

Season 2, Episode 2 · Interview with Kate Suopajärvi, founder at Arctic Cherry

The host of the podcast, Mrs. Jennifer McDonald-Nethercott:

Welcome to this episode of the W-Power podcast created to share the stories of business women from across the arctic rim and hear from them about growing and running businesses in some of the most remote regions of Northern Europe. I am your host, Jennifer McDonald-Nethercott. And our series will feature amazing women, who have overcome the challenges posed by the remote geography to set up thriving small businesses.

All them have received support of one kind or another from W-Power, a project funded through the Northern Periphery and Arctic Programme of the European Regional Development Fund.

My guest today is Kate Suopajärvi, founder at Arctic Cherry. Kate is a fashion designer and model based in Finnish Lapland. Kate first started in 2016 as a freelance model to show that plus size women can be equal in the fashion business too. Kate has had a career in the theatre and beauty industry and this year she has launched her own fashion brand Arctic Cherry Designs. Welcome to the podcast, Kate!

Kate Suopajärvi:

Thank you so much! Thank you, you are having me here!

Jennifer McDonald-Nethercott:

It's great to have you on! And we really want to start with you first started out in the fashion and model industry?

Kate Suopajärvi:

Yes, I have, I think I have one big reason why I started to have, doing modelling and after that designing clothes also. Because I thought that there are not so many different kinds of models, that there only one kind of model, one kind of way to be model. And also, that makes that there is only one kind of way of beauty. And I wanted to challenge this idea. That there could be more ways to be beautiful. And people, especially women, can feel that they are beautiful. And I took step to the catwalk as a plus-size woman, and I was there only one, who was bigger than others, but I thought that this is important to be there. And, after that, I got many-many contacts that women came to

me and tell that 'It was nice to see you there!', that there are also different kinds of women, and women can relate to also maybe to me, and I could be an example to others that you can do whatever you want, and even if you are plus-size. You are beautiful, even if you are a plus-size. And I hope that I could give this message that everybody is beautiful and can be happy as they are.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Which is a lovely inspiration to so many women in there as well. So, in terms of was that when you first decided you were going to those modelling shows that you wanted to then have a full-time career in the industry and set up your own business?

Kate Suopajärvi:

Yes, actually, I have, at the moment I have a part-time business, and I'm studying also, and I have one other job also, because this industry is quite difficult to have full-time, that you get all the bills paid. But, I'm hoping that next year I could have this full-time that I get my business running more and better, that it's possible.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

And in terms of what you're studying, it's fashion design, is it university?

Kate Suopajärvi:

Yes.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

And is that that's driven you to set up design business and start really looking at creating your own range, your own line of clothing?

Kate Suopajärvi:

Yes, actually, I have the same reason why I started fashion designing that I think that this fashion industry nowadays also gives this only one kind of beauty standards that most women don't fit in. And for plus-size women especially there are not so many fashion brands that we could use. And actually, many fashion designers, very famous ones, they don't want to do plus-sizes at all. And I think it's not fair, and it's not equal, and I want to step in that situation that big is also great clothes.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

And there will be, you know, it doesn't matter what size you are, women love shopping for new clothes, don't they? So, there must be a huge potential industry there to create some beautiful

pieces, and women do love spending money on themselves, and they love shopping. So, these ladies are looking for that opportunity to buy a fabulous item of clothing that fits them.

Kate Suopajärvi:

Yes, that's true. I think here, in this society there is idea that plus-sizes are between, that everybody who are plus-sizes, they should be thin. They suppose that if you are plus-size, you are trying to be thin. So, if you are just this moment a plus-size, that you don't need clothes (laughs) at all, or not good ones at all! But actually, some people just are different, and they are not going to change. Maybe they change or not. But you are here now in this size, and you need clothes. That's the case.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

And you still want the opportunity to buy something that's on trend, you know, the season's colors as well, which will give you the opportunity to design beautiful pieces for people to have. And some of them will be one of those stable pieces the people would want to keep and use again and again.

Kate Suopajärvi:

Yes, in my brand I have also idea of this that you can use this piece many times and in different ways, actually. Then, we can save environment also. (laughs) I have many ideas though (laughs).

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Really, and having that sustainable piece behind the brand as well will differentiate you going forward too especially in that market in which there won't be many competitors at the moment.

Kate Suopajärvi:

Yes, I don't know so many competitors at the moment. In Finland, I think we have one brand, which is plus-size brand. But, of course, there are China market, and there are many clothes, but I think those clothes are not so good quality that they could stay forever.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Yes (laughs).

Kate Suopajärvi:

Or after one time.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

And I suppose they probably don't have those sustainability credentials idea.

Kate Suopajarvi:

Yeah.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

They would be that kind of mass-market production.

Kate Suopajarvi:

Yes.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

So, at the moment, in terms of what challenges have you faced so far in setting up the business? It's still in its early stages, but have you come across any key challenges so far?

Kate Suopajarvi:

Key challenges... This year, of course, COVID (laughs).

