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**Bring it On: Keran Wicks**

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## BRING IT ON: KERAN WICKS

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That's alright, that's okay, you're going to pump our gas some day. That's alright, that's okay, you're going to pump our gas some day...

If you're a movie buff then you would know that this rather spirited chant is from cult cheerleading flick, Bring It On. Used as a 'smackdown' to the opposing cheerleading squad on game day, it seems to suggest that by 'pumping gas' – or petrol as we Aussies know it – your life is headed swiftly down the proverbial toilet.

Yet nothing could be further from the truth where Keran Wicks is concerned. While you may not know her by name, chances are you've visited one of her many stores. And when we say 'many', we mean hundreds. Keran is Managing Director of The Network Group, parent company to hundreds of Network Video member shops and Done Dirt Cheap DVD. Leaving school and moving out of home at the tender age of 13 – no, that's not a typo – take a guess at Keran's very first job. That's right, for two years, she pumped petrol.

Far from being an unsuccessful high school dropout, Keran would go on to become the world's only female rental group owner, as well as the driving force behind the Australian Video Rental Retailers Association (AVRRA) taking entertainment giant, Warner Bros., to court. (By the way, Keran's team won.)

### You left school at 13...

I did, I was really bad at it. I really sucked at it. And it's only much later in life that I've been able to think about that because people are amazed by it. As I've gotten older, I've realised I'm just the sort of person who learns by doing things. I have to do things myself.

School in those days was extremely structured and you sat and learned your tables... to this day I don't know my times tables. Seriously, if it weren't for calculators, I'd be screwed. It just didn't suit the way I learn. It's very different these days, they teach to the individual child and it's all much more of a holistic environment. But back in those days it was very strict, and very structured and I just didn't fit.

**So you got your first job?**

I left and started pumping petrol for a living – I got a job at a service station. I thought, I've just got to get out and start earning some money and living life. I was there two years and, as much as I loved it, I'd had enough of smelling like a petrol station. And I did really like it. Those were the days when you used to pull into a service station and people would check your oil and water, wash your windscreen... Working at a driveway, you were talking to people all the time and I loved doing that. That's what I do: I'm a sales person.

**What was your next career move?**

In 1975, I applied for a job at the then grooviest shop in Melbourne, the 'in' shop in Bourke Street and was surprised when I got it and started selling suits. They were all the rage in those days, pinstripe suits. Everybody wore pinstripe suits and I became their best sales girl in three to four months. I stayed there for a couple of years, then I moved and got a job managing a Garfunkle boutique in Moonee Ponds for five years.

When I started with them, they had Moonee Ponds and Footscray. When I left, they had eight stores and I was managing all of them, as well as doing a lot of the buying and working with the owners on design and fabric selection. I lied to them to get the job. I told them I was 20, so I had to have a 21st when I was 17. When I did turn 21, I actually had to go and confess to them. The bosses were fantastic, they were great. They both looked at me and said, 'You mean, you've been bossing us around since you were 16?' And I said, 'Yeah, pretty much...'

**Did you grow up in Melbourne?**

I was born in Sydney and moved to Melbourne with my Mum and stepfather when I was 8. Then I left home at 13, left school and moved to Richmond. I had a gorgeous one-bedroom place in Richmond, which was the size of a dog box. I was always just older than my age. I remember at my first job – the job at the service station – that I was getting paid \$40 a week and my rent was \$27 a week. When I moved out of home, I had a mattress, a cup and a teaspoon – and my first purchase had to be a record player. I didn't care about furniture in those days, I had to have a record player.

*"I lied to them to get the job... I had to have a 21st when I was 17."*

**What did you want to do when you 'grew up'?**

I didn't have any idea, no clue, none, about what I wanted to do. It was very different to today – there's a lot of pressure on kids these days to decide what they want to do for the rest of their lives by the time they are 12, 13, 14 because they need to build it into their studies. I think it's too much pressure for kids. But I never had any clue of what I wanted to do. And, in those days, if you were a woman, your choices were limited: if you wanted to work, you were a hairdresser, a secretary or a nurse. Sometimes a teacher, but you had to keep going to school for that. If you wanted to leave school at what we now call Year 10, your options were apprentice hairdresser, secretary or a nurse. And none of those were for me. At all.

