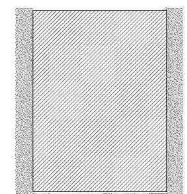




**ANCHORS AWEIGH**

Katie Ford with daughters Isabel, eighteen, and Alessandra Balazs, 22, on a Hinckley Admiralty boat in Gardiners Bay, New York. On Katie: The Row polo and Rag & Bone/Jean pants. Hair, Mirian Lima; makeup, Angie Barton for Diorshow. Details, see In This Issue. Fashion Editor: Tonne Goodman.



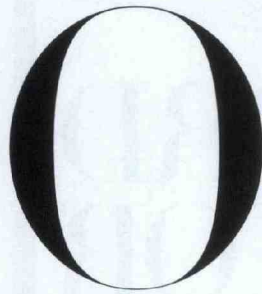
DOING GOOD AT 56

# THE FORD FACTOR

In a radical second act, Katie Ford has brought her skills as the former CEO of her family's modeling business to a new mission: ending forced labor. By Eve MacSweeney. Photographed by Ralph Mecke.



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On a rainy Monday morning in June, Katie Ford is sitting at a desk in the living room of her SoHo loft—beautifully appointed with thirties furniture, a grand piano, and acres of indoor space, no less than you'd expect from a woman who was married to André Balazs for eighteen years and lived through the founding of

his archly elegant hotel empire (starting with the Chateau Marmont in Los Angeles and the Mercer in New York). She's barefoot and low-key in an Isabel Marant black-and-white print shirtdress, talking on the phone to Décio Ribeiro, head of the Brazilian outpost of Ford Models, the family business Katie was born into and, until five years ago, ran as CEO.

São Paulo Fashion Week is around the corner, but Katie and Décio are not discussing models or bookings or visas. They are working on the format for a film that will be screened at the fashion-show venue as part of a media event attended by the Brazilian Secretary of Justice. It's being made to help young nationals who travel abroad on the promise of jobs as models, dancers, cooks, or soccer players (the main lure for boys) to avoid the perils of being trafficked across borders, held against their will, and forced into labor of a kind very different from what they signed up for.

Katie's media skills kick into gear as she checks off the government contacts she plans to invite and runs through the scheduling details. "We don't want somebody from the ministry talking for ten minutes," she says. "The messages should be short and simple." Two Brazilian supermodels, Aline Weber and Patricia Barros, will present the material in the film, a clever way of grabbing the attention of a young audience, and one of the many unexpected crossovers between Katie's old life and her surprising second act.

That she has pivoted from running a modeling agency to fighting human trafficking (no fashion-victim jokes here, please) might seem an unlikely trajectory. But the more you talk to Katie, the more her story starts making its own kind of sense. The two worlds can be just a whisper apart. When a model, for example, is scouted and sent abroad to work, she says, "it's a flip of the coin whether it's done legally or not."

Katie grew up the third of four children of Gerard and Eileen Ford. Eileen, pregnant with her first child, had to quit her job at the New York department store Arnold Constable, where she worked on window displays and catalogs. She was asked by model friends to help them book their appointments, and the business—along with the baby—was born. "It took forever for them to make enough money to live on," Katie says. "At one point they sold their car to keep things going."

The Fords are largely responsible for the modeling industry as we know it, giving it structure and formality. "Carmen Dell'Orefice"—the still-stunning octogenarian model who posed for everyone from John Rawlings to Irving Penn—"made a speech at my parents' sixtieth wedding anniversary," recalls Katie. "She said you just couldn't imagine the difference, after Ford Models came along, of knowing that you were going to get paid. Before, that wasn't a given."

By the time Katie was a child, the Fords had set up residence in an Upper East Side town house that, she says, "was much more exciting than anyone else's house we went to. We had

photographers and editors around, and we had models living with us a lot of the time"—teenage girls brought in from Scandinavia, Europe, or other parts of the United States, toward whom Eileen Ford acted as mother hen. "They were all treated as family and expected to help with weeding the garden or whatever." Jerry Hall, the same age as Katie, was one of them, "but she had left home at sixteen and already been in Paris. So I was there in my uniform doing schoolwork, and she was going out at night. She moved out very quickly." The children often traveled with their mother on scouting trips, and, says Katie, "we were probably the only New Yorkers who studied Swedish."

