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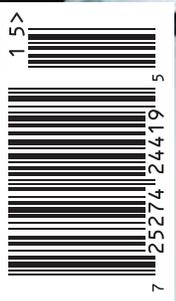
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# • just between US

By **Julia Prodis Sulek**

Alison van Diggelen coaxes thinkers, activists and the merely famous to talk about green tech – and themselves

Martin Sheen sends her old-fashioned handwritten letters. Maureen Dowd has invited her out for cocktails in Washington, D.C. Marketing guru Guy Kawasaki sought her help with a few edits on his new book.

One-time real estate investment consultant and mommy blogger Alison van Diggelen has remade herself into a citizen journalist, interviewing celebrities, Silicon Valley pioneers and the media elite in her fledgling video webcasts she calls “Fresh Dialogues.” Along the way, she also has established herself as a master networker and relationship builder, counting TV interviewer Charlie Rose and KQED’s Michael Krasny among her mentors.

For interview subjects jaded by “gotcha” journalism, they’re drawn in by her gentle charm and enchanting Scottish brogue.

“The relationship between a journalist and the interviewee is usually at best cautious and at worst paranoid,” says Kawasaki, who just published his 10th book. With van Diggelen, “it’s much closer to a conversation between two friends. You can relax in an interview with her.”

And after almost every one, she follows up with a thank-you note and sometimes a gift.

Word apparently is getting around. Since she launched her webcasts two years ago, not a single interview subject has turned her down. She has



Patrick Tehan

Alison van Diggelen interviews Silicon Valley venture capitalist Vinod Khosla before an SD Forum award ceremony in June 2009, held at the Woodside home of valley power couple Heidi Roizen and David Mohler.

landed most of them by simply cornering them at events where they already are speaking. Van Diggelen – who charms with her petite frame, perfect skin and warm smile – introduces herself and asks for just a wee bit of their time.

“I treat them like a sister or a brother,” van Diggelen says over a cup of tea and butter cookies at the kitchen table of her San Jose home. “Then they don’t have their guard up.”

Sheen was so lulled in by her that the actor perhaps best known for his role as President Josiah “Jed” Bartlet on “The West Wing” dipped into the Irish brogue of his mother’s homeland halfway through the interview.

“With her personal warmth, great sense of humor and that delicious Scottish accent, who could resist?” asks Dick Henning, a retired professor and vice president emeritus at Foothill Community College who runs the Foothill Celebrity Forum series, where van Diggelen met several of her interview subjects.

But the 44-year-old has proven herself much more than a good listener. Her interview with Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman was picked up by the Huffington Post. She has moderated green tech panels and Commonwealth Club appearances and lectured about Silicon Valley entrepreneurship at the University of Edinburgh.

She works out of a spare bedroom of her two-story family home in San Jose’s Almaden Valley that she shares with her husband, South African native and Broadcom executive Frank van Diggelen, and their two teenage children.

She has big plans to turn her interview series that focuses on green technology into a TV show. She’s in talks with tech companies and looking for more to sponsor a show

produced at San Jose’s CreaTV. Like many start-ups in their early years, she isn’t making any money. But she aspires to make her personal project a lucrative career.

Van Diggelen has come a long way from her roots in Scotland, where she lived in public housing until she was 8. The daughter of working-class parents – her father was a technician and her mother a nurse – they instilled in her a sense of curiosity and encouraged her to excel.

She went on to earn a master’s degree in land economics from Cambridge, where she met her husband, an engineering student pursuing his doctorate. He played rugby. She played field hockey.

“We shared in common a sense of adventure,” she says, “that we were citizens of the world.”

She graduated first, and got a job in real estate investment and development in London, then moved to Paris. They would spend romantic weekends at her flat near the Eiffel Tower. They married in Scotland in 1992.

When her husband was offered a job at a small GPS company in Colorado Springs, the young couple began their first adventure, finding a house in a liberal artists enclave outside of Colorado Springs called Manitou Springs.

