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# 'It is not useful to weep'

Philanthropist and corporate lawyer Audette Exel says 'home' is family, friends and books.

**A**udette Exel jokes that she's the philanthropist formerly known as Isis. When Exel established her charity Isis 18 years ago, she could never have imagined that the name would come to inspire fear and loathing.

Following the emergence of Islamic State, Exel and her team changed the charity's name in 2014 to the Adara Group. Its focus is improving the lives of some of the poorest people in the world, through projects in Nepal and Uganda with a particular emphasis on maternal and neonatal health and at-risk children. Adara's "for purpose" corporate advisory business arm makes millions through its commercial operations, with fees and all profits going towards the work of the Adara non-profit foundation.

Sydney-based Exel is a corporate lawyer who's run a bank in Bermuda and chaired that country's stock exchange. She was born in Dunedin 53 years ago, to Mary and David Exel. Her father, who died in 2000, was a highly regarded journalist who reported on the Vietnam War for the New Zealand Press Association, before becoming a household name and face in the 70s on television current affairs programme *Gallery*. David Exel gave up journalism to start the Citizens for Rowling group in a failed attempt to stop Rob

Muldoon's National Party from winning the 1975 general election.

Audette Exel is her own woman and also very much her father's child.

**What did your parents teach you that has led you from being a Springbok tour protester, banker and entrepreneur to your present roles?**

Dad was a huge force in my life. To characterise each of my parents: my mother taught me to give – she is a wonderful, caring and very thoughtful human

**"There was never a push to achieve in a conventional way, just to be the best human being you could be. There was also permission to fail and that is a great thing."**

being; Dad was a brilliant thinker and he drummed into us not to accept orthodoxy. He would have loved that I have done something outside the orthodox construct. I think he must have sat beside my bed at night, whispering in my ear, "Girls can do anything."

They were the kind of parents who, if we had been the best cleaners, they

would have been terribly proud of us. There was never a push to achieve in a conventional way, just to be the best human being you could be. There was also permission to fail and that is a great thing to be told: give it a go and we will love you no matter what. As an entrepreneur and a risk-taker, having that foundation has been bedrock, fantastic.

**What attracted you to skydiving?**

Skydivers are risk-takers, but they're also freedom people. It doesn't matter what your education, your job, how much money you earn. I will always be a skydiver even though I am not jumping now. Here I am, 53, and rarely a day goes by without me looking up to see what speed the clouds are moving at and in which direction.

I lived and breathed skydiving for 15 years, starting when I was 16 with Manawatu Skydivers. After I did about 20 jumps, Dad decided to have a go and he did about three. Mary, my mother, said, "Two of you doing this is two too many," so that was the end of Dad's skydiving.

**You're rarely in one place for long, either travelling for work or Adara. Where is home?**

I love my wee place in Balmain, but home for me at a much deeper level is about the people you love. I have lots of wonderful people in my life: fantastic family and

JONATHAN TORGOVNIK, GETTY IMAGES





Left: scenes of devastation in Nepal following an earthquake on April 25, 2015, which killed more than 8000 people and injured more than 20,000. Above: Adara Group director Audette Exel in Kathmandu in 2013 with children saved from trafficking by the group's development arm.

some very close friends. Some of them are creatives: writer Lily Brett is a friend. I am a huge fan of Lil and I love her books; she spends her life thinking about discrimination and its effects. She takes you into a dark space and then suddenly she makes you laugh out loud. It is an art to take people to a level that is so intense and then lift them up.

It's what you have to do in real life. If you spend your life as an intense, angry activist, you have to be able to throw your head back and laugh out loud. I find ways in my life to do that all the time.

Another close friend is Michelle Garnaut, who owns restaurants in China including M on the Bund; she has been a friend since the 80s. She is an Aussie girl and runs the Shanghai Literary Festival. She is a real entrepreneurial, "do it your own way" inspiration to me. My oldest friend, Ruth-Helen, is a psychologist and meditation teacher. Anna Bligh, who was the Premier of Queensland, is another good friend. They all make up "home" for me.

**Aside from Lily Brett's work, what do you read?** My books are my oldest friends. I have lugged them all over the world, wherever I have been. I remember reading Salman Rushdie *Midnight's Children*, putting it down and saying to the person I was with, "I am never going to be able to write." It was just layers of complexity and genius. You can be a great reader but never be able to write. Everything else of his I have found impossible to get through, except for *Joseph Anton*, which is extraordinary.

I happened recently to cast my eye on *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, and re-read them over a couple of nights. Douglas Adams is a master. I also love John Irving's books, his humour and his darkness. I am a big fan of fiction – I love to be taken away and to lose myself in a story – but recently I have been reading more non-fiction. One of the books I absolutely love is Tracy Kidder's *Mountains Beyond Mountains* about Paul Farmer. It's

a story of an ordinary US doctor who went out to Haiti, started a random medical project and in the process made a huge discovery about the treatment of tuberculosis. It ended up changing the protocols on TB treatment. At different times when I have questioned myself about what I am doing, where do I fit into



Exel in February, left, and in Ghyangfedi, Nepal, on a post-earthquake recovery mission.

all this, that book really helps me.

I also had the honour of meeting Gloria Steinem in New York a couple of years ago, and truly, I was star-struck. I wanted to drop to my knees to say, "Thank you for everything you have done for me as

### **"The transition from catastrophe and poverty to ludicrous decadence is hard."**

a woman and every other woman." I'm also a huge Leonard Cohen fan and loved the biography *I'm Your Man: The Life of Leonard Cohen*, by Sylvie Simmons.

**You went to Nepal straight after the 2015 earthquakes, and slept on the streets alongside your local staff. What's it like moving between the corporate world and the Third World?**

One of the hardest things was getting off the streets of Nepal after the earthquake to fly to Madrid for a board meeting of an international shipping mutual, being held in the Ritz Hotel. I was so emotional about leaving my team behind. I was having a bit of a cry at the airport, which I wouldn't normally do, but saying goodbye to our

country director Prahlad was so hard. He said, "Audette, it is good you came, we know you love us, that is important. Now you need to go back to work and make us money." It made me laugh. The transition from catastrophe and poverty to ludicrous decadence is hard. In Madrid, I felt like running from the room screaming, and I

don't feel like that in the developing world. I feel uplifted, sometimes hugely emotional, but I am very careful about keeping that private because it is not useful to your team or your community to be weeping; it is useful to do the work. If you are a leader, you have huge responsibility in the way you speak and

the way you act.

**What do the honours you've received, such as your honorary Order of Australia, mean to Adara?**

My life is full of heroes – Nepali, Tibetan and Ugandan educators, development specialists and health workers – who could be working in cities making big money but instead they are out there in horrendous conditions. The vast majority are locals and completely unsung. Yet I have become the symbol for Adara, so I end up getting the honours and recognition and awards. It is very easy for people to think the Westerner is the hero, but when you do the work – this might sound sappy but it is true – it's such a privilege. My life is filled with joy. When I got a wonderful award in Australia this year as Leading Philanthropist, which is great for Adara, our Aussies, Americans, Bermudians, Ugandans and Nepalis were all celebrating – they know it's for the family, the whole team.

**When times are tough, what's your ultimate escape fantasy?**

Being snowed in somewhere with the mobile phone about to die, but just enough charge to ring home and say, "I am really okay, the battery is about to run out, I have good food, wine and company, great books, and I will check in again in six weeks when the snow melts." ■