

[Social Soles]

Interview by Kiley Fischer
with Introduction by Faith Bennett

KIYA TOMLIN

OWNER | DESIGNER | UPTOWN SWEATS

The Social Soles interview series is based on the saying, "You don't really know someone until you have walked in her shoes." We thought it would be interesting to begin each interview asking our guest to bring a pair of shoes that are significant to her. They can be the pair she walked in each day while attending undergrad classes; The ones she wore the day she first met her future husband – an event that would change the course of her career; The shoes she wore when she first stepped down in Pittsburgh; A pair of killer heels, or a comfy pair of kicks; A pair we would have never guessed...What shoes will she bring? We associate shoes with memories: good and bad. The question steers the path of the conversation. This route will show us a side usually not seen in the one we are talking with. A more personal side. We are excited to see in which direction we are lead – by the choice in footwear and the memories stirred.

September is Fashion Week Season, and as we plan our own Jr. Runway and Happy New School Year Party, (Everyone knows the (other) New Year is in September, when you live in a college town!) we wanted to get some fashion inspo from a Pittsburgh Icon. She may be from New Jersey, but the contributions that she and her family have made to Pittsburgh, allows us to lay claim! Let's start this year off right, Fashionistas and Fashionisters!... Come. Let's take a fierce and fashionable walk...

Social Butterfly Magazine: Kiya, thank you so much for having us over today. Let's jump right in - tell me about your shoes.

Kiya Tomlin: These shoes are Dolce & Gabbana crocodile skin that I actually bought second-hand online. I feel like these shoes are my "I mean business" shoes because they are just like a standard black pump so they're acceptable for business-type things, but then they're sexy and they have a steel toe.

SBM: They definitely have a really fierce vibe.

Kiya: Definitely. I think a combination of that and knowing I got them on bargain, they are favorites.

SBM: That's a double accomplishment!

Kiya: Exactly!

SBM: As far as "I mean business," how did all of this start? For you, was fashion always something you were interested in?

Kiya: Oh, yeah. I've always been interested in fashion, mainly just because I was small - I was very short and I couldn't find things I wanted to wear. Back then they didn't have really cool things like Justice, what my daughter's into. You had Sears and JC Penney's. I was old enough to be wearing the more fashionable teen styles, but they didn't make

them in children's sizes then, so I started to sew and that was my hobby. It grew from there.

SBM: What were some of the first things you created for yourself?

Kiya: After the obligatory stuffed duck when you learn how to sew, the first thing I made was a jumpsuit. It was a pattern and it was my first piece of clothing, but I didn't like the cut of it so I wanted to taper the legs and I wanted to change the neckline and I wanted to do all this stuff that I really had no business doing being my second project ever - but I did it. I made it with tapered legs and all.

SBM: That's so cool! Did you teach yourself how to sew?

Kiya: My mom taught me, but she didn't really know how to sew either. She was pulling information from her 8th grade Home Ec class, so she was rusty, she had an instruction manual and she kind of remembered a little bit about how to use the machine. We basically learned together.

SBM: That had to be a great bonding experience with your mom. How did things kind of evolve from there?

Kiya: That just became my love. That's what I did all the time. Aside from being small, we didn't really have a lot of money, so it wasn't like I could

just be out shopping and get what I wanted. If I wanted something, I had to make it. That was fine - usually I didn't want it exactly how it was on the rack anyway. It was usually something kind of kooky or crazy that I wanted that you wouldn't have been able to buy. I just did that and as I got older, friends thought it was cool and they would ask me to make stuff for them. I would do prom dresses for friends and homecoming dresses and even when I went off to college I took my sewing machine with me. I did an entire maternity wardrobe for my college gymnastics coach, I did the little white sorority dresses, I did costumes for an entire sorority step team. I just loved to do it.

(Laughs) In terms of it being a business, at that point I never really thought of it that way. I just thought of it as a hobby. I think part of the reasons was there wasn't really any information about it. There was no Project Runway or those kind of business-y type shows. I think it scared me that there was no path, like for other careers... So I went to school to study medicine. You do your four-year undergrad, you take the MCAT exam, then you apply to med school. There was a definite path whereas with fashion, there really is none. It scared me that you're kind of just out there.

SBM: When did that kind of divide happen? What changed your mind?

Kiya: I got married right after college and I was still on track to go to med school, but I didn't realize my husband wanted to coach, I thought he was just getting a graduate degree and coaching so it would pay for school. When I realized he wanted to coach, which is still fine, I thought,

"Okay, coach, high school basketball coach, that's a regular job." I didn't really realize what professional coaching, college coaching, what types of hours and the type of movement it required. Once I saw that, and that he loved to do it, he was already doing it, he was establishing himself in it - whereas I hadn't really started on the med school track - I kind of reconsidered. "Do I really want to do it badly enough that I'm willing to digest those challenges that we would face?"