Without a work visa herself, van Diggelen volunteered at the local museum and chamber of commerce.

“I was welcoming people to Colorado with my very strong Scottish accent, which made a lot of Texans laugh,” she says.

In 1994, they followed her husband’s career again, this time to San Francisco. She planned to return to the real estate investment career in that city’s Financial District, but

when she became pregnant, she decided to stay close to home. She began to write a mommy blog that she parlayed into a column at the San Jose Mercury News, which led to a freelance writing gig at the San Jose Business Journal where she profiled Silicon Valley entrepreneurs.

In 2008, she applied for an internship at KQED's "Forum" radio show with host Michael Krasny. She researched and pre-interviewed Krasny's guests. She read Barbara Walters' memoir like it was a textbook. She was 41 years old. Krasny was impressed.

"She has that kind of tool that good professional interviewers have – she's sincerely interested in her subjects," Krasny says.

Before she finished the internship, she asked him out to lunch. "I'd like to do what you're doing," she told him.

So she started small, with nothing but a microphone and a passion for the environment and green technology.

"I always thought of myself as being an entrepreneur," she says. "I was in start-up mode."

Using her networking skills – and her trademark ability to keep in touch – she contacted Henning from Foothill College, whom she had profiled for the Business Journal. When she expressed her idea to him, he started inviting her to VIP receptions before each celebrity forum. But his influence ended there, he says. Van Diggelen took care of the introductions herself.

"They say we take 25 seconds to determine if we like or don't like someone. I think [people] just like her, almost immediately," Henning says. "She also has what I call a practical intelligence, knowing what to say to who, when to say it and how to say it for maximum effect. She's a master of it. It's a social savvy set of skills."

New York Times columnist Dowd apparently felt so comfortable with van Diggelen after meeting her at Foothill that she greeted her at the Fairmont Hotel the next morning wearing workout gear and no makeup. (Van Diggelen was still in audio-only mode; she moved to video last year.) At the end of a 90-minute interview, van Diggelen asked Dowd to imagine her "dream date." It would involve, Dowd said, watching the old Robert Mitchum movie "Out of the Past." The next week, van Diggelen sent her a DVD of the movie. She still plans to take the columnist up on her offer of cocktails.

After John Robbins, author of "The Food Revolution," was interviewed by van Diggelen for a Commonwealth Club engagement, he called her a "true master of the art of conversation." He's been interviewed by Oprah and NPR's Terry Gross, he says, and "Alison is fully in their class."

When he received a thank-you note from van Diggelen, he followed up with one of his own: "Your thoughtfulness and charm evoked the best of me."

It's a sentiment that may very well take her far. **S**

## Alison asks

Some choice questions to the famous, and their answers:

**To former General Electric chairman Jack Welch:** Should businesses see global warming as a challenge or an opportunity?

"There's an enormous opportunity – whether you believe in global warming or not. . . . If you're in a company, you'd better be pushing those [green] products, because the world wants these products."

**To New York Times columnist and author Maureen Dowd:** Why did you call Al Gore "practically lactating" over his eco views?

"Oooh, I was sympathetic to him in terms of his ideas. I was just teasing him a little bit because he was so earnest, and he could be a little righteous and self-important. . . . I mean, certainly his ideas were right, but he himself was – sometimes – a pompous messenger for them."

**To actor and activist Martin Sheen:** Why do you care so passionately about the environment?

"There's a Hebrew adage that says, 'He who hath offspring giveth hostages to the future.' Well, I've given children and grandchildren, so they own that future. We have to be aware of our responsibility to future generations."

For more conversations with leaders in business, technology and the arts, see [FreshDialogues.com](http://FreshDialogues.com).



Courtesy Alison van Diggelen

Valley author and VC Guy Kawasaki says being interviewed by van Diggelen is like "a conversation between two friends."