

# LIZ DAVENPORT A COLOURFUL LIFE

One of six children, Liz Davenport grew up on a sheep and wheat farm at the foot of the Stirling Ranges in south-west Western Australia. There she fell in love with the bushland, spending many hours exploring her backyard wilderness with her sisters May, Sylvia, Robin, Jean and brother Andrew.

Madge, a talented amateur artist, instilled in her daughter a respect for nature that would last a lifetime. "She told me that under every piece of bark, every stone and every leaf, there's a living creature. Don't destroy it. Put it back as you found it", recalls Liz.

It was during her childhood years that Liz Davenport's love for fashion began. Her elder sister taught her how to sew on brown paper using an old treadle machine. Liz, then five, would make paper dresses for her dolls. Graduating to material, she became obsessed about dressing one doll in particular, Patsy. "She was a chubby doll and every day I would rush home from school to play with her. I would make new outfits and even magnificent bed linen to match her skirts", says Liz.

By age 11 at Kobeelya, a Church of England boarding school for girls in Katanning, Liz was making her own clothes and winning dress making prizes. It was around this time that she developed her now famous love for colour. "I was absolutely fascinated with colour and flowers like marigolds, pansies, violets and petunias. Blue acid bottles in the shearing shed also fascinated me, as did the Splendid Wren. I couldn't believe a bird could be such a vibrant blue, says Liz.

Despite her deftness for a needle and thread, Liz didn't initially think of a career as a fashion designer. Instead she opted to train as a primary school teacher. For eight years she taught in schools in Geraldton and Perth.

In 1972, with her husband Terry's encouragement, Liz bought a wholesale fashion agency in Murray Street, Perth. Customers were asking for the latest "hot items". Those I couldn't supply, I manufactured she says. The "hot items" included maxi skirts, fitted black and silver Lurex tops and flared grey flannel pants. Within months, the novice designer was making up to 2,000 of a style. "I remember being so excited about the first samples that I nearly had four traffic accidents getting from the factory back to my office!" laughs Liz.

Flushed with success, in 1975, just three years after starting out in business, Liz Davenport designed her first signature collection. It was a huge success and she was able to open her first "beautiful" store in Murray Street Perth. "The first time I saw my name on a ticket I couldn't look at it. I couldn't bear to think of the egotistical nature of it all. But when Myer rang and said they were waiting on a delivery, I had to get the tickets fixed onto garments and delivered as quickly as possible", says Liz.

By the 1980's, Liz Davenport designs were being sold in more than 300 boutiques and department stores throughout Australia, Singapore and New Zealand. Signature stores followed in top fashion locations around Australia as well as on London's prestigious Bond Street.

"The day I opened the store in London, I thought, what on earth have I done! How can a person from Perth – the most isolated city in the world – open a shop on Bond Street, London? It was such a huge step. I thought what if it doesn't work and people don't like the clothes? I walked down both sides of Bond Street and when I walked back into the shop I knew I didn't have a problem. We sat very comfortably on the street", says Liz.

Today, Liz Davenport remains one of only five Australian designers bestowed with the nation's top fashion honour - the Grand Award from the Fashion Industry of Australia. The prestigious prize, awarded in 1980, recognised Liz's contribution to the clothing industry.

Liz's busy schedule included a lot of business travel, a task that inspired one of the company's most popular fashion concepts - Miracle-in-a-Suitcase. The clever concept utilises 22 pieces of clothing in four block colours with coordinating prints that can be worn an astonishing 300 different ways. All garments can be rolled up without creasing and packed into a cabin sized bag. So popular and practical an idea, Miracle-in-a-Suitcase was recently featured on A Current Affair as "clever couture" – timeless fashion combining comfort, versatility, easy care, style and affordability. As for the genesis of the idea, Liz says it was born out of necessity.

"I was travelling and in one day alone I had a business breakfast in Sydney, a business lunch in Brisbane, a business dinner in Melbourne followed by a midnight flight back to Perth. So I decided to create an original concept that could accommodate almost any travel dilemma and be contained in a carry-on bag. I discovered I could fit 18 garments in the case, three on the body and one in the overhead locker. That's a total of 22 pieces that are all interchangeable, don't crease and incorporate casual, business and evening wear", she says. Referring to the concept as "A Miracle in A Suitcase".

To help women learn the secrets of the Davenport mix-and-match phenomenon, Liz and her team hold regular workshops around Australia. There customers can learn Liz Davenport's Dynamics of Disguise – three key wardrobe rules that guarantee to have them looking one to two sizes smaller in no time!

Interestingly, in her 38 years, the Queen of Coordinates has not changed her fashion formula when it comes to dressing women. Clothes, she says, should be about comfort, flattering shapes, coordination, versatility, easy maintenance and they should not cost the earth. As for clients, they should be nurtured and made to feel fantastic, not failures in the fitting room.

