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Donna's "Urban Zen": Her Vision for Well-being

By Marc Karimzadeh

NEW YORK — Donna Karan, philanthropist.

That's how the designer would like to be remembered one day, so for the last three months, Karan has channeled much of her time and energy into realizing one of her longtime dreams — the creation of the Urban Zen initiative. The program aims to raise awareness and funds for some of Karan's lifelong passions, including wellness, from patient advocacy to marrying Western medicine with alternative healing methods; preserving cultures, particularly in Africa, and empowering children.

"I have always dressed people; now, I want to address them," Karan said, offering one of her typical Donna-isms over a cup of licorice tea at her Central Park West home last week. "I want to address their needs. That's what I feel I have been given a gift to do."

With Urban Zen, which kicks off with a 10-day well-being event of panel discussions and yoga sessions at the Stephan Weiss Studio next month, Karan turns philanthropy into a major personal focus, which she hopes will one day shape her legacy. Pinching the fabric of her black top, she said, "I couldn't just address this. I want people to think that I care about touching people's lives and, hopefully, make a difference and inspire people. That's it. My family is the most important thing to me. I want to make a better place for my children and grandchildren. I don't want them to have to go through some of the things I see my friends go through. The clothes are just clothes, and they are also important because they make you feel good."

These may be unexpected words from a designer who has had a major impact on American sportswear with her system of dressing and her seven easy pieces, and made her fortune in fashion, but Karan is known for letting her instincts guide her. And those who know her have said she is as passionate about launching Urban Zen as she was about starting her own company in 1984.

Talking about Urban Zen, Karan becomes animated and eloquent on such issues as health care, patient advocacy and the importance of incorporating yoga and other holistic practices into American medical institutions. She hopes Urban Zen will be the launching pad for pilot programs in hospitals of organic nutrition, restorative yoga and healing rooms offering alternative therapies.

Karan's experience of the tribulations of her late husband, Stephan Weiss, and friend Lynn Kohlman have underscored what she felt was missing from the medical system, and she is now making a serious commitment to put that message out there with hopes for change.

"I do not have all the answers," she said. "In fact, I don't have 80 percent. I have an idea here and an idea there. But if you bring the right bunch of people together, we will come up with conclusions. And at least we get the dialogue going on every different level. I want to make it clear that we are a vehicle for communication and consciousness. We are not a foundation. The money does not come to us. It will be distributed to the foundations that really will make a difference."

They include the Continuum Center for Health and Healing at Beth Israel Medical Center, the Bravewell Collaborative, Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center and Friends in Need.

Karan certainly has the financial wherewithal to realize her dreams, and she has the Rolodex to bring in some of the world's top conventional and alternative doctors, yogis, nurses, spiritual teachers and high-profile patients for workshops on integrative medicine and patient care.

Urban Zen is separate from Donna Karan International and its parent, LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton, though the designer said LVMH had been supportive and was backing her passion. And Karan insisted she had no intention of using Urban Zen as an exit strategy from her namesake fashion house.

"This has always been a passion of mine, and the company is a passion of mine," she said. "I don't think I will ever leave. That's my name. However, it evolves; that is, a name. It's a place that I care about, that I love. I love designing. I can't help it. I will always be there."

Karan's first Urban Zen foray will be a well-being forum from May 14 to 24 called The Path — which stands for Patient Awareness Toward Healing — and she has been busy picking up the phone and dialing some of her high-powered friends to drum up the panelists. They include professor Robert Thurman; actress and cancer survivor Karen Duffy; Lou Reed; Diane von Furstenberg; Michael J. Fox; Christy Turlington, and Ingrid Sischy, Interview magazine's editor in chief, as well as medical leaders such as Woodson Merrell, M.D., director of the Continuum Center for Health and Healing at Beth Israel; Frank Lipman, M.D., founder and director of the Eleven Eleven Wellness Center, and renowned yoga teachers Rodney Yee and Colleen Saidman Yee.

Each day will offer a mix of yoga training sessions, with an aim to transform yoga teachers into patient advocates in hospitals, so that they can teach restorative yoga postures, yogic breathing and meditation techniques to patients, as well as tai chi, qui gong and Zen meditations. In one session, Reed is scheduled to accompany tai chi master Ren Guang-Yi in teaching the discipline. "My hopes are up for Donna Karan's wellness goals," Reed said. "The incredible energy and spirit of Donna Karan can only help us in the quest for wellness through tai chi, body work and other health-oriented endeavors."

Daily panel discussions will home in on such themes as integrative medicine, caring for the patient, nurses and the healing touch, embracing a new way of thinking for physicians, yoga for health and quality of life, Eastern medicine, wisdoms of traditions and death and dying, and Zen meditation. The final day will be devoted to women's needs, as patients and advocates.

Lunch will be prepared by Living Foods chef Jill Pettijohn and the evening will end with a communal yoga session.

"The alternative world of medicine can exist," Karan said. "This is not any woo-woo talk anymore. Breathing, meditation, song, dance is all part of the healing process. I keep on saying it's not either-or, it's and. It's inclusive, not exclusive."

Karan hopes the program will attract an audience of "donors, people who care, doctors in the administrative world today and nurses. We are reaching out to those people who technically touch the patients, and also the patients, their loved ones."

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Donna Karan

She will also establish a 1,500-square-foot Urban Zen store next to her studio that will be open for the duration of the event and will sell a mix of specially designed Urban Zen clothes, art objects and books devoted to health and healing; profits will go to the initiative. "We figured we can have 6,000 [people] in 10 days getting through the shop, so we better have enough product," Karan said.

