

I Leading Lady

She may once have been known for her appearances on Bangkok's high-society party circuit, but these days NAPHAPORN "LEK" BODIRATNANGKURA is living up to her fabled family name by building on a century-old legacy. Diana Hubbell meets the former party-girl-turned-business-mogul

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unlight pours through the immense windows of Lady L Garden Bistro at Nai Lert Park Heritage Home, a verdant oasis tucked behind Chidlom's cluster of upscale shopping centres. It's early, but Lek Bodiratnangkura is already seated at her favourite perch on the marble counter directly below a framed oil painting of her grandmother, Thanpuying Lursakdi Sampatisiri. From this vantage point, she has an unimpeded view of everything that goes on – and she misses nothing.

Although she's been photographed on red carpets rocking plunging necklines and couture frocks by any designer worth knowing, today she's the picture of understated elegance in a crisp, steel-grey suit paired with stilettos. She flashes a smile as I enter, before ordering us a set of pillowy scones with jam from the Royal family of Bhutan.

"Much of what you've heard about me is bullshit," she says before I can so much as ask a question. I've seen her photogenic features splashed across magazine pages, but still images somehow fail to capture the luminous quality of her skin and the piercing, magnetic pull of her gaze. Her presence would be intimidating, were it not for a glint in her eye that suggests she doesn't take herself too seriously. With a breezy laugh, she brushes off some of the more outlandish rumours floating about – whatever they may be. "I'm done with bullshit. I say whatever I think."

Being born into fame and fortune has meant that Lek has spent 36 years living in the spotlight. Once dubbed the Paris Hilton of Thailand due to her fabulous inheritance and formidable beauty, she was omnipresent at the most exclusive events

in the upper echelons of Bangkok society for the better part of a decade. Her lavish wedding in 2012 to Korn Narongdej – and subsequent divorce, a year later – were the source of endless tabloid speculation and public scrutiny.

In recent years, however, Lek has set aside her hard-partying past and established herself as a canny businesswoman in her own right. As managing director of The Nai Lert Group, she was incremental in orchestrating the 10.8 billion baht sale of their Swissôtel Nai Lert Park Hotel to Bangkok Dusit Medical Services (BDMS) late last year, and a driving force – along with her mother, Sanhapit Bodiratnangkura – behind her family's decision to transform their 101-year-old teakwood house that sits on another part of their sprawling estate into an open museum for the public. She seems unruffled, even bemused by gossip about her personal affairs, which pale in comparison to her larger ambitions.

"If people talk badly about me, it doesn't bother me. Right now, I don't have much to prove to people I don't know, but I have a lot to prove in the arena of this business that I'm trying to build," she says. "I want to create something that is timeless and has substance, something that will last. It's not about me. It's about continuing the legacy of Nai Lert Park."

She's referring, of course, to the empire launched by her great-grandfather, Lert Sreshthaputra, or Nai Lert, one of Thailand's most revered businessmen. A forward-thinking gentleman often spotted about town with his pet leopard and walking stick in hand, Nai Lert made a fortune in enterprises ranging from manufacturing ice to importing Western luxury foods to creating a public transportation network and ship construction. His self-designed crest, a circle with a cross through it, can still be found all over the family's property.

"He was really cool," Lek says, showing me a sepia-toned photograph of a solemn-looking young man. I ask if she ever feels pressured to live up to the scope of his achievements. "You can look at that as pressure, if you don't enjoy it. But I love what I do and I see the value of what my family has created. They've been building on it for over a hundred years."

In order to continue to build upon that, she's not above getting involved in the nitty-gritty elements of day-to-day operations. While some might be content to delegate managerial duties, Lek takes a much more hands-on approach, enmeshing herself in every minute detail. "People

ask how I keep fit and I'm like, 'Walking around Nai Lert Park,'" she says with a laugh. "I've been doing my walking count and I do about 10,000 steps a day, plus I get my natural vitamin D. I love to walk and I love to talk to people. It doesn't have to be at the manager's level. I mean, the cleaners, the gardeners. For example, I assumed the gardeners would want short-sleeved uniforms, because it's hot, but the other day they asked for longer ones to protect them from the sun. How would I have known what they really needed if I didn't ask?"