"The Liz Davenport brand is built on a nurturing factor. Women lack in self-esteem because so much pressure is put on them to look a certain way. If your genes don't allow you to be tall, thin, with a beautiful face and gorgeous hair, then you are made to feel a lesser person. My use of colour and coordination is born from countless hours of experience, research and experimentation. We have made our name by engineering the

right look for the right body shape and for the right lifestyle. I empower women to feel and look confident”, states Liz.

In 1999, Liz Davenport added yet another accolade to her growing tally of fashion and business awards, becoming the first inductee of WA Fashion Week’s Hollywood style Walk-of-Fame Award. Her life’s work was recorded in a terrazzo-and-brass pavement design in Perth’s King Street, right around the corner from where her fashion career began. “To be the first designer to enter the Walk of Fame represents the top of another wonderful mountain”, she told reporters at the time.

In the same year, Liz Davenport made headlines for another reason – environmentalism. Having grown up in the shade of the great karri trees of WA, she was horrified by the extent of successive governments’ clear felling of the ancient forests in the south west of the state. Working alongside respected scientists David Bellamy (from the UK) and Canada’s David Suzuki, she joined protesters in campaigning against logging only to be arrested for her efforts and charged with “prohibiting lawful activity”.

Keeping the debate alive, Liz designed a Forest Collection encapsulating floral, leafy themes in delicate fabrics. Logs are not better than frogs” she told Perth’s fashion set at the Mercedes Fashion Week in 1999 as models paraded her symbolic gowns. Coming to the realisation that the only way she could actually stop logging was to change State laws, in 2001, Liz Davenport entered politics.

Liz announced she would contest the seat of Nedlands. Under the Liberals for Forests umbrella the seat had been held by Sir Charles Court and was then held by the Premier Richard Court. The unlikely contender ran a tight race, finishing a close second thanks to enormous support from the public. But while Liz was defeated, she was not discouraged. “It wasn’t so much about winning for me, as it was about spreading the message – “Stop clear felling old Growth Forest and with it destruction of animal habitat” she says.

Charity is also a passion (“A business should have a purpose beyond its own profit”, Liz declares) and for many years she has helped raise funds for organisations including The Royal Flying Doctor Service, Mission Australia, and the Exodus Foundation that helps needy families and struggling children. It was for service to the community that she was awarded the Order of Australia in 2011.

Liz is also famous for her campaign to promote Australia’s wool industry. Back in the early 1990s, when the wool industry collapsed, the designer was extremely vocal about the failure to market wool effectively. She rallied grower and breeder groups to get involved, and convened a 26 member conference at Parliament House with the then Prime Minister John Howard.

From her inauspicious beginnings in 1975 to her icon status in 2016, Liz Davenport’s passion for fashion burns as bright as ever. She has published her first book, a contemporary autobiography entitled *Liz: A Life of Colour*.

“I live a very privileged life. I’ve had no major disappointments. My three children are brilliant young people. They’ve always been incredibly healthy which we must value above all else. I met Terry, my husband, when I was 17 and I have had one of the best marriages you could ever wish for. My career and passage through business has been nothing but success after success and for that I’m most grateful”, she says.

Business woman, eco-campaigner, fashion designer, mother, wife and philanthropist – it’s difficult to settle for one mantle when it comes to Liz Davenport. In the fickle world of fashion, she has remained a stalwart. And if you think she is slowing down any time soon, think again.

“Retirement? Who ever heard of the word!” she laughs.

## AWARDS

### Fashion Industries of Australia Lyrebird Award

### Fashion Industries of Australia Golden Lyrebird Award

– Grand Award

### Advance Australia Award

– Contribution to Australian Lifestyle through Fashion

### City of Sydney Business Award

– Outstanding Womens Fashion

### 6PR Business Award

**West Australian Newspaper** – Business Achiever Award

**HRH Queen Sirikit of Thailand** – Silk Festival

### Perth Fashion Walk of Fame

### Concourse D’Elegance Hamilton Island

### Golden Key National Honour Society

### Momentum’s Most Inspiring Woman 2011

### The Financial Review’s 100 Women of Influence

**Who’s Who of Australian Fashion** – wall in Sydney

### Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM)



Grand Award,  
Australia’s Top  
Designer 1980



Advance  
Australia Award



Most Outstanding  
Women’s Wear



Fashion Walk  
of Fame Plaque



Order of Australia:  
Service to Fashion  
Industry & Community



Most Inspiring  
Woman 2011



Launch of  
book: Liz A  
Life of Colour



Recognised as one  
of Australia’s 100  
Women of Influence