

Melissa Di Donato

CEO of Kyriba and ex-CEO of Suse



Melissa sat down with Jane Wakefield to discuss how a girl from the Bronx rose to be a CEO, and the role that financial hardship, personal tragedy and being herself played in that.

Melissa Di Donato is proud to have been the first woman to list a billion-Euro software firm on the German stock exchange, but she admits that if I had asked her 20-year-old self if she would become a CEO, she wouldn't have believed it.

"Never ever in a million years would I have said I could do that," she tells me.

Back then she wanted to go into public service.

"I wanted to make the world a better place. I didn't really know how but I thought the best way of serving people and making the world better was going into government and politics."

As a 15-year-old, she was obsessed with Russian history and went on to get an MBA in Russian and Literature at the American University. Melissa chose to study there because it was based at the heart of government in Washington D.C., but going on to study International Business, she realised that her desire to go into government may not pay off her student loans.

"My first mentor, the Dean of the Business School, said that SAP software seemed to be really catching on and paying a lot of money to young people to be engineers." And so began a career in software.

If there is a theme that runs through my chat with Melissa, it is money, the lack of it and how that has shaped this girl from the Bronx.

"My mum and dad got divorced when I was really young, and he left us with nothing. We went off to live with my grandmother. My clothes came from Kmart or the Salvation Army.

"I was a lunch coupon child. We got bread, milk and cheese from the town hall." Her financial situation was not really something that she thought about at the time, and she tells me that she never felt particularly disadvantaged, other than when

she was waiting in line at school to hand over her coupon.

"I think I was probably very fortunate to grow up underprivileged because it made me who I am today," she tells me.

"I never questioned whether I worked or didn't work. I never questioned if I couldn't fight because I always was a fighter."

And now, as a mother to three far more privileged children, she wonders if their lives will be very differently shaped. I've often questioned if I am doing them a huge disservice by putting them in such a privileged position rather than raising grafters."

Melissa was definitely a grafter, racking up roles at BearingPoint, Oracle, PricewaterhouseCoopers and IBM between 1998 and 2008. But it was while she was at Salesforce, working as the most senior female executive outside of the US, that financial hardship struck again. And the second time around it was punctuated by personal tragedy.

"My daughter, Francesca, was born in January 2014 and in October 2015 my husband died very suddenly." To add to the shock and grief of that, Melissa realised that her husband had, in her own words: "left me completely broke." "I had nothing. I lost all my life savings. I had a house in Italy that I lost. "I had £7,000 in my bank account. I was living in Kensington and my rent was £18,500 a month and I had no way of paying it."

She was lent some money by a business associate and friend but made the decision that she had to turbo-charge her career.

"I made a choice right then and there. I can either pack it in and go back to New York where I hadn't lived for 10 years, or I just walk into Salesforce and say to Marc (Benioff) and the executive team that I'm here to be the next CEO.

"And I pretty much did that, I didn't say CEO because I still didn't think I could ever be a CEO, but I walked in and said I've got big ambitions. My life is on the line, my

daughter's life is on the line." And from that moment, her career took off even more than it had before.

"I started doubling my income, I made investments, I would do advising for boards. I paid back all my debt, I paid off the debt my deceased husband left me with. I went on to do amazing things."

"Had I not been poor twice, had I not had a dead husband and a newborn baby, I definitely would not be a

CEO for sure."

And if she were to give advice to other women considering their future it would be this: "Don't wait until there is tragedy in your life to be the best version of yourself. And don't have imposter syndrome. Don't make your goals too low. Lift the weights that are too heavy because eventually you will become strong enough." Imposter syndrome is something many

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successful women talk about having and Melissa is no exception.

While she got used to being the only woman in the room, she didn't get used to whispers about how she got there. "Am I too nice? Are my heels too high? Is there too much make-up? Maybe I got here because of the way I look. That always has been at the back of my mind," she confesses.

"I spent the vast majority of my career in a business setting toning down the way I looked. I had to wear skirts because that's what women wore, all blue and black pinstripes and buttoned-up white tops and pantyhose. I freaking hate pantyhose."

Sitting with me at the Boardwave Live event in London, she abandoned the corporate uniform (and the pantyhose). From her blonde hair to the colourful dress, she makes no apology for the way she looks.

"I am at a point in my life, and

have been for 10 years now, where I said I'm going to actually just be myself. I've made a conscious decision to get up every day and be who I am, rather than pretending to be someone I'm not."

Authenticity is something she is passionate about for all women, as is being an advocate and mentor to other females in the tech industry.

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"We still have more Andrews and Simons in the UK top 100 companies than we have females," she says.

"I want more women in the room purely to have diversity of thought. It is for the betterment of our companies and our communities that we have people that don't

all look the same in the room."

Her charity, Inner Wings, is focused on solving the pipeline problem – the shortage of female applicants for tech jobs, because young girls tend to abandon STEM subjects.

Key to changing this will be "more role models, more women telling their stories," she tells me.

What was the best advice you have been given?

Get a mentor and try SAP – it seems to be catching on!

What tech (other than your phone) could you not live without?

ChatGPT

Tell me something surprising about you?

I have tattoos and raced motorcycles

What job would you have done if you hadn't become a CEO?

A politician

What are your top three tips for business success?

- *Be flexible.*
- *There is no such thing as a career ladder, it's a New York fire escape.*
- *Believe in yourself. You are so much more capable than you think you are.*



For many, her floating of Suse on the Frankfurt stock exchange would be regarded as a huge achievement but Melissa actually regards it as one of her biggest failures.

"I shouldn't have listed Suse. I didn't want to do it, but I had no choice and it was the wrong thing to do at the wrong time."

"It was a very successful IPO all the way through January and February of 2022 and then with the economy and everything else the share prices started to go down."

"I didn't enjoy being the CEO of

a German-listed company. No-one understood our tech, no-one understood infrastructure. No matter what we did the share price was still hampered because we were in the tech basket and tech was going down."

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It is why now she is also passionate as an advocate for the European software industry, something she does in her role as a Boardwave patron.

She also recently took on a new CEO role at cloud-based finance solutions

provider Kyriba and she says the job suits her much better.

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As we speak, she has only been in post for four weeks but has already embraced it with her usual gusto.

"I've been in five countries in three and half weeks meeting loads of our employees and many customers. Kyriba operates like a start-up, and it gives me a good opportunity to do what I'm good at – which is operational and commercial excellence. The people have been amazing, the culture is awesome, the customers love the product."

And she has typically big ambitions for the firm – to double the value of the business by 2025.

Melissa tells me that she likes to do things in threes, and she definitely feels that there will be one more CEO role for her at some point in the future.

Not bad for a girl from the Bronx who never imagined rising to the top.

