

# Jacqui Higgins

## Be Curious

At the age of 15, Jacqui Higgins received some startling news from her parents: they were moving to India. Her father worked in civil engineering and was offered a position overseas. The little family packed up their Illinois home for an eighteen-month sojourn in a very foreign place.

The Higgins were hardly strangers to travel; Jacqui had been born in Nigeria before moving to England, where her parents were from. Since their move to the United States, they'd frequently relocated. At first, these relocations occurred across the Boston area, but recently they'd moved to Illinois. Through it all, Jacqui learned adaptability and began to shed some of her innate shyness.

It wasn't until the trip to India, however, that she fully came into her own. For the first six months of the trip, life was almost like a fairy tale. The whole family resided in a luxury hotel – The Taj Mahal Palace in Mumbai. Jacqui, young, curious and precocious, spent her days befriending the staff. There was Gerard, the handsome French maître d', the general manager, and Rudy, who worked on oil rigs. Often the group would sit around the pool, telling Jacqui fabulous stories about their travels. "They viewed me to be their little sister," smiles Jacqui. "They took me under their wing, made sure I was invited to the right parties and met the right people. I was meeting dignitaries, politicians, and other important people. I went to more black-tie events in those six months than probably the rest of my life combined!"

Eventually though, she had to come back to reality. With the monsoon season over, she needed to get back to school. Her parents sent her to a missionary boarding school in the Southern tip of India, a second culture shock. This one was a lot less pleasant. Jacqui missed the black-tie events, the opulent food, and the dignitaries. Suddenly she

was crowded into a dorm room with two roommates. Glitz and glamour had been replaced by the drudgery of schoolwork. She had so much trouble adjusting, in fact, that she decided to run away.

"I wanted to go back to Bombay, so that's what I did," she laughs. "To get from Kodaikanal, in the mountains, you have to take a bus to a tiny village. Then a train, crowded with livestock, to Madras, then a flight to Bombay. I traversed all of that, and my parents didn't know I was coming home. I probably covered a quarter of India by myself as a 16-year-old with no one knowing where I was. I was fearless. I had no thoughts that anything bad could happen with this plan!" Her parents were relieved she'd made it home safely, but she still had to return to school. This time, she began to make friends and enjoy herself.

"The school was only about 30 kids, grades 1-12, mostly dignitaries' children," recalls Jacqui. "The education I got there was at a collegiate level. Our instructors were amazing; we were always studying and cramming for exams. I joined the running team and field hockey team. And once I adjusted, I liked it. Boys and girls weren't allowed to spend time together unless there was an official reason so my roommate Sheila and I started a social committee for the school. We had a big record collection so we began holding dances. We would decorate to the hilt, and everyone had a great time."

Jacqui began to thrive academically, athletically, and socially. She came fully out of her shell; the once-shy preteen became a worldly and confident teenager. And after growing up in relatively privileged, homogenous Wellesley, MA, she learned much about the world beyond her doorstep. "All of a sudden I'm seeing poverty and destitution," she reflects. "There's a beauty to India



and a beauty to the people. I learned not to judge through one lens. It taught me so many things about myself and how I looked at the world; it helped me see things more broadly. Hearing from the other students about their lives and their homes, made me more tolerant and accepting of differences. If I had stayed in Wellesley, I think I might have been much more myopic. It gave me a completely new view of the entire world, which I'm so grateful for."

Jacqui's experience in India had been a deeply transformative one. But coming home was a second rude awakening, one that in some ways was even harder to navigate. While she had been travelling the world and expanding her horizons, her classmates had been continuing their typical suburban high school experience. Jacqui had grown; the people around her had not. Now it was difficult to relate to anyone around her. She was drawn to older people and was wary of her peers. She took a retail job at a local department store, Winkelman's, and began socializing more with her adult coworkers rather than other students.

From then on, Jacqui leaned into her independent streak. She became not only confident and curious, but creative and ambitious. Her time in India reframed the horizon of the possible for her; she'd navigated an enormous country, built a new home for herself, and encountered all kinds of people. Looking back on her career, it's clear that she took each of these experiences to heart. Through it all, she's maintained her curiosity and love of adventure and is always looking to the next horizon.

