



At 42, Jenna Lyons is at the helm of J.Crew, one of North America's favourite brands. We talked work-life balance and personal style with the fashion insider as the first Canadian store opens its doors

by **Antonia Whyatt**

You have a pretty swanky job, president of J.Crew! How does it feel?

I certainly never would have anticipated it in a million years. It's bizarre. It's kind of unusual for someone with my background in fashion [vs. business] to have the role that I do. I think it speaks a lot to Mickey [Millard Drexler, chairman and CEO of J.Crew] and how he views creativity and puts that at the forefront.

To get where you are, you've stayed with one company for almost all of your working life. How has that been?

I never set out to work at one company. I'm a pretty loyal person, though, whether it's to the brand or the people I work with. We've had many different presidents and CEOs. Through their >

insights from the

CORNER OFFICE

JENNA LYONS

Occupation: President and creative director of J.Crew

Age: 42

Hometown: Rancho Palos Verdes, California

Education: Bachelor of fine arts, Parsons The New School for Design

different leadership styles J.Crew has had very different atmospheres, not all of them great. At moments when it was challenging I found myself promising my team I wouldn't leave, and in the moments when it was great I was like, "Well, why would I want to go now? I've been through the hard part."

So is this the good part?

I remember the first three months that Mickey was here, the whole world just sort of opened up. We went from conversations like "Why should we use that better fabric? The customer doesn't know the difference" to "The customer can tell. Let's give them the best quality and they'll come back."

What would you tell someone who was trying to get into fashion?

The most important advice I would give to somebody who is young is if you don't love it, if you're not obsessed, don't do it, because it's actually quite hard. I think with *Project Runway* and all these shows, you get the idea that anybody can do it — they glamorize it. When I started out at J.Crew I took the job without even asking what the salary was, I was just so excited! But the reality is the hours are long, and you may or may not get a lot of reward, so you really have to love it. I've done a couple of talks at Parsons, because that's where I went, and one thing that was interesting to me was when I asked the room, "Who here knows what Lanvin is?" and everyone raised their hand. Then I said, "Who designs Lanvin now?" and about five people raised their hand. I said, "Okay, you five are obsessed enough to go on."

When you're interviewing job candidates, what do you look for?

Every time I interview someone I ask them, "Who is your favourite painter? Who is your favourite architect?" and if I see their eyes glaze over I'm like, "Uh-oh." It's not just about loving fashion, it's about loving design — furniture, textiles, colour, architecture — and understanding the history of art. If someone's not interested in the visual world, it's not a good sign to me.

Do you have a favourite colour or fabric?

It's funny, I always get asked that. I mean seasonally, yes, but permanently, no, I'm getting into intense pink right now.

Speaking of hot pink, there was quite a furor over the picture in the J.Crew catalogue of your four-year-old son, Beckett, with his toes painted pink. Was that shocking to you?

I was incredibly surprised by the attention that it got. What I was grateful for was the amount of support; it was amazing to see all of the other people out there who were open-minded.

PARENTING STYLE
Jenna at home with her four-year-old son, Beckett.



You're clearly an adoring mother — how do you manage the juggle?

I do the best I can. Beckett and I talk about it in terms of a piggy bank, but it's a time piggy bank. If I go through a period when the time piggy bank runs low — like my trip to China, recently — I then have to fill it back up. So I took two days on either side of the weekend and spent really, really quality time with him. I try to even the score. It's hard, but I make an effort.

So maintaining this life balance thing...

Exercise is tricky. I was working out religiously until I had Beckett and then I definitely fell off the wagon. I now have a yoga instructor who comes to my house and Beckett comes and does oms with us, which is hysterical, and he can do a downward-facing dog. We have a little mat for him and he has his little blocks that he pulls out. So it allows me to have that thing that I need, and him to be a part of it and see me and know that I'm home. That, to me, is a luxury because it is a hard choice: Do I go home or do I go to the gym?

Do you ever have those days when you stand in front of your closet and think, "I have no idea what I'm going to wear"?

I have to say, the most exciting part of the day is getting dressed with Beckett. But I just have to preface this by saying I am an obsessive shopper — there is always something new in the closet to wear and that helps make you a little more excited. I love clothes so much I've worn things out of the store, or completely off-season. Like a chiffon dress in winter: I'd just pair it with black tights, chunky boots and a big comfy sweater.