Carrying on a 120-year-old family dynasty of such magnitude is certainly a challenge, but Lek has never been one to shy away from a difficult situation, no matter what form it may take. At the age of only 11, her family sent her off to an all-girls' boarding school in Hatfield, England. With her limited English vocabulary and slight stature, she was an easy target for bullies.

"All I could say was 'yes,' 'no,' 'hello,' and 'thank you.' So if anyone said anything nasty to me, I would just say 'thank you.' I couldn't defend myself," she recalls. Unfortunately, she had as much trouble communicating with her teachers as with her peers and had to resort to pantomime on more than one humiliating occasion just to make herself understood. Some students might have crumpled, but Lek handled the situation with grit that has remained with her to this day.

"That kind of thing can either mess you up or make you stronger. Initially, I didn't want to call my family, because I didn't want to be seen as weak. I thought, I'll fight for my life."

Near constant ostracisation could not hold her down for long. When she was 13, she threw herself into tennis. Despite being one of the smallest members of the team, her innate competitive spirit made her a daunting opponent on the court.

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MAY 2017 PRESTIGE 107

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TOP **TOM FORD**
SKIRT **LOUIS VUITTON**
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Before long, she was the first Asian captain in the school's history.

"If I hadn't gone to England and gone through all of that, I would've just been a spoiled brat without self-confidence. I wouldn't know who I was," she says. Overcoming the inherent adversity of cultural barriers is something of a family tradition. Nai Lert sent Lek's grandmother to study in Japan roughly 70 years ago, at a time when few women dared to do such a thing. "Even at that time, he was thinking internationally. He knew that you have to broaden your horizons. If you're close-minded or you stop learning and think that you're already the best that you can be, then your life is done."

As Nai Lert's sole heir, Thanpuying Lursakdi expanded his already thriving ventures, opening the five-star Hilton property that would later become the Swissôtel Nai Lert Park Hotel. She also served as Thailand's first female minister, nabbed several championship golf trophies, and maintained a pivotal role in the family business into her 90s. "She lived," says Lek, gesturing to her portrait. "This family has strong women, from my grandmother to my mom to my two younger sisters, Duangpatra and Patcharavipa. We are all very strong-minded," she says, then with a grin adds, "... and very stubborn. If it's a meeting about the business, we argue left and right, but in the end, the decision is made based on what is best for the business."

Of all the women in her life, Lursakdi was also one of the most influential in Lek's transformation from party girl into savvy business mogul. Though Lek has always pursued her passions, she is the first to admit that those did not always lie in the hospitality industry. After graduating from courses at a hotel management school in England and Parsons School of Design in New York, she returned to Thailand. Ostensibly, the point of her homecoming was to join the family business, but her attention lay elsewhere.

"My body was there, but my brain was off in Silom somewhere," she says, shaking her head. "I'm quite an extreme person. When I partied from the ages of 14 to 24, I partied hard. If the sun didn't

come up. I didn't go home. I used to go to product launches, gala dinners, and all these other events three times a day. I would change outfits in the car."

Though she made a point of showing her face at the hotel, her heart was not in it. Her grandmother made little comment, continuing to recount tales of Nai Lert's business triumphs and failures with the hope that one day such stories might leave an impression. One evening at 6pm, as Lek was preparing to head off and hit the town, her grandmother said something that stuck.

"I walked past her office and said, 'Grandma, I'm done. I'm going.' And she looked up and said, 'Oh really, you have finished? I've been working for 90 years and I'm not done yet.' That hit me really hard," she says. "My grandmother didn't tell me what to do. I think she wanted to lead by example. Once I complained to her that a magazine had said something negative about me and that it was hard to be criticised all the time. She said to me, 'Lek, sometimes it's harder to be a somebody than a nobody. You are lucky to have this surname. It's not just about you.'"

Something clicked and Lek began to take her role seriously. She still makes public appearances, but prefers to concentrate her efforts on transforming the Nai Lert Park name into an international brand. As she's grown into a powerful female figure and a force to be reckoned with, she's also matured as a style icon. Her recent sartorial choices may be more refined than the daring cuts she sported 10 years ago, but she's still renowned for her mercurial fashion sense and a refusal to play by the rules. She has a penchant for designer duds, not to mention the face and the figure to pull off practically any outfit – but insists that taste has less to do with labels and more with having the confidence to pull them off.