In 2019, Jacqui launched her second business, J Designs Consulting. Currently, she's working with two large clients, and bringing a broad portfolio of skills and talents with her. With a mixed background in both marketing and sales, Jacqui works to find a business's niche and then effectively communicate that messaging to the sales team. She doesn't believe in trying to outdo competitors by meeting them on their turf; instead, she advises businesses to find their own "sandbox to play in." In other words: find what sets your business apart and communicate that unique value to customers. Be proactive, not reactive to others' messaging.

Jacqui worked with an esports start-up dedicated to building out the infrastructure and community of the competitive gaming industry. "It's an amazing industry," she exclaims. "I'm not

in the company's demographic so I conducted a lot of research when they asked for my help. We think of video gaming as nerdy kids sitting in a basement, and there's certainly that element. But there is also the reality that this is the fastest growing tech industry in the world. And nowadays, you can turn your passion into purpose. You can become part of a team or a league, and you're no longer sitting in your basement. You may not be playing soccer on a field, but you're still learning those same basic tenets of interpersonal skills, development, and leadership."

The organization owns centers where people can play communally and sells gear and merchandise. But with Jacqui's help, they've moved beyond that, too. Now, they're focused on building leagues around schools, businesses, and regions. They're teaching people as well, offering a curriculum in esports and working with schools to offer scholarships. "These kids can go on to study coding, design, event management to name a few," she lists. "There are so many facets of this that they can pursue, and at the end of it, they can get a meaningful job out of college. Tying that all together makes this a neat little tapestry."

Jacqui knows that the key to good sales isn't your product or your size; it's your story. And as she discusses the esports start-up, she tells the story of this business from an emotional perspective. "When I went to school, you had the jocks and nerds," she points out. "But now, these kids who were previously nerds have a voice and can get recognized, too. You don't have to be a traditional athlete to be viewed as an athlete or make money. It levels the playing field and opens it up to people with disabilities; it's changed the whole paradigm of how athletics is viewed. It's good for autism, good for PTSD. I love that inclusivity component of it."

J Designs Consulting offers strategic sales and marketing positioning, branding, and strategy. Step one is empowering the organization to define themselves in the market. What is the purpose of the company? What is the story of the business, the reason customers will emotionally identify with it? After she works with companies on defining themselves in a compelling way, she moves into sales enablement. This means going to the sales team and working on how that story can be effectively presented. "Often marketing people create marketing content in a vacuum," she

explains. “Then they go to the salespeople, and the salespeople don’t know what to do with it. I’m able to look through both lenses and translate between those departments.” This talent has been evident in another engagement where she’s helping a healthcare start-up refine their messaging and marketing approach. The company, SmithRx, is visionary, purpose-driven organization that offers a disruptive approach to pharmacy benefits management. Crafting the message through the lens of the client: what’s most important to them.

Translation and communication have been key throughout Jacqui’s career so it’s no surprise she developed those skills throughout her life. Although India was the first major trip she remembers, she was actually born in Nigeria. At the age of two, her parents moved her home to England. Her father worked as a civil engineer, while her mother occasionally took hairdressing clients at home. Jacqui had a brother who was five years older and was already attending college during her time in India.

The family stayed in England until Jacqui was eight. Though she once had an accent, she lost it over the years, partly due to her desire to fit in. From that early childhood, she remembers happy times with a couple of best friends, and visits to her nearby extended family. Her aunt and uncle owned a bakery, and she fondly recalls them picking out the prettiest Easter egg for her each year. Another uncle owned a restaurant and club, complete with a swimming area and bowling alley. She loved Uncle Bernard, who was “like Superman” and an owner of several beloved rabbits.

But she was closest of all to her maternal grandmother. Jacqui would often spend hours in her home playing in the greenhouse and learning to pot plants. Her grandmother, a talented artist, also taught her to draw. Quickly, Jacqui began drawing imaginative comics. At Christmas, the family had a big traditional English celebration, complete with Christmas pudding, custard, and English Christmas cake covered in marzipan.

It was a charmed childhood, but at age eight, Jacqui experienced her first big move. The family relocated to Wellesley, Massachusetts, a nice suburb of Boston. And the family continued to move every few years. In retrospect, Jacqui realizes her parents were flipping houses. “It was a joke in my family that they would fix it up to the point

they liked it, then sell it,” she recalls. “My mother, to her credit, was a very astute businesswoman. She should’ve been a realtor; she would’ve made a boatload of money. She was always very communicative and social. She would learn things just by talking to people. She knew where to buy and when to sell from talking with people.”

