

A pioneering woman in Australia's property development industry, Kaye Dening AM (BEC '67) believes that her greatest achievement has been to find a successful balance between her career and her family

THE PERFECT balance

AT THE AGE of 18, Kaye Dening was faced with one of the most difficult decisions of her life. A tennis prodigy, she already held the rank of number one on the world's junior tennis circuit, having won titles at the Junior Australian, French, US and Italian Opens and having reached the finals at Junior Wimbledon. Now she needed to choose between continuing her tennis career on the senior tour or putting it on hold in order to either take up a sporting scholarship to Stanford University or enrol at the University of Sydney on a Commonwealth Scholarship, which she had been awarded two years earlier.

"At that time there was no money in tennis," Kaye recalls. "So I thought maybe I would take the Commonwealth Scholarship, get a career behind me, and then go back on the tour. I had also been starting to feel pretty stressed: I was walking out onto the court trying not to lose, rather than trying to win."

So in 1964, Kaye enrolled in a Bachelor of Economics at the University of

Sydney. At the time, economics was not a popular choice among women, and Kaye was one of just five female students enrolled in her year. "I had a tennis hitting partner who was just completing economics, and I thought if he can do it, I can do it," she says.

Kaye threw herself into the University's rich student culture, becoming involved in the Union, which at the time was divided along gender lines, and forging lifelong friendships with many of her fellow economics students, including Nick Greiner, Tony Berg, Wayne Lonergan and John Hewson. "I was even crowned Miss Economics," she laughs. "They were the most wonderful years, it was fabulous. And having Sir Hermann Black as a mentor was just a bonus."

After graduating, Kaye decided not to return to the world tennis tour as a senior, although she had already succeeded in reaching the quarter finals of the Australian Open while she was a first year student, and

had also brought home a gold medal from the Student Olympics in Tokyo, representing Sydney University. Putting aside her sporting ambitions, she asked her father to consider finding her a position in his building company, H H Dening. He initially refused, thinking that construction was an unsuitable industry for a woman. But Kaye persevered and she eventually joined the family company in 1968. "I figured that if I put the same amount of effort and determination into business that I had put into tennis, then I would be successful," she says.

By 1979, Kaye was a qualified real estate valuer and had also become the first woman in Australia to be licensed as a master builder, despite active opposition to her gaining a license by some of her male colleagues. Then just as Kaye was starting to gain the confidence of her father, he died suddenly and his daughter found herself holding the reins of the family business.



Kaye Denning, construction pioneer and former tennis ace

PHOTOGRAPHY TED SEALEY

Kaye soon thrived in her new leadership role and over the next two decades she expanded the firm into what is now the Denning Group, a successful group of construction, property development and investment companies. Looking back, she says she believes that the never-say-die attitude she acquired as a teenage tennis champion has played a pivotal role in helping her overcome the challenges she faced on the road to success as a developer. "You can be down in a set five-love, and still not lose until the last point is played," she says. "I took that psychology into managing companies. I wouldn't give up and I wouldn't take no for an answer, whether it was from men on the job or from the bank manager."

Today, Kaye is CEO of the Denning Group and also divides her time among a number of philanthropic interests including Social Ventures Australia, which provides seed funding to social entrepreneurs, and the MS Trish

Foundation, which funds research into multiple sclerosis. Kaye has also devoted much of her energy to advancing the interests of the Australian building sector, especially through her involvement with the Master Builders Association. In 1995, she was created a Member of the Order of Australia for her services to construction.

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In recent years, Kaye has also been dedicating her time to the University of Sydney in order to give something back to the institution she remembers so fondly. She is a Senate Appointee to the University of Sydney Union Board and a member of the Campus 2020 board, which is helping the University to plan for future expansion. Kaye also has close links to the Faculty of Economics and Business and is a member of the Faculty's Alumni

Working Group, which is making a concerted effort to re-engage with economics and business alumni.

Out of all the passions in her life, however, Kaye says that raising five children has been the most significant and fulfilling. "I really couldn't be the person I am today if I hadn't had a

balanced life," she says. "It was never a choice for me between a career and family: I always knew I could have both."

Kaye adds that two factors have been crucial in enabling her to combine a successful business career with raising a family. "The first was a supportive husband. The second was being in my own business, which does allow you to allocate time according to your own priorities. And for me, that was always the kids."