It was the morning of the MCAT test. I was signed up, I went to bed knowing I was going to take it in the morning, and when I woke up the next morning, I was kind of like, "Mmm. I don't think I'm gonna take it." It was weird because it wasn't like nerves, like, "Oh my gosh, I'm nervous," because I was ready. But it was, "Mmm, I don't feel like taking it today. I think I'll pass and take it next time it comes around if I want to take it." I never thought twice about it.

SBM: That would have to be such a juggling act, too. Like you were saying, it really is a different life.

Kiya: Yeah. At that time when I made that decision, he would leave the house at 5 in the morning and be home around 1 the next morning. Part of

me thinks, "Oh, well I'll have a doctor's life so it's not like I'll be sitting at home missing him," but another part of me was like, "Well, we kind of wanted to have a family at some point. I don't know where that would fit into that lifestyle."

After I decided not to do med school, I was trying to make myself. I did a couple different jobs, but the one constant that I always did was I sewed and designed. I had gone home to New Jersey and I was visiting with my best friend's mom, and in talking about what was I doing and where was I going, she was like, "Figure out what you love to do and find a way to make money doing it." I knew what I loved to do - I did it every free minute. I just had to find a way to do it that worked with our lifestyle.

It's not like I could run off to New York and get a job working for Donna Karan, it had to be mobile and I had to be flexible. I thought, "I guess I'll work from home." I did that, taking custom stuff - wedding gowns primarily.

SBM: Oh wow. Those had to have been amazing.

Kiya: I love wedding gowns, I love doing wedding gowns. The little girl princess in me thinks that is the ultimate - if you can do wedding gowns and make a bride happy, you are gold. But the stress of a wedding wears on you. After a couple of years, I decided I didn't want to do weddings anymore - unless you are a very good friend, it's at least your

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second marriage, and it's super casual, then I will consider it. (Laughs)

SBM: (Laughs) How did everything start here with Uptown?

Kiya: When I decided that I was ready to move my home studio out of the house, I was still doing custom stuff. But now that I was working out of the house, I suddenly had to get out of my pajamas. I couldn't wear the crappy stuff I'd wear working at home. Me loving fashion, I had a closet full of really cool stuff I was excited to wear, but after a month of getting dressed and going to work in my nice stuff and dry cleaning and ironing, I was really missing my pajamas and my nasty sweats. (Laughs)

By this time I had kids and was multitasking and I thought, "You know what I need is a uniform. Mark Zuckerberg has his hoodie that he wears every day. My husband has his nasty gray sweats that he wears every day. I need that one thing that looks nice that I don't have to think about and I can meet with clients and look professional. I can run my kids, I can climb on top of cutting tables and scotch around on the floor trimming stuff. I'm gonna make a dress out of sweats. I've not seen one aside from the oversized hoodie dresses. I'm gonna make a dress I can wear to work."

So I made this dress out of gray standard sweatshirt fabric. I didn't even finish it - the hem was raw, the zipper wasn't in all the way (laughs) - but I would wear it around town running my kids because it was like a prototype and people would stop me and be like, "Where'd you get your dress? I love your dress!" I'm like, "Huh. I may be onto something." I figured I'd make a couple and keep them in the store that way when my custom clients come in, "Oh look, they like my custom work, they like this dress, it's a little side income." Or, for people that don't need custom because custom's really expensive but they still have somewhere they're going to,

they'll want something. I have that side item.

I knew I didn't want to sew them myself. I was doing my custom, I'm not a factory, let me see how I go about getting these produced somewhere else. I'd never worked that way. In learning how to do that, I came across the realization that you can't have just one dress so I designed a couple more dresses. You can't just make 10 of them, you have to make whatever the factory's minimum was. You have to get the fabric. As I was on this journey, I realized that I actually liked it. I kind of liked it a little more than I liked the custom because I thought it was cool to do all the fun design work and then send it off and it comes back in boxes in multiples instead of me sitting there sewing one little thing by myself.

That kind of took over. The balance went from doing a couple little sweatshirt dresses and custom to a bunch of sweatshirt dresses and a little bit of custom. That's how I got into it.

When I first started the sweatshirt line, I was wholesaling it out to other stores and this was just my studio space so I could get out of the house. I liked the sunlight, there weren't many people walking by. I don't even know if I had my name on the window - I was just kind of squatting here. (Laughs) As we worked more and more here and I realized I wasn't really set up to do wholesale - it took a lot more attention than I expected to work with each separate boutique and I didn't have the staff or the interest - I thought, at least in Pittsburgh I'll pull the stuff out. I'm here every day, the neighborhood's getting more active, I'll sell the stuff here.

