

a PEARL *of* WISDOM

Elise Gasbarrino is not your typical belle of the ball. Like many women, Elise loves clothes—but more so accessories: shoes, jewellery and handbags. But not every woman gets to wake up each day and go to work surrounded by them.

words by **Jentzen Michael Shea**
@jentzenmshea

photographer **Shai Mendelsohn**
hair **Stefanie Smith**
make up **Hassan Haque**

For the last few years, Elise has been building a career that so many who covet all things sartorial would kill for. Based in New York, she works for one of the most iconic British fashion labels, Burberry. As a business student in university Elise worked hard to achieve everything she desired. She interned at Walt Disney and went on an exchange to the UK. After graduation she worked at a not-for-profit, a sportswear company and a handbag company. Soon she began to realize that her dreams were bigger than the Toronto fashion scene. Elise decided to set the bar high and get some training in one of the world's most fashionable cities, Milan, where she completed her Masters in Fashion Brand Management. During a visit to see a friend after completing her program, Elise decided that she was meant to live in the hustle and bustle of the New York fashion scene and secured an internship in the "Big Apple." The hard work and countless unpaid hours at various internships were starting to take their toll when fate seemed to step in. Elise notes that, "when I landed the internship at Oscar de la Renta, I knew it would open doors to something big. I knew my career in fashion was about to take off." The internship at Oscar de la Renta led to a full time position as a sales assistant working on the New York and Paris markets, where she stayed for three years.

More recently, Elise has been managing working relationships with vendors and buyers alike as an account executive for handbags and footwear at Burberry. Working with upscale department stores such as Neiman Marcus, Saks Fifth Avenue and El Palacio; she conducts business analysis reports and develops competitive shopping strategies. She provides training and product knowledge for employees, as well as partnership events with ready-to-wear collections.

Like all of us, Elise is so much more than her career. She is wise beyond her years. She playfully juxtaposes this wisdom with a bubbly personality that is as charming as it is contagious. She is an account executive with the fashion world at her fingertips. She is daughter. Elise is a best friend and a sorority sister. She is nearing a decade of work as the founder of the Pink Pearl Foundation. Elise Gasbarrino is a cancer survivor.

Before the store visits, all the shoes, the handbags and the numerous fashion events, her future didn't always look so bright. During her third year of university, while on a co-op term in Ottawa, Elise found herself feeling out of sorts. "I remember feeling abdominal pain for quite some time and I recall my mom and my doctor commenting that I was sort of walking funny," she explains, "I went in for a number of tests and they came back that I had a tumour—it was ovarian

cancer. I was 21."

While performing surgery to remove the cancer, doctors found a tumour roughly the size of a volleyball. To ensure they removed the entire mass, one of Elise's ovaries and a kidney were also removed. Treatment was extremely aggressive; surgery was followed up with four rounds of chemo. The first, being intravenous five days a week from 9 a.m. – 5 p.m. The following rounds consisted of multiple shots and even saw her require a blood transfusion due to low hemoglobin. It was nowhere near the university experience the sorority girl was hoping for in her third year.

She recalls that while going through treatment she looked for various resources to not only help her and her family cope, but she knew her friends were having a hard time with it as well. "I didn't want to be the girl with cancer," she states, "in hindsight though, I think I probably should have tried to relax more, but I felt compelled to try and control the uncontrollable." So she set out to find support groups for young women battling cancer in her hometown and found very few that even came close to what she was hoping for. Organizations exist for women battling cancer, but many of the women she met were already mothers—she wasn't even sure that would be in her future anymore—or they were retired. She was searching for a place where she could meet people relatively her age, facing the issues she was facing. Issues like final exams, boyfriends and parties, and where to apply for a job. Cancer already felt lonely; cancer as an outgoing university student felt lonelier. Luckily Elise had a close-knit circle of friends.

In August of 2006, after battling chemo and going through not one, but two, surgeries, true to her go-getter nature, Elise decided to create the support group she was looking for and the Pink Pearl Foundation was born.

The foundation supports the Juravinski Cancer Centre, the Walker Family Cancer Centre, Wellwood Resource Centre and Wellspring Niagara by helping to create programming and retreats for young women aged 18-35 battling cancer. Through the foundation's partnership with the Juravinski Centre, young women facing cancer are given an in-hospital support package developed specifically for them. At diagnosis, they receive a package including a listing of support services available to them, a checklist of items and the "touch of pink"—a bracelet symbolizing strength and serving as a reminder to the women that they are not facing the disease alone.

The support for patients doesn't stop there, the foundation has created a series of seminars called "Ask the Experts" where industry partners and councillors are brought together to break down barriers and communicate in a welcome environment where no topic is off limits from medical, to financial, to relationships.

Going one step further, Pink Pearl offers retreats which bring together holistic approaches to healing in tandem with medical treatments. Retreat goes partake in yoga, nutritional discussions, hikes and team building experiences. "It is not about how many programs we create," explains Elise, "it is all about how many people we help. If a program doesn't exist we will certainly try our best to find it or create something to bridge that gap."

These efforts are made possible through the foundation's annual gala "Black & White with a touch of Pink." Elise and her family started the annual Black & White event in 2006 and it has grown year after year. This year the gala was held at a trendy art/loft space where event goers donned their best black and white duds with, of course, a touch of pink. The event was a bevy of talent from artists to live music but the highlight was when survivors took the stage to offer their thanks to the foundation and its matriarch for providing them with a sense of belonging and support in a time of both pain and uncertainty.

It's true; Elise Gasharrino is not your typical belle of the

ball. She is a fighter and a force to be reckoned with. While maintaining humility she notes that she "has been so lucky to partner with so many great people and fantastic organizations. This started as a passion project and has grown so much bigger than me." When asked of her plans for the foundation in the coming years, Elise indicated that she hopes the organization will open local chapters in other regions creating more services and programs for women, including partnerships across the United States and Canada. Now eight years in remission, she has accomplished so much in both her education and career paths, to her work with the foundation helping others during their most difficult struggles. Elise is certainly on the path to achieving more of the goals she has set out for herself and the foundation she created. She is indeed many things, a caring and outgoing spirit; a savvy business woman; a fashionista. But like the foundation which shares its name, she is a pearl: a rare find, one that is truly precious.

To learn more about the Pink Pearl Foundation visit www.pinkpearlfoundation.org



*"It is all about how many people
we help." - Elise Gasbarrino*