



Accepting who I am makes me

Happy!

Karren Brady, 43, is the vice-chairman of West Ham United and one of Lord Sugar's assistants on *The Apprentice*. She lives in Birmingham with her husband Paul Peschisolido and their children, Sophia and Paolo.

Being happy about your shape comes from accepting what you have rather than what you don't. And it's also about accepting that you are never going to have it. Like finally getting rid of that thing at the back of the wardrobe that has been there for years, ready for when you lose half a stone. It's actually quite liberating to accept that I am what I am – and celebrate that fact.

When I was younger I spent my whole life wanting to be tall and skinny. And because I wasn't, I was disappointed.

Karren Brady talks to Victoria Young about body confidence, helping women get ahead in business and winning a BAFTA

The great thing about getting older is that I've come to accept my shape – and embrace it. The other great thing is I've stopped making the fatal mistake of following fashion – I now try to follow what suits me.

I've been to some very glamorous parties where

there are some very beautiful – and very thin – people. Then along come the canapés. I love all that – I'll have as many as I like! But they don't touch a canapé or have a drink. And they have that pinched, pained expression. Obviously I don't want to be huge – I'm a good size 12 and I accept that.

But the pain and dedication and the willpower; the constant thought it must take to be thin would be a full-time job in itself.

If you understand what suits you, the right outfit can shave off ten pounds. For me that very much means in at the waist and then

out; A-line is my perfect shape. I really like designers such as Roland Mouret, whose dresses are quite structured with a slight stretch and a zip.

My daughter Sophia, who's 16, has a real acceptance of her shape, which is great. She is a very confident young girl. She knows, far more than I did at her age, what suits her. She really knows how to dress; she's just got that thing, whatever that is.

Whereas my son, who's 14, couldn't care less, like most boys his age!

I like shoes. I like wedges, high heels. I quite like an LK Bennett shoe for work. I love Chanel and Jimmy Choo shoes. And if I have to wear flats, I wear flip-flops.

I can do "smart" very well. I'm happy going to a cocktail party, to dinner, a black tie event, to meetings or being on the TV. But if someone says to me "Barbecue on a Sunday", I go into total meltdown. I struggle with casual because I like height – wearing big heels to a barbecue is a no-no. I'd love to be able to wear jeans, a white shirt and a beautiful pair of loafers, but in reality, it doesn't work for me. What works for me is a nice dress; quite 60s or *Mad Men* style.

I'm always on the lookout for good swimwear – I spend all year looking. As a result I have a wardrobe full of swimwear, wraps and

sundresses, but then I open it and don't like any of them!

I'm not madly obsessed by fashion. If I have a big event coming up, I often leave it until the last minute to decide what to wear. I sit on three boards, have 800 employees who rely on me, and I have a family – which is why getting a dress for something like an awards ceremony gets pushed down the list.

If my hair is good, I feel good. For years I took my hair for granted because it is quite thick, but these days I buy nicer products and go to a good hairdresser, Claudio at Harrods, who I see four or five times a year. But he never really gets a chance to blow-dry it

I've come to embrace my shape, which is liberating, but know the right outfit can shave off ten pounds

because by the time I've had it highlighted and my grey is covered, I can't stand it any more and have to leave!

I love jewellery. Every day I wear my pear-shaped diamond ring, and my diamond studs, which my two chairmen bought for me for my 40th birthday. I also wear a watch that my husband bought me when his team was promoted to the premier league. I have lots of other things, but those three I wear every day.

My slogan should be "Always at the airport" because... I am always at the airport. My routine on a long-haul flight is always the same. As the plane is taking off my seat is going back. >>

I tie back my hair, take off all my make-up, put on pyjamas, cover myself in moisturiser, take a sleeping pill, put on the eye mask, put a blanket over my head and then I wake up to the captain saying “We are landing in 40 minutes” and I’ve missed ten hours. It’s the only time I get to really switch off.

