



Rebel with a Cause

Under Wolfe’s leadership, Rebel Girls is building an omni-channel universe for girls by expanding its offerings to television, live theater, merchandise, and digital. The Rebel Girls app, which brings stories to life with original art and rich audio, won the 2022 Apple Design Award for Social Impact.

Before joining the Rebel Girls team in 2020, Wolfe was a founding member of Chief, a private network for women leaders, and served as COO at Hoodline, a hyper-local media tech company. Previously, she worked in various strategy and finance roles at Algeco Scotsman Group, Boston Consulting Group, Grid-Point, International Finance Corporation, and Morgan Stanley.

Wolfe has an MBA from Stanford Graduate School of Business and a bachelor’s degree in economics and political science from the University of California, Berkeley.

Jes Wolfe chatted with *Diversity Woman* about the power of storytelling, the importance of being nimble, and her impression of today’s girls.

DW: Why is storytelling important?

JW: Storytelling is one of the most tried-and-true ways for kids to learn. It’s how they get information, process the world, and make sense of things. Rebel Girls uses storytelling to inspire, empower, and build confidence in girls. We tell the stories of real-life extraordinary women from across history, geography, and fields of excellence, so that girls of all backgrounds, beliefs, and interests can feel seen and find at least one if not dozens of role models who inspire them.

DW: What types of conversations are you having behind the scenes as you choose which stories to tell?

JW: So many conversations! We all have strong opinions about which titles should be next and who should be featured. Is

As CEO of Rebel Girls, Jes Wolfe helps girls see themselves as strong, smart, and capable

BY KIMBERLY OLSON

IN HER YOUNGER YEARS, Jes Wolfe was a competitive swimmer. She sometimes swam 30,000 meters—more than 18 miles—in a day. Pushing herself to achieve made her feel strong and confident, feelings that spilled over to other aspects of her life.

Wolfe wants every girl to feel bold and fearless. It’s a cause that she’s devoted herself to as CEO of Rebel Girls, a girl-driven edutainment company that aims to build a community of 50 million girls and young women who are engaged with its brand by 2025.

To that end, its popular Rebel Girl book series shares stories of remarkable girls and women—from painter Frida Kahlo to climate activist Esohe Ozigbo, from freedom fighter Harriet Tubman to soccer star Megan Rapinoe.

The company is committed to diverse storytelling, with 63 percent of its stories about women of color and Indigenous women. Its Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls series, for example, includes titles like *100 Real-Life Tales of Black Girl Magic* and *100 Immigrant Women Who Changed the World*. Rebel Girls works with more than 500 creators from around the globe to tell each story as authentically as possible. To date, it has sold 7 million books, translated into 51 languages in more than 100 countries, and continues to expand its content with additional translations and country-specific editions.

CEO WOMAN

“Control is an illusion. The more I can get comfortable with the need to be nimble, and not get too hung up about any one plan, the more adept we become as a company.”

there a woman from a country we have not covered yet? Is there a new profession we have not shared yet? New backgrounds to amplify and celebrate?

Then within each anthology, our aim is to be as representative as possible. We want to have a good mix of geographic representation, field-of-excellence representation, age representation, a mix of current heroes and legends from the past. We also seek stories rooted in ethnicities, cultures, and communities that are still rarely shared—especially in children’s media—such as Indigenous, neurodiverse, and those with disabilities.

DW: How have Rebel Girls books impacted girls?

JW: Parents are constantly sharing anecdotes with us, and girls tell us directly in our focus groups how the stories give them new role models and build their confidence.

We were told a story of two daughters, ages five and seven. The five-year-old was doing a drawing activity, which wasn’t going well, and she wanted to give up. The older daughter turned to her and said she couldn’t give up because it was against the Rebel Girls law.

A mom told us about her six-year-old, who was dealing with a boy being mean to her at school. He was telling her that girls couldn’t do certain things. The girl went back to school with our book and shoved it in his face, saying, “Yes, they can, and here is proof.”

DW: What insights have you gleaned from your travels that shape how you approach Rebel Girls?

JW: I spent 16 years living and working all over the world and consider myself a global citizen. My travels and work abroad taught me about the humanity in all of us and that there are so many

interesting people, cultures, and ideas out in the world that should be celebrated and shared.

DW: How would you describe your leadership style?

JW: I am deeply passionate about empowering girls. I’m high energy and an optimist. I’m also direct and analytical.

I also love to have fun. Costumes definitely come out from time to time at Rebel Girls. We have a team with great love for our pets and kids, and we do a lot of photo sharing. We also just have fun camaraderie overall, like special hand signals to end each meeting, or jokes and poking fun at each other’s obsessions, whether they be QR codes or bike riding.

DW: As CEO, what challenge have you learned the most from?

JW: I became CEO at the start of the COVID pandemic in April 2020. At Rebel Girls, we’ve had challenges around global paper shortages, supply chain and ocean-shipping delays, team members contracting COVID, political unrest, the great reshuffle—all of it.

What I’ve learned is that control is an illusion. The more I can get comfortable with the need to be nimble, and not get too hung up about any one plan, the more adept we become as a company at problem-solving and forward movement.

DW: During the tough times in your career, how do you keep going?

JW: Perspective. My brother was in the military. When things are tough in his world, people get hurt or die. In my world, no one dies. This perspective is very important for contextualizing what is tough and what is required to keep going.

A deep love for this mission of what we are building at Rebel Girls.

A long history of mastering endurance. I spent a lot of time in the pool, and I learned to take one stroke and then another. Same with mountain climbing, which is something I currently love to do. Having practice doing really hard and, at times, painful physical activity translates to doing hard things in life and at work. It’s one step at a time—just keep going.

And a glass of red wine and a good night’s sleep always help. There is always a new day in the morning.

DW: What projects are you currently excited about?

JW: We took our award-winning podcast stories and transitioned them to the app, and then we added new story types, soundscapes, and cool features that complement the stories, such as real-life archival photos and quizzes and polls for listeners to engage with. This year, we won the Apple Design Award mere months after launch, which was an amazing recognition of the impact we have. Going forward, we’ll be launching more immersive features and story types.

Unlike books and podcasts, which are one-way conversations, with an app we can have more of a two-way relationship with our community. We can learn what engages them and then make better storytelling experiences for them. Also in the app, we will start to add more ways for girls to participate, which furthers our empowerment mission.

DW: When you think about this upcoming generation of girls, how do you feel about the future?

JW: Inspired, motivated, hopeful. This is the greatest generation to date, which is great because they have a huge responsibility and a whole slew of problems to solve. When I talk to the girls in our community, I see a bright future. They are smart, engaged, bold, curious, and empathetic. **DW**

Kimberly Olson is Diversity Woman’s managing editor.