When it came to her own career, Ford, after attending Sarah Lawrence, worked in TV (fun but poorly paid), went to business school (which she loathed), and became a management consultant ("I wasn't very good at it"). It was a time of reckoning. "I thought, I want my own company connected to an art form, where your reward comes from interaction with people and you travel to interesting places. At that point, I realized I had described my parents' business." She joined the firm at 27 and clearly had the eye, able to judge in millimeters the difference between a face that can launch a thousand ships and just another pretty girl. "I remember Christy Turlington's first test—and how all the angles of her face were so beautiful they made her very easy to photograph. It just blew my mind."

Eventually, after a slew of whirlwind years opening new offices and divisions at Ford—she lived in Paris in the early nineties to run the branch there—Katie began rethinking her options and the care of her elderly parents (her father has since died; her mother is still living). Perhaps, she reasoned, it was time to cash out and work on her passions. When traveling on business, she had regularly taken side trips to visit remote regions and tribes—the Wayuu Indians in Venezuela, say, or the Hmong in Thailand. "I had always wanted to work with indigenous groups," she says, "to come up with a business model to preserve the diversity of their cultures. As I was turning 50 I was thinking, You know, I'd better get to this at some point!"

Giving up a family business built over six decades was a hard decision—"I worried that I wasn't anticipating how terrible I would feel after the fact," she says. Then, two weeks after her last day at Ford, the U.N. asked her to attend a conference in Vienna about human trafficking, a term she was barely familiar with. "Within two hours, I understood exactly why I was there," she recalls. "I could think of so many things to do to stop trafficking because of the parallels to how we brought models into the U.S. I had this weird set of knowledge about immigration law, a very distinct skill set that not many people have. I thought, I've got to do this. It became all-consuming."

Human trafficking may sound like a lurid activity conducted in distant parts of Africa or Eastern Europe, but, as Katie discovered, it is the fastest-growing criminal industry in the world, second only to drugs, and surprisingly pervasive: There are an estimated 27 million unpaid and entrapped workers today, according to the Washington, D.C.-based organization Free the Slaves. And, as the recent scandals about life-threatening conditions in African mineral mines and Chinese technology factories have brought home to Americans used to noodling around on our shiny electronic devices, we may all be buying, using, and wearing things produced by cruelly exploited—or even enslaved—laborers multiple times a day.

Katie identified a number of groups to support around the world that take concrete steps to tackle specific areas—from

child laborers in the Ghanaian fishing ports to girls abducted for the sex trade in the Philippines and an NGO in the United States dedicated to promoting audits of corporate supply chains—and has become what Free the Slaves cofounder Kevin Bales called “a subtle but powerful force in the global antislavery movement.” Many activists, he says, “are long on passion but short on strategy and organization. Katie’s got the skills of the business world combined with a sense of style.” The business skills help with financing plans. The style opens doors to people of influence and potential donors. (Katie will hold her first fund-raiser for her newly established foundation this month.) But—perhaps as a result of all that intrepid traveling she’s done in the past—she’s not afraid of getting involved in what she’s doing at, literally, a grassroots level.

Today, though, is about making an impression. Past the former playroom of her two daughters, Alessandra and Isabel (respectively a new graduate from UCLA’s film school and a soon-to-be freshman at Brown), Katie walks through the loft to check in on the foundation’s full-time staff of two. Sharpening up the Isabel Marant with a pair of high-heeled pumps, she sets off for her next appointment, arranged by a mutual acquaintance, with Luiz Felipe de Seixas Corrêa, the Brazilian consul-general. Katie hopes to urge the consul-general to press his government to encourage foreign businesses to sign what is known as “the Brazil Pact,” an alliance of corporations that have pledged, all the way down their production chains, to avoid using any form of slave labor.

For all her fluency in the world of glamour, Katie has an unaffected air, devoid of self-importance. Now 56 and slim with shoulder-length, blondish-brown hair, she has retained a girlish quality that feels unforced, an insouciance that is the opposite of vanity. The consul-general, a portly and elegant figure who was formerly Brazil’s ambassador to Spain, contemplates Katie as she sits in his anonymous midtown office, a portrait of a green-sashed Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff looming from the wall. The experience is a little like watching a patient at the optometrist while a succession of different lenses brings his vision into ever-sharper focus. At first, you sense, he is not sure who Katie is—a bored Manhattan mom? A privileged dilettante? Someone with real information? Then, as she speaks, augmenting his facts, citing brand-new legislation and mentioning the names of Repórter Brasil, a nonprofit she works with that monitors farms and factories for forced labor, and Luiza Lopes da Silva, the Brazilian minister for emigration, who is collaborating on the Fashion Week event, he relaxes: She knows what she is talking about.