Both of Jacqui’s parents are still alive and in their 90s. Her father, unfortunately, suffers from dementia, but her mother is as sharp and feisty as ever. Both of them were tremendous parents. “My father was always very kind, charming, and even-keeled,” Jacqui reflects. “He’s a gracious warm person who is easy to connect with and to talk to. He had a lovely strength of character I admire. He’s also a very humble man. I’ve learned from him that humility is one of the greatest traits you can possess.”

“My mother has been my mentor,” she goes on. “I saw her manage so many things, seemingly with ease. Moving a family around all the time to different countries or neighborhoods. She always flowed with everything; when they moved, she was the one who made sure they got involved in the community. I love her strength and her resilience. She instilled in me a belief that there wasn’t anything I couldn’t accomplish if I put my mind to it. I never felt there was a limit on what I could achieve.”

One anecdote in particular illustrates their supportiveness. Jacqui was something of a tomboy growing up. She loved the outdoors and became fascinated by a movie called “The Other Side of the Mountain” about a little boy who ran away. She was packing to run away when her father stumbled on her trying to crawl out the window; he sat Jacqui down and asked about her feelings. Then, her parents bought her her very own pup tent, where, except in severe storms, she chose to sleep outside for over a year. Sometimes, her parents would come out and join her for a bonfire or smores.

In school, Jacqui got along with the other kids and did well both academically and in gymnastics, but as mentioned, she had trouble transitioning to normal after returning from India. She decided to take a gap year before attending college at Northeastern University. She took some courses in interior design and loved it, but ultimately decided to go into the IT space.

Her first adult job didn’t end well. She’d scored a marketing associate position at a

telecommunications company, but quickly became a victim of the CFO's unwanted advances. When she commented on the harassment, she was let go. "I walked out and started sobbing in my car," remembers Jacqui. "I really did think my entire life and career were over."

Soon after, she noticed an ad in the newspaper for a job at Wang Laboratories. "The role was International Public Relations Specialist," she smiles. "I definitely was not qualified for that job. I knew nothing about the role, but I was determined and was able to talk my way into it. I think it was the determination I showed." At Wang, she met her first mentors, Cheryl Garelik and Jane Carpenter. They taught her the marketing and international business ropes.

From there, Jacqui moved onto the operations side with a job at MASSCOMP. She wanted to learn more about software and management; she did both, but ultimately decided the role wasn't for her. She was back in marketing at AAA when she was diagnosed with a severe illness. She was just about 30, and she'd come down with a thyroid disorder called Graves' disease. For five years she struggled with her illness; at the same time, she struggled to learn to rely on others more.

"My whole life went into a tailspin," she relates. "I couldn't make it through a whole day. My heart rate was off the charts. I was exhausted and would have to take naps in conference rooms. My friends would watch out for me and wake me up. I was fortunate because I had three very dear friends who would always help me. I always knew I could turn to people if I needed to but was always reluctant to do so. It was a progression for me to accept being more dependent on other people. Part of that goes back to moving all the time. I had become very self-sufficient and independent."

After five years, Jacqui fully recovered and knew immediately that she wanted a change. At first, she considered a move to Tampa but ultimately settled for Washington, DC. Here, she developed her skills in international sales and marketing while working for Learning Tree International. Five years later, she decided to go out on her own and launch her first business.

That first business was called Accents by Design. It focused on commercial interior design,

with a heavy emphasis on the value add of design. It wasn't just about creating nice spaces; it was about working with businesses to understand their needs, and fill those needs with smart design. She started with nothing but her presentation and public speaking skill. She launched a series of "lunch and learns" at the Tower Club and found clients that way. The business thrived for several years before the economy made it difficult to compete. Ultimately, she tried her hand at working for a larger design firm before deciding it wasn't for her. Ever the independent one, she refocused on a new business with a fresh strategy: J Designs Consulting.

Jacqui emphasizes the importance of leading by example. She also reflects that leaders should inspire their subordinates to be better versions of themselves. "Your role in leading them is to help them elevate their strengths," elaborates Jacqui. "I'm curious about people and want to hear their stories and learn what makes them tick."

To young people entering the working world today, Jacqui advises a willingness to learn from others. "I want to instill in them the value of knowledge, and that knowledge comes from experience many times," she nods. "Take what you can learn from other people; that will make your journey easier. Be astute enough and curious enough to ask people about their journey and learn from them."

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