

Collective Genius



Cassandra Kelly and Nigel Lake

What's the connection?

After meeting at work in London, the couple married, moved to Australia and founded global advisory firm Pottinger. Now they're taking on a fresh challenge: Cassandra has relocated to New York with their three children while Nigel stays in Sydney.

What makes it work?

Aligned ethics and morals, mutual trust and a preference for action over talk.

INTERVIEWS BY **DI WEBSTER**
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CASSANDRA SAYS

"Nigel was based in London in the investment banking part of HSBC in 1998, working in corporate finance, mergers and acquisitions, and I had joined the securities research arm. We started getting groups together for collaborative meetings. His team dreamt about a brighter future and I drew up a plan of how they might get to it. Nigel apparently thought, 'Wow! Who's that woman?' I was just doing my thing and didn't think anything of it but we became close. We understood each other.

We married in 2002 and moved to Australia the following year. One day, we talked about what we could do that we'd be proud of. What would it be like if you acted with full integrity, where you provided full and frank and bold advice to leaders who insisted on it? We said, 'Let's do something mad and crazy.' We sat down with a piece of paper, with a vision to make the world

a better place, and so we started Pottinger. It was all about changing the world.

Nigel is the best colleague I've ever worked with; a thoroughly decent and generous person. He's a very big brain and he's not like me but we share the same vision and dream for society. I think in any successful union, business or otherwise, it's the sameness and the difference that matters.

But if we want to change the world, we can't just be based here so I've moved to New York – that's where we'll see our growth. Nigel will ensure [the Australian business] runs smoothly. How will we make it work? We'll make it up as we go. You have to talk about your needs, your desires and your minimum standards then apply those and keep an honest dialogue. This is a really amazing and really important time in our journey.

I can't see it being a short-term move. For Nigel and I, there is a sense of real urgency. I feel like we're in a sandpit trying to tell the world to play nicely with each other."

NIGEL SAYS

"I'm pretty sure I still have that outline Cassandra drew up in the [HSBC] meeting in a drawer somewhere. I was struck by someone biased towards action. That was the absolute essence of it in the beginning; the shared need to make something happen, not just sit around talking about it.

We were given some great advice by a friend of ours. He said, 'Just put white space in your lives, don't think about what you're going to do next; just get set up, settle down and then see what grows in that space.' We both wanted to do something different.

Cassandra and I are very different in lots of ways but we recognise that those differences are important. We're also good at knowing when to trust the other person's instincts. And we have an underlying set of values that are incredibly similar. We have never disagreed on anything of substance, ever.

I won't see as much of her as I would like to in the near future as we navigate through this period but the connectivity is still there. I honestly don't think our relationship will change. I know when the good times are to call; I have all the time zones in my head.

It will be a bit tough on the kids but we'll be doing plenty of Skyping. When we told the younger one about this move, he said he would be sad and miss his friends but about a minute later he was like, 'But there will be a Magnolia Bakery and I will eat thousands of cheesecakes.'" ●