“Katie’s a quiet person, but she is one of the bravest women I’ve ever met,” the writer and former MTV VJ Karen “Duff” Duffy, who was once on the Ford books, told me. “I first met her tagging behind a speedboat, water-skiing, after she had just given birth to Alessandra. She took so much joy in it and was so graceful, it made an impression on me. She handles very difficult things with breathless agility. She really runs toward life and crams three lifetimes into every day.”

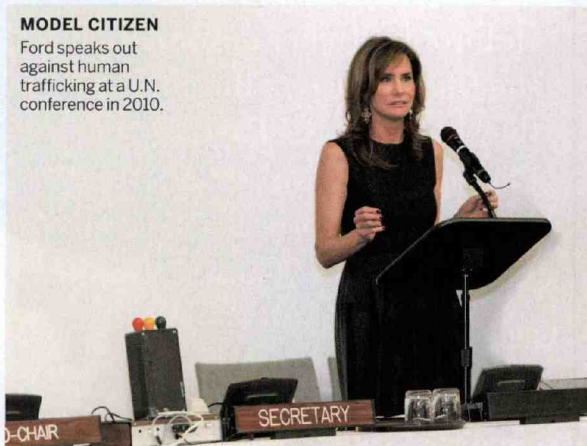
Duff’s words were ringing in my ears when I accompanied Katie on one of the several short, focused trips she makes each year to the field and experienced the nitty-gritty side of her work. She was headed to Karnataka, India, to witness the work of Jeevika, a movement organized to help Dalits—formerly known as Untouchables, and a virtual slave caste—improve their lives. It was started by Kiran Prasad, a charismatic anthropology scholar and former Jesuit priest

who has worked to spread awareness of Dalit rights. Even though the practice was outlawed in 1975, many still work in bonded labor—whereby, to repay a loan taken from a landowner to finance, say, a daughter’s wedding, family members are obliged to work without wages for years on end. To date, Prasad has freed nearly 4,000 slaves.

Now he is eager for Katie to see as much as she can in two days, and after a six-hour drive from Bangalore deep into tiger country, we embark on a series of stops. We witness a protest for fair wages at a government office. We visit some villages, entering modest homes and meeting rooms, or sitting in the grassy courtyard of a school, to talk with groups of women and discuss the progress they have made now that Jeevika has helped them secure microloans. We speak to former slaves, some sold by their own families, and hear their stories. The experience is moving and hopeful, but the weather is stiflingly hot, and it has been an exhausting day for jet-lagged New Yorkers. As evening falls, we watch a performance of

#### MODEL CITIZEN

Ford speaks out against human trafficking at a U.N. conference in 2010.



street theater Prasad has organized to ritualize the story of Dalits, who are still widely persecuted, and their emancipation. I begin nodding off, asleep on my feet, but Katie, eager to absorb the reality on the ground, never flags.

When we head back to the airport—pausing to see one young father, a former bonded laborer from the age of twelve, who beams with pride as he shows us the tiny shop he has been able to open and the new house he has saved to build—Katie has a sharper sense of where funding is needed. She departs India recharged and inspired.

“Obviously after she sold the agency she could have done a lot of things with her life, but she’s chosen to do this,” remarks Mark Mittelhauser, who collaborated with Katie in his recent post as director of the Office of International Labor Affairs at the State Department. “I think the work she is doing is incredibly important, shining a light on some of the world’s most vulnerable and invisible workers in a way she is uniquely positioned to do.”

As she sets off from JFK to Shelter Island to spend the weekend with her boyfriend, environmentalist and NRDC board member Tom Roush, Katie couldn’t look happier. “I feel great,” she says. “I don’t know if I would have felt as good about this transition had I not been working in trafficking, which is very targeted, but it came into my life at exactly the right moment.” □

### THE FORD FACTOR

**162–163:** From far left: On Isabel: Saint James top, \$70; [saintjamesboutique.com](http://saintjamesboutique.com). J.Crew shorts, \$45; [jcrew.com](http://jcrew.com). On Ford: Polo, \$450; Bergdorf Goodman, NYC. Pants, \$176; Rag & Bone stores. Jimmy Choo sandals, \$445; select Jimmy Choo boutiques. On Alessandra: Elizabeth and James dress; [elizabethandjames.us](http://elizabethandjames.us) for similar styles. In this story: manicure, Kristina Konarski for Privé Salon.