Winning the BAFTA for *Young Apprentice* felt great. It’s really nice to be part of the winning team. BAFTAs recognise all the people who work on a show behind the scenes. No one contributes as much as Alan [Sugar], so it’s lovely for him, but it’s really special for me too. The best thing about working on the show is giving these bright, fiercely determined young people that showcase. Since last summer’s riots, there has been a lot of negative attention on young people; *Young Apprentice* is the opposite of that.

MENTORING

When the voice-over on *The Apprentice* says “It’s 5am”, it really is 5am! So when I’m pounding the pavements, I accept that I look how I look and there is nothing I can do about it. But when I’m filming I never drink alcohol, try to eat better, drink loads of water and tend to eat less because I’m running around so much. I love my sleep, but can survive without it if I have to, though the next night I’ll go to bed at 7pm.

My kids are my life. Sitting on the sidelines watching my son play rugby, helping them with their homework or getting them ready for their exams – I can’t think of anything else I’d rather do.

My son is a huge sportsman. He is very good at rugby, so

most of my weekends are spent watching him play. He’s very good at athletics – he is the county 100m champion – so all year he is involved in one thing or another and our time is spent supporting him.

Encouraging other women in business is an important part of my role. I mentor people within my organisation, which means spending time; giving them confidence; prising out of them the things they want to achieve and getting them to think about what sort of leader they want to be. Then it is about helping them deal with very specific issues, and also overcoming them.

Everyone encounters difficulties at work. What makes a mistake into a problem is if it stops you doing what you want. The trick is to find a way of getting round the problem and still achieving the end game. It’s important to keep your ultimate goal in mind.

I do think that someone needs to champion Women In Business issues. Whether that means childcare issues, flexible hours, equal pay – whatever the issues are, someone needs to champion them. But no one has asked me, and I don’t think you can just turn up at Number 10 and say, “By the way, I am now taking responsibility for this.” But if I were asked, I would do it, definitely – because it is important to me.

If I were Prime Minister for a day, I’d make businesses explain why they don’t have women on their boards. I don’t believe in quotas, but I do believe that there are ways to give women opportunities. One of the reasons I’m such a big



Helping other women in business is important to me, giving them the confidence to be the best they can be

PHOTOGRAPHS TREVOR LEIGHTON STYLING JILLIE MURPHY HAIR & MAKE-UP IAN MCGINTOSH AT CAROL HAYES MANAGEMENT
KARREN WEARS: FIRST SPREAD TOP: HARVEY NICHOLS VEST: AMERICAN VINTAGE JEANS: NOBODY AT DONNA IDA SHOES: JIMMY CHOO EARRINGS: H STERN AT HARRODS FINE JEWELLERY RING: MANGUETTE WATCH: CHOPARD BANGLES: FOPE THIS PAGE DRESS: ALEXANDER MCQUEEN AT FEATHERSFASHION.COM SHOES: SIMMI SHAPEWEAR TRIUMPH EARRINGS: DVF FOR H STERN AT HARRODS FINE JEWELLERY BANGLE: MANGUETTE CUFF: H STERN AT HARRODS FINE JEWELLERY

believer in mentoring is that I was a young businesswoman who was given an opportunity.

I practise what I preach. I work in a male-dominated industry, but at Birmingham City I still managed to get 75 per cent of my senior management team at director level as women. When I went to West Ham, there wasn’t a single senior woman in the organisation, and now 50 per cent are women.

I try to make uncertainty as rare an occurrence as possible. If I am uncertain about something, it is probably because I don’t have enough knowledge about it. If I don’t know the answer, I will just give my honest opinion or ask for time to go and think about it. That said, it would be highly unusual for me to go into a board meeting and be asked a question I didn’t know the answer to.

If I need to be brave I depend on my own backbone and my own ability for endurance. I’ve always accepted that the only person I can fall back on is myself and that has always stood me in good stead.