If all this sounds like Karan is going on another journey — the kind that has so often proven to be sweet fodder for critics — then so be it. Karan had this to say to those who may sneer at her efforts as just another one of her follies, or "woo-woo trips," as she called them on several occasions throughout the interview: "It's their problem. They will soon see. It is a big undertaking and I know that there is risk involved. And this isn't going to be perfect. Nothing in life is. But all I am doing is trying to bring people together. I do not want anybody to think that I have the answers. I am offering the space for people to come together to create that next step. That's all it is, to inspire people."

Karan will be the co-chair of Urban Zen with former designer and friend Sonja Nuttall.

"This is important, because it touches every one of us," said Nuttall. "We have all been patients. I hope [people] walk away with a complete consciousness that things have to change, and if we can implement that by creating pilot programs that can make a difference to the patients, that's a good beginning."

The well-being forum will be co-chaired by Turlington, Merrell, Lipman, Yee and Saidman Yee; vice-chairs include Fox, Demi Moore and Ashton Kutcher, Katie Couric, von Furstenberg, Evelyn Lauder, Kenneth Cole, Christina Ong, Graydon Carter and Anna Wintour. Karan has also hired a team of people to make the events run without a hitch under event producer Rachel Goldstein and executive producer Richard Baskin.

For Karan, the overall Urban Zen idea predates this particular program. "About 12 years ago, I saw the vision of what Urban Zen was," she recalled. "I found there was no space in the urban cities. We all go away for healing, but where was that space in the city that we can have? I'd go off to Canyon Ranch or some yoga convention, but I would always be leaving. I'd go to London and Paris, and never felt there was a place where I could get everything that I wanted."

Karan recalled her ultimate fantasy: a residential building devoted to wellness, offering condominiums with a concierge service devoted to all cultures of the world and healing; nutritionists; a dome area for 24-hour meditation, yoga, massage and acupuncture treatments; a lecture room, and a health food eatery.

"I saw this complex available here in New York, and London and Paris because I was going from city to city and couldn't find anything to live in," she said, adding in a lowered tone, "and, quite honestly, I didn't want to have any staff in my apartment. I wanted them somewhere else. I realized I have so many people here, that I don't want them here. I wanted that privacy, but the availability to have a healing center and an artistic center and a restaurant and yoga studio where I live."

Karan said there were several triggers that made her realize she was ready for this challenge. Besides her experiences with Weiss and Kohlman, she said she was inspired by the Clinton Global initiative, and a recent "Hope" event she held in the studio for the Dalai Lama, who had blessed her husband 12 years ago, shortly after Weiss was diagnosed with cancer.

"When Stephen passed away, I had this amazing studio, and I would tease him every once in a while and say, 'Honey, when you're gone, I will turn it into Urban Zen,'" she said. "And I couldn't do it. Having his holiness [the Dalai Lama] now in my husband's studio was something I couldn't even fathom. I thought, OK, it's Stephan's approval that it's time to do this."

According to Karan, the idea is more relevant than ever because "disease touches every single human being," she said. "We all have loved ones. They are bringing holistic medicine...look at acupuncture; but how do we get doctors and alternative together so it is working as one?"

"The alternative world of medicine can exist," she continued. "The yogis are so versed in the body and the mind over body, and the fact that we are in control of our bodies."

Karan herself and corporate partners LVMH, Sephora, Rodale Inc., Christina Ong, Gaiam and Citibank will underwrite the forum's costs, and all contributions will support the pilot programs that come out of the workshops. Karan will kick off Urban Zen with a gratitude dinner for donors at her West Side home on May 14 featuring a performance by Patti LaBelle, Angela McCluskey and Paul Cantelon, followed by a benefit dinner at the studio on May 15 hosted by Vanity Fair with an exhibition of Michael O'Neill's work about a yoga journey through India.

Those who have worked with Karan to put the program together are confident the designer will have an impact.

"It's incredibly important, and what we hope to achieve is the help to make some fundamental changes in the way health care is delivered; to make it more integrated than it is now," said Beth Israel Medical Center's Merrell. "Donna, to her credit, has taken this on as a mission of hers. Based on some of her experiences in the past, she wants to help support changes in clinical care at the medical centers. It's wonderful that she has decided, at this time, to focus a significant portion of her foundation work in helping health care institutions make a change, not only by providing information to key

thought leaders and clinicians and nurses, but to help bring donors to this to fund it."

Turlington, who first met Karan at the start of her modeling career, when the designer was still at Anne Klein, connected with her over the initiative's focus and on health care. Turlington's father died from lung cancer some 10 years ago. She, too, is convinced that many major medical institutions are in need of a makeover to integrate alternative healing methods.

"We had this discussion about what it was like to have an experience of a loved one who was ill, and how hard it is on people around them, let alone the patients," Turlington said. "Donna has been a huge example to me. She is now in a place where she can dedicate time, money and her interest solely in things she is passionate about...using her influence to make the world a better place. The place she comes from at this point in her life is of pure intention and it's quite inspiring to be a part of it."

The organization's next initiatives will take place in June and focus on helping impoverished cultures in Africa, and children, with plans to educate them, their parents and teachers about the Spirituality for Kids program that Karan is involved in.

The establishment of Urban Zen has taken up much of the designer's time, which begs the question: How does Karan juggle this expansive venture with the demands of helming a Seventh Avenue fashion house? "My design room is my sanctuary," she said, with a giggle, "I have never been so calm in my life [as] when I am in my office."