

Model on a mission | Milford PA

Wendy Kaplan — model and writer, traveler and advocate — gets her 'life's balance' in Milford

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Photos

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Wendy Kaplan with a photo from her last trip to Africa (Photo by Anya Tikka)

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Alan Kaplan took this photo of the African girl whose life was saved by malaria medicine

“Milford gives me balance to my life. It has so many opportunities I wouldn’t have in the city. You can volunteer for so many things, and see results.”

Wendy Kaplan

By Anya Tikka

MILFORD — Wendy Kaplan says she was turned down by "every agency" when looking for modeling work in New York City, and later in Paris and Milan. But now, at 60, the part-time Milford resident is still modeling and still in demand — hence the title of her recent book, “She’s the Last Model Standing.”

Kaplan is dismayed so many women over 40 or 50 cannot find work. Why? she asks, when they have experience.

She’s also an advocate for anyone who doesn’t quite fit society’s norm. She seeks to introduce people “whose stories nobody’s heard” to a larger audience.

That’s why she wrote her book: to inspire others — no matter where, and no matter what age — to keep on going. To this end, she’s founded Model on a Mission, an organization that promotes worthy causes

like the Upper Delaware GLBT, is starting a scholarship program at the GAIT horse therapy center, and creates videos for the Wildlife Conservation Film Festival.

Kaplan thinks both globally and locally, raising awareness of endangered wildlife around the world while also promoting local rescue centers like the Pike County Humane Society.

A perfect fit

All that's on top of working as what's known a "fit model" for some very big names in fashion, like Eileen Fisher, Nina Mclemore, Michael Kors, and Walmart, where she mainly models underwear. Designers and clothing manufacturers use fit models to see how a garment looks on a real person.

"I have to make sure everything fits the way they want it, exactly," she said with a laugh.

She says the industry is about much more than just supermodels.

"They only tell you about big famous models," Kaplan said. "Nobody hears of us who are still doing it. I've had a very successful career. Now my idea is to inspire."

Growing up in Bronx, Kaplan had a difficult time after her lawyer dad came down with Parkinson's and her homemaker mom became the sole breadwinner. Her appeal was evident from early days. She had been a runner-up in Miss America contest. Her glamorous friends from that world influenced her dream of becoming a model.

As a fit model, Kaplan slips garments on her "perfect size 8" figure so that designers know how to alter them for other sizes.

"I work a lot with fabrics, knits," she said. "I know how things drape. A lot of successful women have their own businesses but can't find anything to wear. A lot of things are still designed for young women, I don't like to wear what my 17-year-old does, but I'm hip and cool. There's a big void here. You'll spend money on something that makes you feel good, and in my industry that spells success."

Africa calls

For two weeks each year, Kaplan travels to a distant place with her photographer-husband, Alan, to gather stories about endangered animals or remote tribes.

She tells of an Indian farmer who rescued 6,000 Siberian cranes that were about to disappear because of industrialization. They couldn't land on the one-crop fields the farmers were required to plant on the birds' migration routes.

"He organized all the local farmers to plant these seeds to feed and land these birds," Kaplan said. "This guy with not even a sixth-grade education, someone you're never heard of, but he knew when they feed, who the leader was, he knew because it was important for him. I want to tell all the stories you've never heard of."

In Costa Rica, she met a woman who helped sloths endangered because the government cut down trees.

But Kaplan's real love is Africa, the continent that calls to her again and again. Even when she was very young, she said, she knew she'd go there someday.

Her first trip was to Nigeria, on a student summer study program, at a time of huge political unrest. She traveled to places where she was regarded as a sort of goddess because of her blond hair. She cheerfully admits it comes from a bottle.

Her latest trip, at the beginning of this year, was to visit four tribes in Ethiopia who still live the way they did thousands of years ago.

"We were told they are violent, terrible," she said. "But we found them and said we would pay each leader \$100 and each person some money too for photos. They don't have cash, they deal in cattle, and they all have AK 47s, — from Russia I guess. But they could not have been nicer. The kids sat with me. They offered me their lip plates. It was really unbelievable."

She hopes ecotourism will send more visitors there because it will help the village and its people.

"I asked this man, would you give me an on camera interview?" she said. "He said yes but didn't want money, just a ride to Jinko two miles away. He said his daughter needed malaria medicine, but he couldn't pay for it."

When they arrived, they found that the price for the medicine was just \$15. Kaplan paid for it.

"It was absolutely unbelievable," she said, with tears in her eyes. "Someone can die for \$15. We learned something that day."

Husband Alan leaned in to whisper: "She forgot to say she does all this because she really cares."

But no matter how far she travels, Kaplan is always happy to come home to Milford.

"Milford gives me balance to my life," she said. "It has so many opportunities I wouldn't have in the city. You can volunteer for so many things, and see results."

Although she's a part-time resident, she spends so much time here that she feels she's "a full-time person."

In Milford, she said, "you can jump in with both feet first. It's a metaphor for a lot of the things I've been through."

"She's the Last Model Standing" is for sale at The Milford Craft Show, 120 East Harford St., Milford (570-296-5662); and on Amazon.com.

For more information [visit kaplanstuarttv.com](http://kaplanstuarttv.com), or search "Model with a mission" on YouTube.



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