**In 1983, you got fired when you were pregnant and sued them for unfair dismissal...**

The equal opportunity board had just been established and they wanted to take on the case. But, of course, it was settled and I was paid some 'princely' sum of maybe three weeks wages, which today would be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.

**Then what?**

I was three months pregnant, out of work and couldn't get a job. In those days, being pregnant? Forget it. No one was going to give you a job because you were going to leave. Most women stayed at home in those days as well. 'Those days'... it sounds like a hundred years ago, doesn't it? But it was very different to today. Women stayed home for a couple of years when they had babies and I couldn't do that, I had to work.

So I got a job in a video library. The industry had just started and I got a job working part time, renting movies, standing behind the counter. I worked there until I had my son and after he was born, I still had to keep working. I couldn't not work. So I went back part time a couple of days a week and I thought, there's a better way to do this. Maybe there's an opportunity to sell movies to other stores. Movies were about \$100 each when they first came out on VHS tape, and video libraries were opening everywhere so I said to the owners, 'I think I can sell these for you, they're not renting anymore'. I threw them in the back of the car and drove to another store and sold them. I bought some more and sold them. I bought some more and sold them... this business just grew organically.

### **You were soon one of the largest wholesalers in Australia?**

Yes, within two years, I was one of the largest wholesalers in Australia and set up a warehouse. I had a couple of people working for me because I just couldn't keep up with demand. So that's how the business was born. Video shops were opening everywhere in those days. I opened a lot of stores – supplying all the stock. We were setting up probably a library a week.

I didn't set out to build a business of this size. It was organic... now there's an opportunity for this, now there's an opportunity for this... nineteen years later I look back and think, how did that all happen?

### **Tell us about one of your milestones...**

We developed a marketing campaign called 'Videology' and it was the first time anywhere in the world that a rental business had actually not used product to drive the business. This marketing campaign was about the people, it was about everyone in our stores being 'videologists': experts in entertainment. It was the first time worldwide – which I didn't know at the time – that any group had gone off the well-worn track of product marketing, every month just talking about the new movies that came out.

*"I don't believe in balance. I think balance is bullshit".*

The Marketing Director at 20th Century Fox Studios in LA asked me to present it at their worldwide rental conference, which I did. I got up and presented and it was translated into eight languages – they had the whole worldwide rental business in the room so everything was translated into eight different languages just like the UN. 150 people in the room all on headsets. Public speaking doesn't worry me at all but I was very nervous beforehand and I did throw up. That was in 2000. I was the only woman there, apart from a couple of women who worked at rental businesses around the world, but I was the only one who owned a rental group in the world.

### **There was another significant event – taking Warner Bros. studios to court over two tier DVD pricing...**

Yes, the Australian Video Retailers Association (AVRA) did, of which I was a board member at the time, and I suppose I ran the legal side of that. It was very ballsy for AVRA to take it on, particularly ballsy because the two largest groups – Blockbuster and Video Ezy – would have nothing to do with the case. We had great lawyers who were fantastic and always had extreme faith in the case, as did we. Warner's certainly never expected us to win, didn't expect us to take it on.

We turned up at court the first day and they had 24 lawyers. Seriously, they just had like this football team of lawyers with trolley after trolley of files. And we walked in and there were four of us – our two lawyers and two or three of us. I said, 'Where's our trolley?' And they said, Keran, we don't have enough files for a trolley. I was like, 'Get a f\*\*\*\*n' trolley! I don't care if you put empty boxes in it, get a trolley!' So the next day we turned up with a trolley with hardly anything on it but we had a trolley! Looks count. Image is important. So we sat through a week of trial and it was just horrendous but it was fantastic the day [the verdict] was handed down. Just great.

