



PHOTO BY RICHARD KERN

# TERESA KENNEDY:

## ILLNESS POINTED HER TOWARDS YOGA AND MEDITATION

**ARIANA:** You got your MBA at Harvard Business School, a prototypically uptight place.

**TERESA:** Have you ever seen the movie *Legally Blonde*? I felt like Reese Witherspoon's character. Everybody at Harvard dressed conservatively, and had worked in either investment banking or consulting. I was an art and sociology double major at Wellesley, and had done a lot of theater and modeling. So, the first month at Harvard I wasn't sure what I had gotten myself into. But I ended up having fun. I produced the school musical — I was doing my case studies backstage while everyone else was stressed out with theirs.

**ARIANA:** Did you know what you wanted to do when you got out?

**TERESA:** Work in entertainment and media. I was a media baby. My dad was a professor of communication and theater, and a speech pathologist. He was known as "Mr. Speech" in the 1950s. As a black man teaching corporate executives at IBM how to speak, he was a bit unusual. And my mom was a journalist for many years.

**ARIANA:** They sound like tremendous role models.

**TERESA:** My parents have been my greatest blessing. Right after school, I tried to start a cable network with my family. [laughs] We made some headway, had wonderful meetings, but we needed a hundred million before we could get any distribution. Finally my mom said, "Honey, just see what else is out there." I reluctantly sent out letters saying, "Here I am. I know the creative and the business sides. Call me." When you're not desperate, people do want you.

**ARIANA:** What was your mandate at MTV and VH1 when you were there from 1992 to 1999?

**TERESA:** I started off working for the head of programming for VH1. I became his strategic advisor, which gave me reign — and that pissed people off. Being a young woman with an MBA in that environment did not sit well at all. Everyone was probably thinking, "Oh my god, a suit!" During that time, we repositioned the network, and brought out a bunch of new shows like *Behind the Music* and *Storytellers*.

**ARIANA:** That's when VH1 began to come into its own. Did you ever lose interest working in a corporate environment?

**TERESA:** I would get restless every two years. The first time was in 1993. I went to my boss,

John Sykes, and said, "There's this thing called 'online.'" John said, "We have no money, and I don't even know what it is, but do whatever." I then invited myself to a meeting that MTV had set up with AOL, and made a deal with them that funded our online division. I actually programmed and designed our first site.

**ARIANA:** That's impressive!

**TERESA:** I'm a geek at heart — I programmed computer games in junior high. When I got bored again, the guys at MTV asked me to set up a new group joining MTV and VH1 Interactive.

**ARIANA:** You were responsible for the online presence of both brands?

**TERESA:** Anything new and digital — CD-ROM, interactive TV. We launched six digital cable channels. It was all so new that our attorneys didn't understand the nature of the business, so I had to draft most of our deals myself. We were making things up and getting money for it. We could come up with ideas and then execute them — how beautiful is that? But then it became a little more corporate. Deals started to slow down. That's when I started to think in a more entrepreneurial way.

**ARIANA:** Were you interested in wellness then?

**TERESA:** I had grown up with holistic health, nutrition, and yoga — we even had a wheat grass juicer! The moment I entered the door at MTV, all that went out the window — I sacrificed sleep and healthy eating. I pushed myself so hard that my body couldn't keep up. I almost died. In March 1997, I lost twenty pounds in two weeks. I figured I had the stomach flu.

**ARIANA:** What did the diagnosis end up being?

**TERESA:** I was in the hospital for ten days, hooked up to an IV while they ran every test. They finally diagnosed me with Crohn's disease, an aggressive intestinal disorder. My mom put me on a specific diet. I healed and returned to the way I used to eat growing up.

**ARIANA:** It can be hard to come back from that kind of experience.

**TERESA:** My greatest gift was almost dying. I had to rebuild physically and mentally. It gave me an empathy I didn't have before. My personality is very different now. I don't go around barking orders at people.

**ARIANA:** So you took a step back and reassessed your goals?

**TERESA:** Yes. To get more balance in my life I decided to leave MTV. People thought I had lost my mind because I was making a boatload of money. I'd already lined up some financing for a new internet business — an international directory of holistic practitioners. Then I got sick again and was out of commission for the first six months of 2000. While I was laid up, the internet tanked. I thought, "Maybe I should open a physical place, a spa in Harlem." Then September 11th happened.

