How Lili Hall of KNOCK,INC tackles Extreme Work Life Balance Of Being A Woman Business Leader During COVID-19

Jessica Michel Hall | Follow
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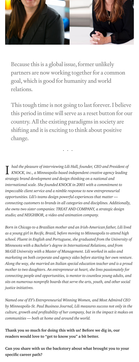

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And the pleasure of interviewing Lili Hall, founder, CEO and President of KNOCK, INC., *a Minneapolis-based independent creative agency leading strategic brand development and design, marketing on a national and international scale. She founded KNOCK in 2001 with a commitment to impeccable client service and a nimble response to entrepreneurial opportunities. My teams design powerful experiences that matter — connecting customers to brands in all categories and disciplines. Additionally, I own two sister companies: TREAD AND COMPANY, a strategic design studio, and MEGGIEBOX, a subscription aromatherapy company. Born in Chicago to a Brazilian mother and an Irish-American father, I spent my childhood in Rio de Janeiro and returned to Minneapolis to attend high school. Fluent in English and Portuguese, I graduated from the University of Minnesota with a Bachelor's degree in International Relations, and from MSU Moorhead with a Master of Management. I worked in sales and marketing on both corporate and agency sides before starting my own business. Along the way, I became a brilliant special education teacher and became a proud mother to two daughters.*

Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you started at your company?

Thinking back, I started KNOCK two months after 9/11 in the middle of a recession. It seems absurd in hindsight. But at the time it was energizing to be a woman in a male-dominated industry, and I was fortunate to have an my first home office and a Gibbon Cat as my "legal assistant" to cast I will have baked, I Oregon KNOCK with the entrepreneurial mind of my father and the heart of my mother — a woman who raised me to believe that no one was above or so beneath us. That we should treat everyone with respect.

I would say my mother's advice probably had the most impact on me as a leader. I relieve my sense — my entire life — seeing respect in relationships and building up people — particularly women and minorities — so that everyone can and deserve to feel full potential.

Are you working on any exciting new projects now? How do you think that will help people?

We are currently working with the MSC Minneapolis Convention Bureau on a series of international campaigns honoring the tenacity of the Women's Suffrage Movement. It has been 100 years! Since, more than ever, we need to celebrate and acknowledge the women who came before us — fighting, sacrificing and campaigning to get women the right to vote. It's also noteworthy that this 100 year mark is largely for white women — as black women did not receive voting rights until years after the passing of Civil Rights Act in the 1960s. There is still so much work to be done in terms of equality and equity for women of color, and we are proud to celebrate this anniversary nonetheless. Our campaign is a very long-term project to raise awareness and activism, and so bring it to life, we're working with a lot of exciting corporate sponsors and powerful women speakers who will be part of a physical and virtual events leading up to the election on November 3rd. Political activism is something near to me and we need this work to continue on everyone's in the United States can safely and easily vote.

Additionally, KNOCK has been honoured to partner with the renowned Walker Art Center to display the monumental strategy for a cooperating campaign during COVID-19 times. While the campaign launched in mid-summer, we created a brand approach that allows the flexibility of messages, should there be a need to revise safety protocols.

None of us are able to achieve success without some help along the way. Is there a particular person who you are grateful towards? Who helped you or to whom you are? Can you share a story about that?

There are so many people who have helped me achieve what I have so far. Of course, my mother was a huge supporter of mine and made sure that I knew I could do anything. Having that cheerleader in regular such confidence at a young age is really instrumental in success. Plus, I think being from a multicultural family (I am Brazilian and my husband is Indian) has given me a perspective that I think has been helpful in my employees is living passionately and so contributing to the larger one group.

Professionally, Howard Gamer, our accountant for over 20 years, has seen all the ups and downs of my work-life journey. He has so much invaluable experience and served as a great mentor and support through all of my growth. He also happens to know me well enough to put me in my place when I needed to hear it!

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected nearly every aspect of our lives today. Can you articulate to our readers what are the biggest health related challenges you are facing as a woman business leader during this pandemic?

As is the situation for many people, home, work and family here all collided in a messy way that none of us expected. My husband, high school aged daughter and I all work from home now. As the KNOCK office, I had my own turf, but with the "home" office now been needed to be shared — and I am not but my whole family. Literally overnight, we had to adjust to not only new ways to work, but new "co-workers" and transition on top of all this stress of the pandemic. And as a mother and parent, it is largely seen as my job to figure it out and keep it together. It sent my mental health and priorities and tasks when tossed into this new environment. All of our old routines were disrupted and we had to create new ones. I had to be intentional in order to accommodate our needs. For me, my husband just received from his teaching job, and that is another life adjustment that we have had to navigate.

