



Elyce Arons, CEO of Frances Valentine, holds a favorite photo of her best friend Kate Brosnahan Spade, *Kansas*.



Picking up the Pieces

How shoe and handbag brand
FRANCES VALENTINE
is keeping Kate Spade's spirit alive
season after season.

BY KRISTEN DESMOND LEFEVRE, INDIANA >> PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS SORENSEN

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HEN KATE BROSNAHAN SPADE, Kansas, died in 2018, she left things behind. A note explaining the depth of her depression. A husband and a daughter, fam-

ily and close friends, all grieving the woman they called “Katy” or “Mom.” Kappas who proudly called her “sister.” Fans worldwide who called her a fashion favorite for her sunny designs with their trademark blend of irreverence and timelessness.

She also left behind a company—and it’s not the one you’re thinking of.

Be My Valentine

At the Frances Valentine pop-up store on the corner of Madison Avenue and 67th Street in New York City, you get the distinct impression that you’ve walked into the oversized closet of the chicest girl on the block. Her style is both polished and effortless. She’s breezed in and then left again, but not before editorially arranging her extraordinary collection of accessories on shelves and bookcases. There are tote bags in sleek snakeskin; boxy boarskin handbags in bright pops of orange, pink, and green; crossbody bags in classic stripes and tweeds; and vacation-ready straw and raffia clutches. There are stacks of bangle bracelets and trays of fanciful cocktail rings. And then there are the shoes: embroidered loafers, pebbled leather pumps, velvet mules, bedazzled Mary Janes, and sandals in plaids and polka dots.

You feel the need to up your accessory game immediately. Who is this Frances Valentine? Turns out, she’s Kate Spade. More precisely: She’s the legacy that lives on after the loss of one of America’s most beloved designers.

Founded in 2015—nearly a decade after Neiman Marcus Group bought Kate Spade New York—Frances Valentine was Kate’s second-act business. Now under the direction of CEO Elyce Arons, Frances Valentine is keeping Kate’s sartorial point of view at the forefront of the fashion world, offering clothing, jewelry, shoes and handbags that evoke Kate’s unique vintage-modern design aesthetic.

But Arons is not just any corporate crisis honcho hired to handle a company that unexpectedly loses its leader. She’s Kate’s best friend, and she’s been there from the start (even before the start) when she and Kate (whom Arons refers to as “Katy”) were freshman-year dorm mates at the University of Kansas.

Friends at first sight, Kate and Arons became inseparable in the fall of 1981. “We spent those first nights in the dorm telling each other about things we had never told anyone else,” Arons says. “The death of my older sister, the hard times Katy experienced during her parents’ divorce.”

They went through sorority Recruitment together: Kate pledging Kappa and Arons joining Chi Omega. After a sophomore year spring break road trip to visit Kate’s sister Missy at Arizona State University, the pair transferred schools together, moving into an apartment in Tempe, Arizona. As college graduates, they reunited in New York.

“Katy traveled through Europe for the summer and turned up at my place with \$5 in her pocket,” Arons recalls. “We lived together in this tiny Manhattan studio that I barely afforded waiting tables.”

They signed up for work through a temp agency, doing stints across the city. Within a year, their friendship became a business partnership: Arons was at Kate’s side when she built the Kate Spade New York brand in 1993 and sold it in 2006, and again when they launched the Frances Valentine label in 2015.

Carrying On

When it comes down to it, Arons says, Frances Valentine was founded because she and Kate missed being able to wear the sorts of uniquely chic accessories they just couldn’t find anymore (since they had stopped producing them themselves). “We missed making things that simply made us happy,” Arons says. Soon, the pair had secured a studio space, sketched designs, hired fabricators, and put together a website. They launched their first collection in 2016, purposely keeping things small. “We were dedicated to the idea of a boutique label designed by friends,” Arons says.

Then came June 5, 2018: the day Arons got the news that her best friend had died by suicide.

On a personal level, Kate’s death was inconceivable for Arons. It still is. “Every day, I wake up, it’s still shocking,” she says. As a businesswoman, Arons was left wondering what to do with the brand she and Kate started together.

After Kate’s death, Frances Valentine’s staff of 10 employees met to figure out next steps. They gathered around the large oval table in the heart of the common space of the double-height, light-filled offices overlooking Bryant Park. It was the same table where Kate had so often sat sketching or reviewing samples. It was the same table where only days

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earlier they had laid out mood boards together as a team. The discussion was tearful, but the decision was unanimous. “The only thing that we could think to do was to go forward,” Arons says.

Frances Valentine—a mashup of names plucked from Kate’s family—had faced an identity struggle from the outset. Sure, Kate and Arons were committed to a small-label concept. But even dedicated fans of Kate-Spade-the-designer were generally unaware that she was no longer associated with the brand that still bore her name. Even fewer connected her to Frances Valentine, despite Kate legally changing her name to Kate Valentine Spade in 2016. “It kind of makes me sound cool, like a rap star or something,” Kate told *Business of Fashion* in 2016. It was Kate’s way of distinguishing the name while honoring the old one. “It’s a way to separate the two worlds,” she said.

Even the new line’s spirited but timeless offerings of tailored leather totes with racing stripes, straw shoulder bags shaped like honeypots, jeweled mules lined with fur trim, and preppy-but-playful statement necklaces didn’t give consumers enough of a hint to make the jump—despite speaking loudly and clearly from Kate’s classic-with-a-twist point of view.



Mood boards and samples fill a table at Frances Valentine's Bryant Park studio and showroom.

But as news of Kate's death spread, awareness of her new brand spread almost as quickly. Every product in Frances Valentine's offerings—which at that time consisted of only a handful of items—sold out online within three days, crashing the company website.

