

Meet  
*Kirstin Ferguson*

The woman behind the #CelebratingWomen campaign

Company director and ABC board member Kirstin Ferguson lurched to the front of the corporate world's gender equality debate with a series of tweets she started in January 2017. Ferguson profiled two women on social media every day for an entire year in her #CelebratingWomen campaign, inspiring women from all walks of life to celebrate each other's achievements.

**KATE ALLMAN**, profile number 441, reports.

Photography: Jason McCormack

**T**he world of social media can be a cruel place, especially for women. Anyone who has ventured onto Twitter knows how rife anonymous online bullies, known as trolls, are. Horrific news stories, such as those detailing the death of Charlotte Dawson in 2014, show just how crushing their abuse can be.

Australian businesswoman and leading company director Kirstin Ferguson has watched countless female colleagues cop abuse online. She has had to deal with the issue frequently in her roles as a board member at the ABC and chairwoman of the ABC People Committee.

One day early in 2017, she decided enough was enough.

“I was reading some of the negative comments that one of ABC’s talented on-air broadcasters had received,” recalls Ferguson. “They were targeting Patricia Karvelas [a radio presenter and host of ABC’s Radio National *Drive* program]. I can’t even remember what the comments were but I was really annoyed.

“This happened in her workplace – because being online is an important part of Patricia’s work. My frustration stemmed from being on the board at the ABC and feeling a sense of concern and care for everyone within that organisation. But more so, I felt we needed to collectively find a way to make noise of a different kind, in a positive way for women.”

The next day, Ferguson wrote an opinion piece on corporate women’s news site *Women’s Agenda*, in which she vowed to try to counter the negativity saturating social media. She promised to “celebrate women, from all walks of life” by featuring photos and quotes from two women each day for a year on Twitter and Facebook.

The first woman she celebrated was her mother, Irene, in January 2017, and the last was her eldest daughter Emily, a year later. The movement #CelebratingWomen was born.

Ferguson has celebrated more than



***I’ve had plenty of women say to me it’s changed their experience of Twitter. If that has been the outcome and if I’ve made human beings just that little bit cheerier for a year, then that makes me very happy.***

KIRSTIN FERGUSON



700 women from 37 countries since that fabled first tweet. She says she did not miss a single day for the entire year – whether she was travelling, sitting in taxis, at airports, or celebrating her birthday or Christmas.

“Someone recently asked me whether I did all the profiles myself – I was devastated!” says Ferguson. “Of course I did! I wrote every single word.”

At first, Ferguson profiled friends and family. When she opened an online portal where women could submit photos and answers to the four questions she posed, the responses came flooding in.

Women in a multitude of professions, from law to astrophysics, began sending in photos and snippets of information that summarised their lives. Ferguson introduced two women every day to an online community of other women, who would retweet, “like” and celebrate their diversity.

“There were some profiles that I would read and think, ‘Oh my goodness, I had no idea that was a profession,’” recalls Ferguson. “And there were some women who had really difficult, challenging lives, yet they still found their passion. It was remarkable.

“I’ve had plenty of women say to me it’s changed their experience of Twitter. If that has been the outcome and if I’ve made human beings just that little bit cheerier for a year, then that makes me very happy.”

### **A career in defence**

Ferguson has repeatedly refused to share her own answers and photos for #CelebratingWomen because she says the campaign was always about celebrating other women, not herself. While this is typical of the eternally modest, mentor-to-all that Ferguson is, it seems a shame not to share the fascinating story of her life and career.

Ferguson was born in Sydney and spent her early childhood living in the small town of Maianbar in the Royal National Park. When she was in high school, her family moved into a 19th-century terrace house just off Oxford



Above: Two of Kirstin Ferguson's first tweets in the #CelebratingWomen campaign featuring her mother, Irene, and her friend and colleague from the ABC, Leigh Sales.

Clockwise from top centre: Ferguson gathers with attendees at the first of a number of #CelebratingWomen networking events that followed her campaign; a proud Ferguson dressed in full military attire for her ADFA graduation parade in 1993; and preparing to fly an RAF Hawk over Wales in 1994.

Street in Surry Hills that was rumoured to be one of Sydney crime figure Abe Saffron's former brothels.

"Growing up in that inner-city environment during the 1980s really gave me a foundation for understanding the importance of diversity and equality," says Ferguson, who has a PhD in corporate governance and leadership, and is known for her work advocating the benefits of diversity for businesses.