I love competition; I thrive on it. There is no greater measure than pitching yourself against somebody in the hope that you can win. What is more exciting than that? If I don’t win, I accept that you don’t win everything. The most important thing is to understand why you didn’t win and to make sure you do next time.

Nothing is work unless you’d rather be doing something else – and there’s not much else I’d rather be

doing during the working day. But I do like my holidays to relax. I didn’t have a holiday for 13 years because I was so busy building up my business and having my kids that everything got squeezed. But I take a lot now and I work from home if I want to.

BALANCING ACT

What’s important to me is getting the balance right. There’s no perfect formula. It’s about understanding that at certain times in life, matters at home are more important than matters at work, and sometimes it’s the other way round. You have to be flexible, and you have to accept that you can only do your best. You have to make choices with your head and your heart, and you have to know that it won’t always be the right choice, but that you made the choice for the right reasons.

I am one person at home and another when I’m at work. And the trick is not to allow either of those personalities to drain the life out of the other, and to keep those things very separate. I often find that if things haven’t gone well at work, if I carry that into my home like a dark cloud I can change the mood of the house and that’s unfair. So I just leave it at the door. I take the view that my problems are my problems.

My home in Birmingham is my sanctuary. It’s full of all the things I’ve collected over the years – everything tells a story. My favourite room is my study, which is my space. It’s got bits that the kids have made, awards I’ve won, a basket with invitations, photos of the kids growing up and weird and wonderful things they have collected over the years, as well as old wedding presents.

I love to cook. A big Sunday lunch is my favourite. We’ll have friends and family over and it’s a lovely day when everyone eats, chats and listens to music.

I speak to my dad more than my mum, but my mum will call and say, “Ooh, I’ve seen something that will look lovely on you.” She’ll send me photos and say, “Shall I get it?” I usually say yes.

My brother lives in France, but we are close – they come over in the summer. I’m close to Paul’s sister too. She lives in Canada. And we have other family in Italy – places to stay all over the world.

I love and embrace change. But to change something and change it for the better are two different things. I take the view that if you don’t like something, you can change it, but if it’s not in your power to do that, then you just have to get on with it.

If you fear change, it helps to really think through why you are changing something. It’s like when people say, “I really hate my

job.” If someone feels that now – even during a recession – they should think about what they are going to do about it because it won’t change itself.

Only you can change your own circumstances – other people can’t do it for you. I have probably always lived my life like that, but it’s probably not something I thought about until I had the aneurysm six years ago.

When I was diagnosed, what really got to me was the thought my children might have to grow up without me. All the things I’d sacrificed – not being there because I was at work – came back to haunt me. That felt worse than the thought of actually dying. After the operation, I decided to do things differently. Now, when my son rings and says, “Mum, there’s a rugby match this afternoon, I’d really like you to come and watch me,” I’m on my way. I only do the things I want to do now, because I know how fragile and short life is.

THE REAL KARREN BRADY

EARLIEST MEMORY? Aged three, hunting for Christmas presents around the house with my brother. They hadn’t been wrapped and I was so disappointed I’d spoiled the surprise. It was that thing of “Be careful what you wish for”.
RELAXATION IS... Lying on a sun lounger with a book and cocktail. I’m currently reading Martina Cole’s *The Faithless*.
HOW OFTEN DO YOU PROCRASTINATE? Not enough!
WHO ARE YOU CLOSEST TO? My children.
WHAT ARE YOU MOST SCARED OF? Like most people I’m scared of dying, but I don’t fret about it. I accept that whatever will be will be, so whatever the situation is, I’ll do my best to resolve it and if I can’t, I have to accept it.
WHAT DO YOU VALUE MOST IN A PARTNER? Respect.
ALTERNATIVE CAREER? Interior designer.
WHAT WILL YOU BE DOING IN TEN YEARS? The same thing. I hope I’m still alive.
TELL US SOMETHING THAT WILL SHOCK US I like gardening! It’s the only manual labour I don’t mind. w&h