SBM: That has to be helpful too, again, with that balance. Having your family and everything happening.

Kiya: Oh yeah. It's really convenient. My daughter cyber schools so two days she cybers at home and two days she cybers at her gymnastics gym. When she's cybering from home, she comes here.

It's cool - she's actually learning the business and I can put her to work on a few things. My assistant Brittney will take her out to lunch when they go to pick up lunch. I think it's a really cool experience for her to kind of grow up taking naps on the fabric bolts and under the sewing machine.

SBM: Well and you get a different bond, too, because she's getting this experience, but you also get to spend more time with her.

Kiya: Yes. It's been really cool and I've enjoyed it. She's already looking forward to taking over the business and she wants to do a children's line. She asks me, "When's the children's line coming?" and I tell her I don't do children's wear. She's insisting, so I did tell her for 2018 she can do five children's pieces and we'll produce them.

SBM: That's so cool!

Kiya: (Nods) In between classes she'll work on her designs, draping them on the mannequins over at our factory space.

SBM: She's really picking up a lot.

Kiya: Yeah! Oh yeah! She knows how to sew, too - I didn't teach her, I send her over to Catherine's Cut and Sew Studio over in Morningside. She's not on the industrial machines yet, but she can drape and pin on her home machine.

SBM: How old is she?

Kiya: She's 10. (Smiles) It keeps her busy and I enjoy it because I don't enjoy playing Polly Pockets or Barbies, so to have her enjoy what I enjoy makes spending time together and playing together much more fun for me. (Laughs) It's a little selfish, but (laughs) I feel bad because I did do the action figure thing with my boys when they were little. I don't know. I just enjoy action figures more than Polly Pockets - there's more going on. You can only fight the Polly Pockets for so long and then what are we encouraging? Cat fights? (Laughs)

SBM: I love that. She has the vibe for a kid's line, too. She knows what her friends are wearing and what they like.

Kiya: And she gets the Uptown brand because she sees it every day. She sat in on our staff meeting on Monday and she'll give me input. She'll say, "I don't like it, Mom. Why don't you do this?" Sometimes I listen, sometimes I don't. (Laughs)

SBM: I love that it's really a huge family thing.

Kiya: It really is. My boys used to go to school at Obama right over here and since they didn't want to take the bus home or walk, they would walk over and I'd make them take out the trash for me and if anything needed moving or lifting, they'd do that. They feel a little ownership and a little disappointed that they aren't on payroll. (Laughs) I'm like, "Food is payroll. The ride home is payroll." (Laughs) They're 15 and 16 so they're not over there anymore. I lost my trash men.

It's fun. Fortunately for me my husband has a good job so I don't have to struggle to put a roof over my head or food on the table for the kids, so I do have that level of comfort. I started the business because I knew at some point, the kids would leave and I had seen the women around me that were on the same track as me, living the same lifestyle as me, that once the kids left they really struggled with "what do I do now? Who am I?" So I was like, "I don't want to do that. I'll start this little business and kind of do it as I see it's fun and then once the kids are gone, I'll be like full force. I'll be up and running. It won't be starting from scratch." It took off a lot faster than I expected. (Laughs) I didn't really expect to be working full time and traveling, but it's been great.

What has been really awesome is for my kids to see it - to see the highs and the lows and to see that I don't know everything, but gosh darn it, I'm going to figure it out. For them to be able to have opinions and for me to listen to their opinions and to have opinions about business and to explain. I'm taking a webinar on online marketing and how to sell more product online. For me to be able to come home and be like, "Hey, this is what I learned today," for them to have input and say, "That's cool, Mom." For them to see me pursue something and chase my dreams, the amount of work I put into it. That's a normal experience for them so when they get older and go out on their own, they know you gotta work hard and no, things don't always come easy and sometimes you screw up and you gotta get back up and do it. If there's something you love and you want to do it, you can do it. "My mom did it." That's been pretty cool.

SBM: They're not oblivious to what you're doing. It's not just, "Mom's at the office." It's life for them.

Kiya: My oldest son - this was a couple of years ago - I was going somewhere to an event. He said, "Mom, what are you wearing?" I was already dressed and I said, "This." He said, "No, I mean what are you wearing?" I was like, "I'm wearing this outfit." He said, "You should be wearing Uptown." I said, "(sighs, quietly) Oh, you're right." I love my stuff, but I love other designers, too.

