



FROM BURGERS TO THE BOARDROOM

How McDonald's empowers women to build lasting careers.

When Kylie Freeland worked her first shift at a Brisbane McDonald's nearly 30 years ago, she had no clue that flipping burgers would one day lead her to a seat in the boardroom. Now the managing director for McDonald's New Zealand and the Pacific Islands, Freeland explains how she turned a high-school job at her local Macca's into a career – and how she believes many other women can do the same.

"I've been lucky enough to work for McDonald's for most of my working life. When I look back, I believe the reason I've stuck with Macca's is because I've continued to take the opportunities presented, and have a lot of fun along the way. The business offers great training and professional development opportunities, and has always supported me to stretch and move into new roles," says Freeland.

For many teenagers, a Macca's job is a rite of passage – but Freeland says it can be much more than a "first job". "What got me in the door at McDonald's was the fact it was renowned for great training and a great start for people to work. But what made me pursue a career at McDonald's was just that genuine care and pathway – developing people to wherever they want to be in the future."

While studying radiation therapy, Freeland worked casual hours—until a life-changing opportunity arose "I got the chance to become a restaurant manager and open a brand-new restaurant. I took that opportunity and stopped my studies thinking that I would go back... but the rest is history," she says. Soon, Freeland was overseeing operations for all of the McDonald's-owned restaurants in Queensland. In 2015, she was offered the role of National Equipment Manager with McDonald's Australia, headquartered in Sydney.

"I relocated my then-young family down to Sydney, where I was procuring and distributing all of the equipment for the Australian and New Zealand business," Freeland recalls. Her last role there was senior director of supply chain and sustainability for both countries. Freeland held the position throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, which saw her navigate a raft of new and unprecedented challenges as logistics were severely disrupted amid lockdowns. "That was a really steep learning curve, as I managed to keep our supply chains alive and thriving during our most difficult time."

In 2022, Freeland assumed her current position of New Zealand's managing director. She now lives in Aotearoa with her wife and two teenage sons, and is grateful her high-flying career still affords her an all-important work-life balance. "How I achieve that work-life balance is by committing that when I'm at work, I'm at work – but when I'm at home, I treat home and being with my family as important as being with work," she explains. "I have an amazing team around me and we're very clear on who has what decisions, roles, and responsibilities at any time, to make sure everyone can have balance."

"My wife and I also fostered children in Australia, and we have continued to foster in New Zealand."

Giving back is an important quality for Freeland, and it's a trait she's proud to see in her children. Kylie's younger son Cohen recently received media attention when he bungy jumped from the Auckland Harbour Bridge 15 times on his 15th birthday, seeking to raise \$15,000 for Ronald McDonald House Charities. Freeland's older son Fletcher has followed in her footsteps, working as a manager at McDonald's part time while he studies.

Despite many students using McDonald's as a financial stopgap during their studies, Freeland reiterates that the fast-food giant can foster long-term career growth and development that reaches far beyond the till or grill. The company sponsored her master's degree in business administration (MBA), which she obtained from the Australian Institute of Business in 2017. The investment was another way in which McDonald's empowered Freeland to succeed.

"I started out cooking burgers, but McDonald's has continued my educational career, sponsoring my master's degree in business, and given me opportunities to relocate to different cities and different countries and to manage an entire country network."

Ninety per cent of McDonald's restaurants are run by local franchisees – independent business owners who operate under the McDonald's brand. Many people who start their careers on the restaurant floor move on to become franchisees, restaurant managers or senior leaders at the head office, Freeland says.

"The majority of people in senior leadership have come from a restaurant background. Throughout my time, I've travelled overseas with the company, I've had so many experiences that only McDonald's can offer," she says.

Freeland hopes her story inspires women to take charge of their careers and follow their passions.

"The sky's really the limit within McDonald's."

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