Walking past Darlinghurst Courthouse each day on her way to SCEGGS Darlinghurst also helped form a romantic vision of the judicial system in Ferguson's mind, and she initially wanted to go to law school to become a prosecutor. However, when she fell just short of the requisite mark to study law at the University of Sydney, she chose a different path, enrolling to study arts – and later law – at the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA) instead.

"I'm from a third-generation military family and I loved the idea of the adventure," says Ferguson. "I knew the leadership opportunities that being in the

military would give me. The military also offered to pay for my university degree – and I can't pretend that wasn't a big plus for a 17-year-old."

Ferguson spent four years at ADFA at a time when women accounted for less than 10 per cent of all cadets. She attributes her passion for empowering women to her experience in this high-discipline, male-dominated environment.

"I was really fortunate that I had a great experience there with my male colleagues, but I know many women didn't," says Ferguson. "It was a challenging time for women in the military, which is something the military has acknowledged, investigated and sought to redress."

At 21, Ferguson was posted to an F-111 air squadron with the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) near Brisbane. She met her husband on her second day there and says the rest is history.

"It was just like out of *Top Gun*," laughs Ferguson, who celebrated her 20th wedding anniversary in January. "Such a cliché."

When she left the RAAF three years later in 1998, Ferguson started a job as national administration manager at a national law firm. She was studying law part time while working and also had two children.

“What I loved about law was the way it teaches you to think,” says Ferguson. “It is a brilliant degree for teaching you to analyse problems, solve issues and even communicate. I have used those skills every single day in my work since.”

Ferguson’s intention was to practise law once she graduated in 2001. However, by the time she was admitted to practise in Queensland, she had fallen in love with her leadership role in the firm’s executive team and decided to continue leading and building businesses.

After proving her leadership skills at the law firm, Ferguson was offered a role as chief executive officer for international consulting firm Sentis in 2006.

In 2008, the Queensland Government asked Ferguson to join the board of the government-owned corporation SunWater. She went on to become the first female non-executive director of Queensland Rugby Union in 2011 and to sit on the boards of Queensland Theatre, Thiess and CIMIC Group. By 2012, Ferguson’s growing board portfolio had morphed into a full-time career.

“I came to really love sitting in board meetings and looking at the big picture,” says Ferguson. “When you’re in a full-time executive role, you get really deep in the context of that particular organisation. But now, I get to contribute in a range of different ways in diverse industries including media, manufacturing, property and not-for-profits. There are so many different contexts that I get to add value in.”

### Imposter syndrome

Ferguson sits on the boards of the ABC, SCA Property Group, Hyne

Timber and Layne Beachley’s Aim for the Stars Foundation.

She is a keynote speaker at conferences, often highlighting the myriad benefits of championing women and diversity in corporate leadership. She is on the Advisory Panel of female-led start-up incubator SheStarts and is chairwoman of the Women’s Agenda Leadership Awards judging panel.

Ferguson has become a mentor for many young women through the #CelebratingWomen campaign and is passionate about countering what she calls “imposter syndrome”, which she says is particularly common among women. It occurs when people think they don’t measure up to a self-imposed standard or worry they are not ready for a particular opportunity.

“Women would often say to me, ‘I’m not worthy of being celebrated’,” says Ferguson. “I would say that every woman is worthy of being celebrated and is a role model to others, whether they are the tuckshop lady or the foreign minister. #CelebratingWomen became about inspiring others to have the confidence to put themselves forward for opportunities.”

Ferguson also says we should forget the metaphor of successful women lowering a “ladder” behind them to help other women up. A ladder is a waste of time, she says, because it only helps one woman at a time.

“What I’m hoping #CelebratingWomen has done, and what I can do, is show that we can all help by throwing down a fishing net instead of a ladder,” she says. “That way, we could lift up so many women at once.” **LSJ**

Kirstin Ferguson is working on a book with Walkley Award-winning journalist Catherine Fox to continue the campaign’s legacy. Murdoch Books will publish the book later this year. You can follow Ferguson on Twitter @kirstinfernugson.



### Costs Guidance

# COSTS GUIDANCE THAT COSTS YOU NOTHING

Contact us for free, independent guidance on all costs issues.

**(02) 9926 0116**  
[costs@lawsociety.com.au](mailto:costs@lawsociety.com.au)



THE LAW SOCIETY OF NEW SOUTH WALES



[lawsociety.com.au](http://lawsociety.com.au)