**ARIANA:** How did that affect your plans?

**TERESA:** I decided the business should not be about luxury, but revitalization. In a two-year span I did a yoga teacher-training course, got certified in fitness, and rented a little space in Harlem. You're not trained to start a small business at Harvard. If it's not a hundred million dollar business, it's not on the map. But there was something guiding me, telling me this venture needed to be calm. At first, I gave free classes because I didn't have to work for a little while. That's when the idea behind Power Living came to me.

**ARIANA:** What's Power Living's mission?

**TERESA:** To help people from all walks of life live better lives by minimizing stress and maximizing productivity. Through Power Living, I do speaking engagements and conferences with stressed-out executives. Through Ta Life — an offshoot of Power Living — we do outreach to underserved communities. It's about having a purpose. What's the point of life if you don't take the time to figure out why you're here? When I tell a crowd I almost worked myself to the grave, they always open up.

**ARIANA:** It's a cautionary tale that anyone can understand.

**TERESA:** Exactly. I'm not like, "I'm the Yogi, relax." You can't say that to top-tier executives. I'm bringing the world of holistic health and nutrition to Type-A personalities. The most productive people know how to manage their energy.

**ARIANA:** What's your philosophy for that?

**TERESA:** Take a lesson from Hatha Yoga, which is about the balance between effort and ease. You push into certain poses, but you reap the benefits in the rest periods.

**ARIANA:** How do you teach people to stay calm in the face of email, the phone, and office politics?

**TERESA:** Let go of thinking, "I'm so important." You're not. [laughs] If you drop dead tomorrow, your job will still be there. I learned that. Don't take yourself too seriously. Do three major things, not twenty. Do the most important things in the morning, because your energy is very different in the afternoon. Eat protein in the morning, so you don't have sugar cravings at 3 p.m. Simple things like that — what I call "personal sustainability." How can you be successful over the long term?

By managing your energy and letting go, too.

**ARIANA:** What's your five-year plan for Power Living?

**TERESA:** I started off with individual yoga clients, but my mom told me I needed operating leverage. So I began doing group sessions, then conferences and events. I've thought about how I can touch more people in shorter periods of time. We're floating a television show. We have a relaxation CD, a line of audio products, and a series of mini-books that we're publishing in 2005. I'm also talking to publishers about a larger book project. So I'm still doing a lot. [laughs]

**ARIANA:** The idea of selling "wellness" might strike some people as tacky.

**TERESA:** What I do is not about marketing. The message — "positive, healthy living" — means so much to me. That's why I'm now comfortable going on television with it. Having worked in the world of image, I saw how nice-looking women could be perceived as ditz. With Power Living, I realized I could use the power of media, which I know so well, for something positive. Like Oprah. That's where I want to be.

**ARIANA:** Do see yourself as a brand?

**TERESA:** I've been saying "we" because I have an incredible team of advisors who are helping to craft "me" as a brand. Look at Martha Stewart's brilliant business model — they create content and leverage it across multiple media platforms. That's exactly what we're doing. My first book will be the *Power Living Pledge*, which takes you through the process, step by step.

**ARIANA:** What's your marketing plan?

**TERESA:** There are two different audiences — consumer and corporate. The big push for 2005 is corporate. The mini-books on productivity and stress will be sold through corporations.

**ARIANA:** So you'll sell in bulk to corporations and they'll distribute the books to their employees? That's really smart.

**TERESA:** In the '80s my mom wrote a book called *Excel*, about Black achievement. She had a corporate sponsor who bought two hundred fifty thousand units. A bestseller is fifty thousand.

**ARIANA:** Aside from your mom, has anyone else distributed books that way?

**TERESA:** Probably, but not as a distinct strategy. I haven't lost my business sense because I started doing yoga. Wellness is a two-hundred-billion-dollar-a-year industry. Everyone wants to feel good and look young. People are stressed and that's not going to change. So how can I serve that need? Developing these alternative distribution channels is one way for me to go. It's efficient, and I like efficiency.

INTERVIEWED BY ARIANA SPEYER

**"IF YOU DROP DEAD TOMORROW, YOUR JOB WILL STILL BE THERE. I LEARNED THAT. DON'T TAKE YOURSELF TOO SERIOUSLY."**