Can you share what you've done to address these challenges?

Open communication with my family ensures that we don't step on each other and are addressing our needs. Designating spaces for each person to work and have family time has been helpful. Also, honoring mental health is extremely important to keeping my family and strong in these tough times. I have made sure to keep myself sane in order to be there for my family. While many have resorted to virtual conferencing, such as Zoom, for being business meeting, I decided early on that an all-day virtually stream of Zoom calls would be too much for my family and myself. Instead of Zoom meeting, I decided to become dedicated to "walking meetings." With the help of my Apple watch, I put in my 10K steps a day, which keeps my meetings productive, clear-headed growth and my mental health in check.

Because you can so easily give a cabbie hole of money in COVID times, my family decided to do fun things to keep it at bay. We've made it our mission to explore the beautiful outdoor spaces that are in Minneapolis. At least three times a week, we will order out to show our support and we enjoy the family bonding of picking our where to eat and what to try next. Keeping your family engaged is something has brightness the week.

Can you share the biggest work-related challenges you are facing as a woman in business during this pandemic?

I seriously land awake for the first ten weeks of "shelter in place" worrying about how I was going to keep KNOCK alive with people employed. As the main bread winner in my family, I was acutely aware of what was at stake for everyone who works for us. Thankfully, we have not been forced to make any pay cuts or furloughs. We are extremely determined to keep our entire team together. Like everyone else, we applied for and received a loan which has allowed us to keep operating.

There is also the concern of making sure we stay extremely (in a work culture that cherishes collaboration), and how to keep the office actually functioning. We recognized early on that some people would need/wanted to return to the office for a variety of reasons. So making decisions around the health and safety of our employees was noteworthy we had to think about on a whole new level.

What have you done to address those challenges?

Our first challenge was keeping money coming in and employees paid. It goes without saying that navigating that entire loan process was extremely stressful. I am lucky to belong to women-led professional groups — Women's Presidents Organization (WPO), the C200 and We Rank — who helped me navigate the process of applying for the loan. Without their insight, we would not be well off today. We also started communicating the progress on the Big Fleming a reward group of experts and well connected people going through similar challenges provided us valuable and support system. I even got in the habit of recapping everything I learned and sharing it with other business owners as part of a group. At times like this, mutual support is incredibly important.

As for the physical work environment of our office and making decisions around who should come back to work, we had a lot of conversations and discovered that some people really wanted to safely to work from the office. So, we created a committee within the company to address that issue. The safety and health of our "work family" were the focus. We made the decision to allow about 25% of the employees to work in the office at any one time. We developed a sign-up system as well to make it fair. We also hired a daily cleaning service that specializes in sanitization to ensure that we were safe. We also purchased a lot of PPE and installed plexiglass in our open and temperature checks. Additionally, several years ago we decided to cover the cost of preparing health-care directives and wills for our employees. While it is sad to be thinking about those things, it becomes another source of potential stress for our employees and their families especially in troubling times like this. Our goal was to make our employees feel secured in as many ways as possible.

What's your advice on how to best work from home, while balancing the needs of homeschooling or the needs of a family?

It is a fair question, but in reality, balance is something that rarely exists in our world. It more closely resembles juggling. You are required to remove a new work environment that also serves as a family home. I am lucky as my kids are pretty independent and self-motivated. I know that is not the beginning of this journey for many families, and it is a challenge to be sure. Communication is key and a lot of patience is necessary. We all need empty mechanisms and screens are a large part of that. With the education system completely disrupted, it didn't make sense to cause more stress at home by instituting new rules. My kids have been great about scheduling their procedures and staying focused on school. But as restrictions lessen, they've started to widen their friend circles which is something we have been closely monitoring to ensure everyone's safe and healthy. We also have had to be very flexible with our work hours, so we can take care of the needs together, and generally have more conversations than we did before.

Can you share your strategies about how to stay sane and serene while sheltering in place, or simply staying inside, for long periods with your family?