He said, "Uh-huh. You gotta represent because other people are gonna be like, 'Is that yours?' and you're gonna say, 'no' and they're gonna say, 'Well, why not? Is your stuff not good enough?'" I said, "Yeah, you're right." That kind of stuff is fun.

SBM: (Nods) What are some of your favorites or your inspirations?

Kiya: It's funny because I'm not artsy like, "I'm inspired by the wind and the sun and architecture!" (Laughs) I think coming from custom design, what inspires me are body types. When you're doing custom, that's why people are coming to you. They can't find something that fits the way they want it to fit out in a store. I am very interested in body types and what design features best play up different shapes. When I design my collection, I do design like, "I have this concept, how do I make it fit a pear shape, but also fit an apple shape?" I can't get something that fits everybody, but I do try to design so there's something for everyone. That's definitely a driving factor.

Also, just what I want. What I don't see out there that I wish I had. Another thing that is inspiring to me is looking at couture runways. I buy all the runway magazines and look on the websites to what the couture designers are doing, and to me that stuff is art and it's beautiful and it's talented, but it's not wearable. I'm trying to pull concepts and details from that kind of work and make them wearable and not just wearable but comfortable. I'm in my sweats, but I have this cool detail.

SBM: I feel like there's a lot of places that if you don't fit this one body shape, you're out of luck.

Kiya: Yes.

SBM: It's neat that it's something you really do think about and consider.

Kiya: It's true. When you think of J Crew, you're (she makes a straight line with her hands) long and lean. If you think of Apple Bottom, you're curvy. I try to design for the spectrum of shapes. It helps that my fabric has stretch to it. (Laughs)

SBM: Talking about how it's kind of exploded for you here, what's the reception been like and what kind of feedback have you gotten since you opened the space?

Kiya: The coolest thing is when people get it, when they really get the concept. It's sometimes hard to find my peeps (laughs) the people who appreciate and understand and want and need what I have. People who are like, "I want to wear my sweats all day every day, but I want to look really chic." I think that's just cool that people are getting it. Uptown is about getting dressed and being fabulous, but feeling like you're in your athleisure but looking like you just stepped off the runway.

SBM: What's next, moving forward this year?

Kiya: More of the same. I feel like I've been methodical about learning what I'm doing and learning how to do it better, so I'm really just interested in doing it better.

What's new is I have a factory space so we can manufacture at least some of the collection here in town versus in New York. To be able to be

present on site to control production, to control fabric waste, control the quantity, that's really important to me. By doing it locally, I can do smaller runs and I can see how they sell and if they're not selling, we stop it. In New York, I have to make a certain quantity and then I have this quantity to know it didn't sell and then what do I do with it? I don't want to do that.

One thing that's been really cool about bringing the manufacturing here is being able to see the fabric waste. I don't know what they're doing with my fabric waste in New York - when I had them send the leftover fabric, I was shocked. By having more control over that, it's really helpful for the health of the business and the environment. We can create other things to use that fabric waste. For example, the turban I'm wearing was scrap fabric. We lay stuff out and we can say, "We'll make some turbans and we'll donate them to the Hillman Cancer Center or we'll sell them." That's next - figuring out how to run a small factory.

It's fun!

I'll tell ya, I love learning. Had my husband not cut me off from going to school for free wherever we were when he was coaching college when he got into the NFL, I'd still be in school. I just love learning. I love taking that webinar, I'm doing a workshop at Pitt's entrepreneurial program. I'm loving learning to get better. It's fulfilling.

SBM: What's the biggest thing you've learned about yourself?

Kiya: I'm tough, man. I can do anything. I feel very Super Womanish, and I like it. I know "you can't have it all, we can't have it all"... we can try. I think that's fun. (Laughs)

SBM: So if those awesome heels could talk, what would they say?

Kiya: I imagine them to be like The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants. I'd be interested to see who owned them before me and I bet it was some badass chick who was all about kicking butt in business. I envision her strutting into a corporate meeting in these shoes and some awesome blazer and telling the boys to sit down and shut up. (Laughs) I like to think I carry on and am inspired by that. I'm feeling a bit of her soul. Maybe when this arthritis in my toe overtakes me and I can no longer wear them, some other badass chick'll get 'em. (Laughs)

SBM: (Laughs) So at that point when you pass them on, who's shoes would you want to walk in if you could walk in anyone's?

Kiya: Oh, man. I'd be interested to walk in Beyonce's shoes. I think that she is probably the hardest working woman in the entertainment industry and I'm sure she's the brilliant mind behind her very successful career. I'd be interested to walk in her shoes for - well, I could probably only do a half a day. (Laughs)◆

To see more from Kiya Tomlin and Uptown Sweat see her [Website](#) and follow on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), & [Twitter](#)!