

Inspirational women

FASHION ISN'T FRIVOLOUS IT'S ABOUT CONFIDENCE

From teaching and tailoring to campaigning for equality and advising the Government, Maggie Semple tells Victoria Young what drives her

MAGGIE lives in London with her music producer husband. In 2001, she was awarded an OBE for her services to education in the UK.

I've had a fairly eclectic career, but everything I've done has a common thread: I don't sign up to anything I'm not passionate about and don't believe in. I've always done more than just my day job and I don't necessarily do things for payment. I do things for the good, and everything I do is about improving society and people. Along the way, I've always tried to help people, particularly women. And women in particular have been very helpful back to me.

My father was born in British Guiana, which was part of the British Empire in South America. One good thing to come from colonialism was education, so he went to university and became an engineer, then came to London where my younger sister and I were born.

In the sixties there were very few black girls living in North London. We had our own house and went to school, but there was an assumption that we were underprivileged because we were black. My dad definitely met with discrimination. I probably did too, but I didn't know what it was at age eight.

But as I grew up I became more aware. I was shocked to realise there were parts of the world, like South Africa, that didn't like me just because of the colour of my skin. I'd ask my father how that could possibly be. He always said, "You'll do well nonetheless, and you will be whatever you want to be."

My father played saxophone and my mother sewed all of our clothes. It was a fun childhood – and we were impeccably dressed, which planted a seed in my mind of the importance and power of clothes. Knowing that my clothes fitted me, and suited me, made me confident about the way I looked.

I was quite an organised child. I had inklings that I wanted to be a teacher when I was fairly young. I worked at two secondary schools in London and loved teaching, but knew there'd be more to my life. I began giving talks to other teachers about how I taught. After ten years of teaching, I moved to the Arts Council as director of education.

Maggie wearing one of her own designs

I'm a great believer in putting something "out there". By saying something out loud, you put it out into the ether and it will somehow come back. The thing I kept on saying was, "I can do more than this." But when I received a call inviting me to be part of a team of 20 advising government about the National Curriculum, I thought it was a prank!

Being asked to get involved was the beginning of a new direction for me. I went on to participate in several other task groups, including one helping people to access further education, which was very satisfying.

I saw a job advertisement for lay non-executive directors for HM Court Service, which later became HM Courts and Tribunals Service. I applied and after an interview I became a board member. Then I applied to become a civil service commissioner, which governed the recruitment of senior civil servants. There were 12 of us, a diverse mix, and we were part of the process to modernise recruitment in the civil service, which very much used to be "jobs for the boys". It's a work in progress, and it's still changing, although not fast enough for my liking.

My work is all about equality. I set up a management consultancy business in 2004, helping big businesses and organisations, such as BP and HSBC, to be better at what they do. People at the top often tend to be white men of a certain age. So I work a lot around how

to engage men to be the change makers and to create a diverse workplace.

My latest lay appointment is a panel member of the Queen's Counsel Selection Panel. You can't change the QC community overnight, so you change the people in it. I use charm, but I'm an iron fist in a velvet glove. I smile a lot but don't be fooled by the smile!

Fashion is often seen as a frivolity but it's important. Having grown up wearing handmade clothes, I knew how they helped me feel confident. Twenty five years ago, I started having dresses made by a woman called Hilla in an Italian atelier. Yes, having clothes made is expensive, but it's an investment and they will last a lifetime. Hilla has been making my clothes ever since.

Simple was originally a networking group for women to share stories about their clothes. It was inspired by a talk I did about a beloved dress that I bought at M&S in 1985, which was so well worn it told a hundred stories. We held networking events about clothes and, two years ago, we started making dresses. I wanted to create a classic, comfortable dress for women like me, who work in corporate organisations and want to look the part, and be confident enough to get on with their job.

We offer a very personal service. Women come in for a consultation and curate the style of their dress, including sleeve and hem length, fabric and colour. Then we make the dresses at

our atelier in Covent Garden. One dress costs £485; we have 120 clients and some are on their 15th dress.

A good dress is the one where people tell you that you look fantastic. But that doesn't happen until you feel fantastic inside. Some women describe putting my dresses on as putting their armour on – one less thing to have to worry about in difficult meetings. And if you have an army of women wearing clothes they feel good in, they are more likely to be confident and to speak up in a board meeting or a presentation because they don't feel invisible.

Taking care of myself is important. I go to boot camp twice a week. I don't eat meat or drink alcohol because I don't like the taste. I hate cooking but luckily my husband loves it so we have the fine dining experience at home every night!

I'm busy, but I make time for friends. I've only got a few close friends but they are really important. We meet for coffee and talk about our businesses and relationships, and are each other's sounding boards. We're supportive of each other and celebrate who we are.

Visit maggie-semple.com



MY TIPS TO MAKE CHANGE HAPPEN

+ DISCOVER YOUR PASSIONS If you are stuck in a rut and aren't sure what you like or want to do, think about what makes you happy. When you talk about a hobby, plan or dream, what makes you smile and your eyes light up?

Find what really motivates you: remind yourself that money is only one aspect of life. Look for volunteering opportunities where you can use your passions and hidden talents for the good of your community.

+ BRANCH OUT Everyone has transferable skills; it's just a question of identifying them and matching them to opportunities. So if you love bringing neighbours together to work on a community issue, consider volunteering to

chair a local council or board. Draw a mind map with you at the centre and jot down all your skills. Then look for networking meetings, or consider hosting or speaking at local meetings on a topic you have views on.

+ TAP INTO HIDDEN TALENTS You may not know about your hidden talents, but your friends will. So ask them! They might say how good you are at explaining things to others, or putting people at ease in social situations, or inspiring others and giving them confidence to do things. Once you have a list, consciously find occasions where you can turn your hidden talents into visible ones. For example, become a mentor to someone very different from you. **w&h**