My pre-pandemic life was just packed with weekly travel, so so much that off was entirely a shock. But as we all learn to slow our pace down, there is now space for other things that may have been neglected or even unknown. My most meaningful strategy is mindfulness and I discovered it been my walking routine. Walking has allowed me to meet neighbors, from afar, and to feel more connected to my community while working from home. That has been an unexpected joy. I also try to keep a good grasp on my mental health by being intentional about what I watch and what I have everything simply together. To remain healthy, I decided to remove what I would attempt to get dressed up a bit on Saturday nights, in spite of having nowhere to go, to serve as a marker for the weekend!

Many people have become anxious from the dramatic jolts of the news cycle. The fears related to the coronavirus pandemic have exacerbated anxiety and depression. What are your strategies to handle stressors. From your perspective, just one help our readers to set the "Light at the End of the Tunnel"? Can you share your "5 Reasons To Be Hopeful During this Coronavirus Crisis"? If you can, please share a story or example for each.

Anxiety and fear have been top of mind for us. In addition to the pandemic, we all witnessed the horrific murder of George Floyd here in Minneapolis — which rocked many of us to the core. Managing COVID-19 was challenging enough, but the ensuing protests and unrest made it even more difficult. As a concerned Black man was shattering, the pride ourselves is being one of the most diverse companies in the Twin Cities and seeing the anxiety and hopelessness of the Minneapolis community was brutal. While we offer boxes located in the midst of the chaos, we had to bound up our doors and stay aware of where the riots were happening and moving. From the beginning, we have been open about communicating about issues of race and discrimination. We have been working with our clients to create a social could voice our collective pain, confusion and fear. Diversity, equity and inclusion are already a part of our DNA at KNOCK, yet we are always open to learning and evolving. We brought in Jessica Michel Hall from MORE Coach (thewokeroach.com), to help with that. I also purchased dozens of relevant books on the subject and have made them available to staff. When it comes to things like social justice issues, the best can be read, but allowing yourself and others to be empowered and take action is key.

Whereas, when it relates to COVID specifically, despite the devastation happening in our world that too, there are always reasons to be hopeful:

- The collaboration happening in the science community around information sharing and vaccine development has been remarkable to witness. With scientists all around the world working on the issue of COVID-19, solutions will reveal themselves.
- Because this is a global issue, former unlikely partners are now working together for a common goal, which is good for humanity and world relations.
- This tough time is not going to last forever. I believe this period in time will serve as a reset button for our country. All the existing paradigms in society are shifting and it is exciting to think about positive change.
- Community has become much stronger and heartiness appears a silver and well. This new world has seen so many entrepreneurs doing remarkable things, the pivoting simplifiers into a source for hard sanitizer or a manufacturer retooling his floor to make masks or ventilators and people committed to helping each other.
- We are now being forced to examine our priorities and step of life with new perspectives. I have had so many conversations with people who are realizing their need to reprioritize what is important in life. We are now acutely aware of those people and things we love and have a renewed sense of appreciation for what we have.

From your experience, what are a few ideas that one can use to effectively offer support to families of loved ones who are feeling anxious? Can you explain?

I think you need to assume that everyone you know is feeling anxious on some level. It is important that we take the time to notice when people are acting differently and to be willing to ask them if they need to talk about it. When communicating with each other, it's important not to take things too personal as everyone's emotions are heightened. We also strive to make as many concessions as possible to make the added stress to those around us. Making sure you are staying as healthy and safe as possible — so you are not negatively impacting those around you — allows all of us the ability to reclaim some sort of control over this situation, which in turn lowers the stress factor.

Can you please give us your favorite "Life Lessons Quote"? Can you share how that relevant to you in your life?

"Pay it forward"

The concept of creating a ripple effect of good is something that has resonated with me throughout my entire life. Our work with multiple organizations and philanthropies has been extremely rewarding for our clients, and we are BEING inclusive (and so much more) has given us a greater appreciation for people and the struggles they might have. It's taught me generously. It's made me a better person. This situation of growing vulnerability by nature and its exponential value projects positive change we can all feel and appreciate.

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Executive Producer of Talkabit Films
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Are the interviewer Karina Michel Hall is the Owner and Executive Producer of Talkabit Films. Karina has 20+ years of experience in TV, film, and print and is a respected member of The Producers Guild of America. The mission of Talkabit Films is to bring together directors, entrepreneurs, film-makers, and seasoned to produce award-winning TV and film projects. Karina is also a Mom, a Wife, a Dog Lover, and a Yoga Enthusiast, refreshed, and uplifting. Karina is Co-Owner and CPO of Fresh Pickle LLC. Can seen on ABC's "Shark Tank".

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