And how do you start your workday?

By car service, which I pay for. It is the thing >

jenna's must-have fall pieces



"A PAIR OF COLOURED PANTS that suit your body type — high-waisted, wide-legged, skinny, man-tailored or cropped."



"A CRISP PRESSED SHIRT."

"A BIG OVERSIZED SOFT SWEATER in a luscious colour like mustard, cantaloupe or emerald green."



"A LONGER SKIRT that's right for your body type — it could be a circle or pencil skirt, but things are going below the knee and getting longer and softer. The proportional shift is very important."



"If you don't already own **A CHAMBRAY OR DENIM SHIRT**, make sure you have one. It's a critical absolute and has to be in everyone's wardrobe."

"A LEOPARD-PRINT SOMETHING. Ideally shoes, as they have nothing to do with whether you're having a fat day or a skinny day and add that little flash."

that allows me to work the way I do. I put my makeup on in the car, read the paper, make calls, check emails. That way, I have more time at home. On the way back, I try to catch up on the emails I didn't do that day so at least when I'm through the door, I'm present. Maybe after dinner, when Beckett goes to sleep, I can pick it up again.

Where do you see yourself in 10 years? Do you have that vision?

No. I never would have anticipated being where I am right now and I think one of the things I've been trying very hard to do is stay in the moment and live my life day to day and enjoy things a bit. When I was young, I spent more time looking toward what was going to happen next.

Which women do you particularly admire?

Emily Woods, whose father started J.Crew. She was running this company at age 34 and some of the people she hired — including me — are still here! And Diane von Furstenberg. She's a lot of woman. Funny, fun, warm, involved and voracious. She's not egotistical, she's very supportive of her design team, she knows how lucky she's been and sees the value in helping others. She's a pretty incredible woman. Style-wise, Alexa Chung [MTV host and model]. She can put on anything and make it look gorgeous. I mean, she put on this '80s knit ballet dress with a scoop neck and low back and I swear I thought, "Oh my God, I want it," but it would have made me look like a streetwalker or like I was in a roller-derby movie.

Top three fashion tips?

First of all, people make mistakes by not playing up their body traits. If you're tall, wear skinny cropped pants and high heels. If you're curvy, wear siren dresses; if you're really little or short, wear short skirts. Don't worry about what the trend is. For instance, high-waisted really long pants are back in, but I'm sorry, if you're five foot two, they're just not for you. Don't get caught up in that — play to your strengths. I'm relatively tall [six foot] so I always wear heels and I have awful legs but no one would ever know because I never show them. Work with what you've got. Also try to create something that is signature, that's a little bit yours: That could be a locket you always wear, or something from your grandmother, or you could always have hot-pink nail polish. Let your personal style come through.

J.Crew's becoming known for collaborations with top designers. Who's next on the list?

I would love to do something with Louboutin, and I do love the shoe designer Pierre Hardy. Or Phoebe Philo [who's currently designing Céline], if she would ever do something with us. I mean, it's all just a dream. ✦

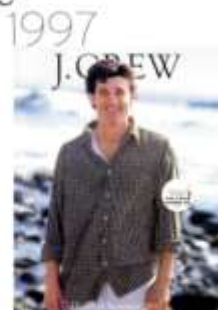
J.Crew's style timeline



1983 J.Crew debuted and launched its first catalogue under the direction of Emily Woods, the founder's daughter.

1985-87 The iconic roll-neck sweater, the perfect pocket tee and the barn jacket make their first appearances.

1989 The first retail store opens in New York.



1990 Jenna graduates from Parsons The New School for Design, where she interned for Donna Karan.

POSITION: Starts at J.Crew as an assistant designer.



2003 After three CEOs in five years, former Gap CEO Millard "Mickey" Drexler takes over, reportedly saying to employees, "Everything and anything is under attack."



1996 Jcrew.com is launched.

1997 J.Crew is sold to Texas Pacific Group; Emily Woods leaves the helm.

2000 100th retail store opens.



2007 Jenna becomes creative director.

2008 J.Crew Women's Collection store opens.

2008 The catalogue starts running "Jenna's Picks," which becomes a cult phenomenon.

2010 J.Crew's cool American-heritage-style brand, Madewell.com, is launched, along with the first bridal store.

POSITION: Jenna becomes president.



2005

2011 J.Crew becomes a private company and opens its first Canadian store in Toronto.