### **So what's been your biggest challenge?**

The business has had year on year growth for the whole time it's been going. So managing growth is unbelievably difficult... but it's a great problem to have. I'd certainly rather manage growth than decline but managing growth ongoing and staying on top of changes – making sure you always have as much information as you can to make informed decisions – is challenging. Particularly with this industry, there's so much technological change. There are 35,000 products available at any given time. It's unlike a business where you're selling widgets, the same thousand widgets every month – month in, month out. We're doing 500 new products every month. So keeping on top of technological changes in the last 15 years has been a challenge.

### **What's next then...**

It's an interesting time in the entertainment business. You, like everybody else, would have heard about the 'end of rental'. That video stores are closing at a rate of knots and it's the end of the world for us all. You know, it's not the case. 37 million DVDs are rented every month still, so it's still a very large business. This great entertainment 'nirvana' you keep hearing about – where you push a button and get anything delivered into your lounge room – is a very, very long way away still. So your local rental store will still be the best form of entertainment for years to come.

As I said before, we've always stayed on top of technology and always will. As soon as any of those other businesses become viable, we'll be involved in them. That will be our next evolution: the digital business however that starts to take shape. We certainly won't be the first ones because, traditionally, the first five or ten businesses that do anything go bust so it won't be us. We're quite a bit smarter than that. But we certainly stay on top of what you want as a consumer.

With the rise and rise of technology, we moved into online DVD sales with our online business, **[doneditcheap.com.au](http://doneditcheap.com.au)**. That's been huge – massive growth. We're still experiencing 300% year on year growth so it's doing very, very, very well.

### **After all these years, do you have an exit strategy?**

I think if I had an exit strategy, I'd have to leave. I certainly make sure I have very subtle succession plans in here – but not for myself – for ongoing continuity of the business with staff to make sure that everybody under managers are learning and being mentored in the same way as managers have been. So it's not so much a succession thing as ongoing training and mentoring. So no exit strategy for me. I'm still enjoying it and what would I do? I don't want to sail around the world. Honestly, I think I'd get bored. I've been working since I was 13 and working 40, 50, 60 hours a week for a long time and I've done that because I've enjoyed it. I am a workaholic, I know that, but I get a great deal of pleasure out of what I do.

### **Is there anything you'd like to add?**

I often get asked, how do you find balance in your life? I don't believe in balance. I think balance is bullshit. There's no such thing as balance. If I read one more of those articles [about work/life balance], I'm going to throw up because it just makes me feel incompetent. I read about these people who achieve balance and I think, clearly I'm just an abject failure. I can't do it. I honestly believe there's just compromise – right now there's an opportunity to do this and home has to suffer. And then my kids are calling me 'Aunty Mummy' so I better stay home some more... it's a matter of compromise across every area as situations arise. I don't believe there's any such thing as balance. I think the notion of balance makes

you think once you achieve it, you'll be happy everywhere and there's this nirvana.

I've set up a business that I'm really happy coming to every day and working nine, ten hours a day, and I like the people I work with. You want to enjoy what you do and I still enjoy what I do, 25 years later.

### About Keran Wicks

Lives: Brunswick

Children: Two sons

Employees: 50-Odd

Industry: Entertainment

Position: Managing Director

Established: 1993

Associations: AVRRA (Formerly AVRA)

Favourite Movies: 9 1/2 Weeks, Dead Poets' Society, A Beautiful Mind

Best think to eat while watching: Cadbury's Dairy Milk - The most underrated chocolate in the world

Visit [Keran Wicks](#)

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### JENNIFER KIELY

Jennifer Kiely is Editor, Co-Publisher and Co-Founder of Samara Magazine. A professional writer since 2000, Jen's first copywriting job was at age 18 for fashion retailer Jeans West.

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