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Yeah.

Kate Suopajarvi:

And it has affected mostly my entertainment business, because I can't do modelling cases, or I can't do hostings. So, all of these geeks are cancelled. But I wanted to educate myself more. Now I have time. I don't have so much money, but I have time more. So, I did try to learn to do my own web pages, and Instagram, and so on. I got from W-Power project for these, and I'm so grateful about that! And I can develop my business more.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

And I think that's for as you've said COVID's given you an opportunity to do, although, as you've said, that entertainment side of your business has suffered, because some things were cancelled.

Kate Suopajarvi:

Yeah.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

At least you'd been able, as you've said, to learn about online marketing.

Kate Suopajarvi:

Yeah.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Which really help your fashion design business.

Kate Suopajarvi:

Yeah.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

I think that you'll get launched this year, won't you?

Kate Suopajarvi:

Yeah. I think so, that there are always good sides and bad sides in everything.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

And do you have any specific goals that you want to achieve by the end of the year? In terms of the business.

Kate Suopajarvi:

This year I have one goal or two goals, that I want my web page launched (laughs). It's all a bit not ready yet, but I want to make that ready. And also, I have one product I'd like to develop more, if I have time. It's one web-course about styling, style.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Really?

Kate Suopajarvi:

I'll try to do that.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

And will that course be delivered online?

Kate Suopajarvi:

Yes, I'm trying to do that, but there are few question marks still on.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

(laughs) I think that's always the challenge and the excitement with launching a new product, isn't it? If you get it right, and if you get an audience to sell it to.

Kate Suopajarvi:

Yeah. There are many-many things to do, and also researching to find out some things more.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

And as well thing jumping between this studying at university and you've got a family as well.

Kate Suopajarvi:

Yeas. Lots things to do.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

(laughs) So, in terms of starting a business, is there the one particular thing that you wish you'd known right at the start?

Kate Suopajarvi:

Yes. In Finland there is a very complicated tax system. So, I wished I knew more about that. Then I could have more easier (laughs) start. And later also. There are always some things with taxes.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

That's it, and I suppose that in terms of personal tax as well as business tax.

Kate Suopajarvi:

Yes. And you have to know many things, and you can take this out, and you can't take this one (laughs). So, so much to know. So difficult (laughs).

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

I think it's with most tax systems, isn't it? It's a mind build that you have to spent time in the beginning, and otherwise you can get caught out.

Kate Suopajarvi:

Yes, that's true (laughs).

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

That's it. And, to give listeners the opportunity to find out more about Arctic Cherry, it would be great if you could share your elevator pitch with them.

Kate Suopajarvi:

This is always hard (laughs), because I have so many things what I do. I have this entertainment business, that I do modelling, catwalks, photoshoots, and hosting events. And also, I do singing and

dancing. Flamenco dancing and many kinds of singing. But also, I have these courses, modeling courses and color and style courses, and skin care courses. Also, I produce events and fashion show, and then this, I have my own fashion brand 'Arctic Cherry Designs'.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

It's a wide range, isn't it? And in terms of those courses that you do, did you use, before COVID of course, hire venues, invite students along and that's where you would teach them?

Kate Suopajärvi:

Yeah, I had actually these courses, I used to do like work groups, that they have a little bit of entertainment also by this course. But also, I have these courses that they have somebody who gets a group, and then they come to my office, and then we have this course. But now it's a little bit difficult. Because there are these all safety rules and so on. But actually, I have one course, a makeup course on this Sunday, but we are one meter, safety rules are on (laughs).

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

I think that's where we've all had to as you say adapt to those changing rules and guidelines around social distancing that we're all going to have going through for the foreseeable future. But it's great news you've got that one course back up and running, and it sounds positive being for the rest of the year, on that side.

Kate Suopajärvi:

Yeah.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

What is your vision for the business for the next five years. Where would you want to be in five years' time?

Kate Suopajärvi:

I hope, I could be a full-time entrepreneur (laughs). And I hope, my fashion brand could be world-wide, that I could send these items everywhere. And I was hoping that I would do more modeling also, may be in London someday (laughs).

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Oh, that would be brilliant, won't it?

Kate Suopajärvi:

Yeah.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Yeah, and taking a brand worldwide!

Kate Suopajärvi:

Yeah.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Yeah. It will be an amazing journey over the next five years. And the benefit is there, that you'll be able to model your own fashion brand, won't you, which would be really exciting, and really be the face behind it!

Kate Suopajärvi:

Yeah, that would be great.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Yeah, that would be very exciting few years ahead you. Well, thank you so much for your time today! And if you want to find out more about Kate and Arctic Cherry, we will hop the links in the short notes.

More information about W-Power and the support available in your area is included in the short notes, as well as links to join the project's local and international Facebook pages and LinkedIn group. We thanks to the Northern Periphery and Arctic Programme of the European Regional Development Fund, and Highlands and Islands Enterprise for their support with this project. Until next time!