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## **MANSI SHAH-KOTHARI, EVENT STYLIST, HONG KONG**

Today we are speaking with Mansi Shah-Kothari, 29, event stylist and one of the founding partners of 3 Degrees Events Limited in Hong Kong. Visit their website [here](#) and follow them on Instagram.

### **Tell us about your background.**

I was born in India, my dad moved to Hong Kong for work shortly after I was born and my mum and I moved when I was 10 months old. I have always lived in Hong Kong except during the five years I studied and worked in London. I'm Indian and my parents made it a point to speak Gujarati at home because they didn't want me to lose touch with my mother tongue but Hong Kong is where I call home.

### **What did you study at university?**

I studied Philosophy and Economics at the London School of Economics (LSE). I had studied Religious Studies at A-level and enjoyed discussing morality, ethics and religious issues so wanted to study Philosophy. Luckily my dad insisted that I did something else with it so I combined it with Economics and when I was at the LSE I enjoyed the Economics part of the course more. If I was to go back and make the decision about where to study again I would probably apply to the States because in the UK you have to choose what you want to study straight away and do it for three years whereas in the States you have more flexibility. I'm quite an artistic and creative

type and I think that the US system might have fit better with that side of my personality.

How did your move back to Hong Kong come about?

I'm an only child and very close to my parents; they really wanted me to return to Hong Kong but I kept extending my return date because I wasn't ready to leave London. So when we finally agreed that I would come home I approached my boss at UBS and explained the situation. They were kind enough to offer me a transfer to Hong Kong.

How did you end up working at UBS?

I did a Human Resources (HR) internship at UBS during the summer holidays after my second year at university. They offered me a job which I accepted; I started work when I graduated. I love numbers but never wanted to work in finance, I also really like being around and working with people which is why I went into HR. I completed a graduate scheme during my first two years at UBS, this meant rotating through different departments. I settled on an analyst role in the HR department producing reports analysing headcount and termination trends, but more interestingly, working with department heads and building models to help allocate salary increases and bonuses.

How did you meet your two business partners?

My two business partners are Janhavi and Vehka. Janhavi and I grew up together and Vehka and I met through mutual friends when we were in high school. In January 2013, Janhavi mentioned that she wanted to do something of her own in the wedding and events field in the future, and I said to her when you feel ready to make that leap let me know because I would love to be involved. Janhavi had a similar conversation with Vehka and a few weeks later the three of us met to discuss whether the idea could work. We were very conscious that we were three friends going into business together and made it very clear from the beginning that we would have to make decisions as business partners which we couldn't let affect our friendship. So far working together has strengthened our friendship; in fact, they are now like family.

### How did you go about starting 3 Degrees?

In spring 2013 we started devising our business plan; I quit UBS in May and signed up for a course the following month in Strategic Design Management at Parsons in New York and Central Saint Martins in London. This involved creating a business idea and presenting a business model, the skills I learnt there were so useful in starting 3 Degrees. We incorporated a limited company in September; Hong Kong is one of the easiest places to set up a company which makes it such a great place for start-ups and entrepreneurs.

### What's the process involved in planning an event?

3 Degrees helps plan all kinds of events, including weddings, personal celebrations and corporate events. Each event is different, but starts with an initial meeting with the client to understand what they want and what vision they have in mind. Based on that meeting we will do some research, come up with a few proposals and agree a concept with the client. From then on, if hired, we will also handle all budgeting and vendor management. We believe it's the little details that make all the difference, and thus our focus is on styling and adding personal touches which make an event unique. In terms of sourcing decorations for an event, we are very hands on and design and produce a lot ourselves; it's important to us that we get unique items for our clients at a low price which often means making them ourselves. I really enjoy the creative process involved in making things which is something I didn't have in my previous career.

### How do you maintain a work-life balance when you have your own company?

I have much more of a personal investment in the company, so if something comes up after hours I have to make a call as to whether it can wait or if I should deal with it urgently. There are times when I don't have any personal time at all but I have learned to find balance and I have the flexibility of working less when it is quieter; I don't have a boss expecting me to be at my desk.

**What has been your greatest challenge so far?**

My greatest challenge has been not doing what I was expected to. I wish that I had taken the time out earlier on to challenge myself and ask myself if I was in the right career. I took the easier path of going into a graduate job in HR rather than figuring out what I enjoyed and wanted to achieve and making a career out of that.

**Who has inspired you?**

My parents. Nowadays, our generation has so much in terms of education and exposure which my parents' generation didn't. The fact that they were able to come to Hong Kong with nothing and make a home and living for themselves really inspires me.

**How did you meet your husband?**

My husband, Chirag, was first pointed out to me two years before we officially met but he was living in Belgium at the time and I was living in London. Two years later we both moved to Hong Kong and the aunties in the Indian community called both our mothers suggesting that we meet. One day he messaged me and we met; we didn't like each other at first, we had both made back up plans to make sure we could get away. A few weeks later we met again and we spoke for hours, from then on we spoke every day and saw each other every other day and within three months we were engaged. I think it's different when you date because you've been introduced for marriage. Although we didn't view our relationship this way, it did feel like the dating process had almost been fast tracked.

**Why is marriage so important in Indian culture?**

In traditional Indian culture many parents would like their daughters to be married by the time they are 23 or 24, they worry that if you aren't married by then it will be harder to find the right man and the right family. In Indian culture it's not just a boy and girl marrying but the coming together of two families. I feel like this expectation is changing and people are getting married later. I pushed back against this and got engaged and married later than was expected.

**What have you learned as a result of your relationship with Chirag?**

Learning to love and accept each other for who we are is something that has come with time and something that I've learned to value. It's easy to pick on each other's flaws and get into arguments but when you love someone for who they are you don't get into those arguments and things are a lot easier. I've learned that rather than going into marriage with the mind-set that you can change someone, if you simply let them be who they are, they change for the better as an individual and you flourish together as a couple.

**What advice would you give to a young girl?**

Don't try and plan out your life from the very beginning because things will change. Be ambitious and don't be scared if your priorities change – it doesn't make you any less ambitious; it just means that you're striving to achieve different things and that's okay.