When I ask her where her heels are from, she rolls her eyes and says, "I have too many other important things in my brain to waste space on

something like that." She may not make a fuss over the label, but she does admit that her favourite way to accessorise is with a killer pair of shoes. "Even if you're wearing a pair of ripped jeans and a T-shirt, you can throw on pair of heels and it's done. To me, it's about how you carry yourself. If you're a rude person in a Chanel jacket, how beautiful is that? That's the difference between good taste and bad taste. Taste is knowing what is beautiful, what is distinctive and what is timeless."

It's a bold statement coming from someone who could easily snap up whatever she chooses off the runway. Yet Lek has never been one to let passing trends dictate her decisions in either life or fashion. When I ask her what constitutes luxury for one who has everything, she pauses thoughtfully, then muses, "From a tangible aspect, luxury can be measured by horsepower, thread count, and air miles," she says, then adds, "Luxury, to me, is to have peace of mind."

What brings her that peace of mind has evolved over the years as she has channeled her energy to more adult pursuits. "It was my passion to party and now it's my passion to work. It's not an effort. If it were an effort, I wouldn't have this attention to detail," she says. "I love coming here every day and seeing what problems I'm going to face."

There is no shortage of problems to solve or work to be done. Opening Nai Lert Park Heritage Home required calling in restoration experts from Ayutthaya and cataloguing some 25,000 original antiques.

Over the next two years, Lek and her siblings (she also has a younger brother, Phollawud) plan to open two hotels under the independent Nai Lert Park brand – one in Bangkok and one in Hua Hin. The Bangkok development will also have a residences component, while the latter will include boutique villas and apartments, scattered around the family's beautifully restored 90-year-old weekend beach home on a stretch of pristine beach. "It's going to be very warm and welcoming, and the word 'park' in our brand name is a give-away of what can be expected," she promises.

In addition to the charming function spaces at Nai Lert Park Heritage Home, where Lady L Garden Bistro is also located, Lek launched an outside catering business, called White Bus Catering. Most recently, they were involved in a talk-of-the-town event hosted by Cavallino Motors in Ayutthaya to celebrate Ferrari's 70th anniversary.

A great deal of thought went into the decision to sell Swissôtel Nai Lert Park Hotel and the 15 rai of land surrounding it after 33 years of operation. Although plenty of companies were clamouring for the prime piece of real estate, Lek and her

family refused to deal with anyone who would not uphold their vision. "We chose to sell to BDMS because they appreciate what we have. They want to keep it green, as the lungs of Bangkok," she says.

A hulking, high-rise condominium might have been profitable in the short-run, but would have destroyed the public space that Nai Lert established, as well as cast a shadow over the family's remaining 24 rai of adjacent land. During the transition, she fought to keep as many of the hotel's staff as possible, both as employees at Nai Lert Park Heritage Home or working for the catering business. The fact that 50 staff members had been with the company for 15 years and that some had stayed with the hotel since it opened is a testament to their loyalty. "When we closed, it was the saddest day of my life. My mom was pregnant with me before the place opened. I was born with the hotel."

Despite the bittersweet nature of the transition, Lek is not one for sentimental reminiscing. By her own admission, she seldom reflects back on the past with regards to personal or professional matters, preferring to move forward. Despite a grueling schedule, she takes an hour out of each day to sit in silence and plan for the future, much like her great-grandfather before her.

"Not everything that Nai Lert did was a success. But he could see opportunities and he had the guts to go for them. You have to have guts to succeed in business," she says quietly, then with modesty that feels sincere. "You know, a lot of people think that this bistro is named for 'Lady Lek,' but it's dedicated to my grandmother. Even the embroidery on the napkins is a copy of her signature. I haven't done anything worthy of putting my name on a restaurant yet."

As she stands there, it hits me that the look of fierce determination in her eyes is a dead-ringer for her grandmother, the Lady L, and I have no doubt that someday soon, she will. **P**



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