political and violent.” It didn’t feel the right place to raise their children, so they decided to sell up and leave, and were planning on returning to the UK, when a career opportunity came up for Kelly in Western Australia.

Several years later she took a job with Adecco. As always Kelly worked hard, and took every opportunity, and quickly moved up the ranks. Just over two years ago, her family and she moved to Mona Vale when she was given the Managing Director role in Adecco Australia, overseeing 15 offices nationally as well as a team in the Philippines.

Shaun and Kelly bought their house in Elanora Heights six months ago, but Shaun still has a fly-in fly-out job as an emergency response officer at a natural gas plant in regional WA. With the COVID-19 border restrictions he’s done

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CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE: Kelly Van Nelson at home in her garden at Elanora Heights; her Roar award for Best Book; with her second book of poems *Punch & Judy*; visiting Zimbabwe aged 18 (in favourite Newcastle United strip); with Shaun on their wedding day in Cape Town in 1997; the couple with children Kayin and Imani visiting Scotland; the young family in London; and the jacket to her first poetry collection, *Graffiti Lane*.



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five rounds of hotel quarantine, is only home for two weeks in every eight, and for four months last year was unable to come home at all.

"It's like being a single mum most of the time," says Kelly, "and it's definitely taking its toll."

Alongside this dazzlingly successful corporate career she writes her hard-hitting poems, short stories and novels. She has been writing since her late teens, had her first poem published in her 20s, and in 2019 her anthology of poetry, *Graffiti Lane*, came out. The gritty, raw poems are about bullying both at school and also in the corporate space, domestic violence, mental health issues, and also about resilience.

"It got 100,000 followers on social media," she tells me, matter-of-factly, and became an Amazon UK and Australia bestseller. Copies were also given to the Australian Gold Logie Award nominees, and to the 2020 Oscar winners and nominees.

Last year her second book of poems, *Punch and Judy*, was published.

"The theme of this one started with turbulent love and modern love, problematic love as well, because love is never really perfect, and it evolved into domestic violence. [It's] taken from

the idea of the puppet show about being controlled and cutting through the strings and breaking free."

Like the first book, it is hard-hitting and I can't help wondering if she has been a victim of domestic violence.

"My husband is so good and kind, and has the utmost respect in our relationship, but it stems from living in a home where there were three stepdads, always arguments, always things getting smashed, and someone waking up black and blue. It was problematic, so I write about a place of healing for my own self," she says, explaining the huge impact domestic violence has on children.

Kelly admits that she spent many years in denial of her background and trying to escape it, but recently her thinking has changed.

"It's the platform I have. I always say my superpower is willpower, and it comes from this childhood in a neglectful, loveless home." It's because of her upbringing, she believes, that she has such strong resilience.

In her corporate role, she coaches women on leadership and youths on how to enter the work force, and remain relevant by always upskilling.

"I coach a lot on becoming the best version of yourself. I could have gone

lots of ways. I could have gone down the gutter, but it's the choices you make."

Kelly has taken full advantage of the COVID era and embraced a whole new online audience. Her son, Kayin, now 17, is an aspiring film director, and has been turning her poems into short films - combining dynamic visuals and her spoken words.

In 2020, she was a finalist for the Telstra Business Women's Awards, and for the CEO Magazine Managing Director of the Year Award. And 2021 sees the publication of her first novel, *The Pinstripe Prisoner*, set in a South African jail and the Scottish IT world.

Kelly says she loves living on the Northern Beaches surrounded by bush and overlooking Narrabeen Lagoon. She's become a great walker, and it's when she's striding along in the early morning that a few lines of a poem will come to her. But her favourite time to write is the evening.

"I love writing before I go to bed about something I've seen, or that's happened that day, or whatever's on my mind. I find it really soothing, and a huge stress release from the corporate day job."

Kelly Van Nelson lives and breathes the power of possibility; she's a truly a creative and dynamic highflyer.

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