Arons says sometimes the only thing you can do in the wake of loss is laugh ... and keep pushing forward. And she says that's just how Kate would've wanted her to handle the company they built together. "Katy and I shared that kind of horrible sense of humor, even in the face of tragedy," Arons says. "It may sound a little sick, but I think the joke that Katy would've made if she could see it all now is: 'You know, I had to die to make this company successful.'"

Love and Legacy

With Kate gone and Arons at the helm, Frances Valentine's direct-to-consumer, online-only business model—except for its two pop-up stores and relationships with a few specialty retailers like ShopBop and Nordstrom—is finding its foothold among upscale accessory labels. The brand doubled its 2018 revenue in 2019. "I think people found Katy's design aesthetic again at Frances Valentine, and they just keep coming back," Arons says, adding that Frances Valentine is in the midst of raising capital to fund the rapid growth fueled by new and returning customers.

Over a year and a half since Kate's passing, Arons says she thinks her friend would be pleased (and slightly perfectionistic) if she could walk into the Frances Valentine studio today. "Katy would probably come in and say, 'Turn the music up!' Then she'd start straightening the bags on the shelves, scrounging around for extra paper to stuff the bags out to puff them up more," Arons laughs. "She would look around at the pieces, throw her hands up in the air and say: 'Love! Love! Love!'"

Arons admits that without her friend and business partner, keeping up the work end of things has meant learning new skills—including emulating her friend's prodigious editorial eye. "We would get all the samples in, and we'd set them all up in groups. And then Katy would come in and start pulling things out. She'd say, 'I love this, but it's too much.' She always pared things down enough where every item really looked special and clean and had a reason for being there."

Items left over from Kate's cuts keep many of her original designs persistent in the products showcased in each Frances Valentine collection. Dozens of things Kate designed, produced and edited out of past collections are making their debut in new collections. "She'd come up with 10 collections or 10 groups within a collection. In the end, we really only needed five," Arons says. Concepts held over from earlier seasons get pulled back out, reevaluated and—if they're the right fit—offered up to the public.

But beyond the edit-outs, there are other items carefully curated by Kate herself: bags of material, bins of Moroccan sandals and tassels, boxes of fabric swatches and trims, stacks of mood boards, and racks of inspo vintage clothing items—including geometric evening coats, taffeta tea dresses, blouses in tartans, skirts in gingham and sequins, embroidered caftans, and jackets in tweeds, stripes, spots and florals—that dot Frances Valentine's New York studio. "Katy could go into any vintage shop and come out with just the right mix of old stuff that she made look new and cool. Her designs have always been inspired by those kinds of items," Arons says.

The massive collection is a clear sign that Kate had a plan and a purpose for the future of Frances Valentine. "She was designing right up to the days before her death," Arons says. Now that Kate is gone, the items help define the brand's design vision. "We tap into those things she collected and saved," Arons says. "We're always going through them and saying, 'This is so Katy.'"



Elyce and Kate, circa 1982

Beyond the Brand

Nobody knows you like your bestie. Here's what Kate was like as a person (not a brand) from Elyce Arons, Kate's best friend since college.

What was Kate like as a friend?

Katy never ever, ever let anybody feel bad. Ever. She would never hurt anyone's feelings, and she couldn't say no to anyone.

Any nicknames or pet names?

In college, her name in the Kappa house was Kiki.

What's something people don't know about Kate?

She was a great practical joker. She and I used to play practical jokes on each other all the time, even scary ones. She was the person who I could send a really horrible video and really laugh about it with her.

Beyond fashion, what were her passions?

She loved to travel. She loved her family. And she always loved having music around: Bob Dylan,

Leonard Cohen, Nick Cave, Fleetwood Mac.

Was she always the most fashionable friend?

She had the best taste. She rarely showed up in something that wasn't a hit.

Did she ever give you fashion advice you just didn't love?

One time she told me, "You should do your eyebrows really dark and your hair a lot blonder. Go for it!" I did it, and I looked like I was constantly angry because I had these dark eyebrows. But Katy thought it looked great.

When do you miss her most?

When I'm doing my hair. She was always pulling at it, fixing it, putting more pins in it. "You have to do it this way," she'd say. And she'd always be right. So every morning, when I'm doing my hair, I can almost hear her say, "Push it up!"



But the items that are perhaps the “most Katy” are the items from her personal closet. To share some of those favorite looks from Kate’s wardrobe, Frances Valentine has launched the *Love, Katy* collection. “Each piece has her sensibility, her wit and her charm,” Arons says. “They bring to mind a sense of longing for the past, but they also offer something refreshing to hold onto in the present.”

Beyond keeping Kate top of mind for the Frances Valentine customer, the *Love, Katy* collection has a more personal meaning for Arons and her staff. “To the world, she was Kate Spade. But to friends and family, she was always just Katy,” she says. “Our *Love, Katy* collection allows everyone else to see her the way we all saw her—as a person ... the best person. Not just a brand.”

Fashion, Forward

In a video posted on Frances Valentine’s website shortly before her death, Kate gushed about designing for her new line. Watching the clip now, it’s hard to imagine her as a person battling depression. She talks enthusiastically about finding creative inspiration everywhere. “I find it in everyday life,” Kate tells the camera. She adds jokingly: “The most fun thing about what I do is about working with friends and family. I would say the most challenging part is working with friends and family.”

Now without Kate, Arons finds her own inspiration in continuing

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to produce the kinds of designs that evoke her best friend’s unique way of seeing the world through fashion.

Who better than your best friend to continue your dreams when you’re no longer able to do it yourself?

“I’m doing it for Katy,” Arons says. “She lit up every room she ever entered, and so do the designs she has created and inspired. We intend to keep them alive at Frances Valentine. We’re going to keep working to bring her designs and vision to the world.”

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