



ROLE MODELS: COVER GIRLS SPEAK UP FOR SOCIAL CAUSES

MINDFUL

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Working together to shine a light on social and employment issues, the empowered women of the Model Mafia are a global collective to be reckoned with.

BY ISABEL GONZÁLEZ WHITTAKER

Models have obliterated the archaic notion that they are just pretty faces over recent decades, first through empowerment-busting (Eryq Bonny, Heidi Klum) and then through acts of activism (Ashley Graham, Ebonee Davis), with the evolving presence of the Model Mafia, a global collective of 200+ models who work industrially and together to elevate social causes. Their impact continues to grow.

"I found modeling to be fun, but intellectually unstimulating and lacking community," says Model Mafia cofounder Anna Rose Campbell, who started community mobilization as a teenager in London, where she organized a talent competition to raise funds for students in need. Later in New York, she organized events to bring models together around issues they care about, as an answer to the industry's intensely isolating standard where "your friends are your competition."

The guest speaker of one of those events was environmentalist and #MeToo activist Cameron Russell, and together they launched Model Mafia in 2016, hoping to bring together working models under the banner of social impact, as well as "to support each other's voices while helping them all become leaders for their causes."

Among the ranks are Ebonee Davis (transformation coach), Leyna Bloom (transgender-ownership activist) and Anna Therese Bengtson (eco-warrior), who got involved with Model Mafia after meeting at the People's Climate March in DC last year. "I started modeling to have a voice but quickly realized you don't get to have one," says Bengtson, who associates on behalf of environmental orgs Rainforest Alliance and Lonely Whale. "To me it felt like a huge disconnect, having this platform but

not being able to have that voice. Bengtson, who is based in San Francisco and was once a model on Project Runway, has a podcast called "Hey Change" and runs Role Models Management, an agency that runs cause-driven brands with issue-focused models. Models can use their social media platforms to promote important progressive change to their followers and inspire others to share their stories, too," she says.

Like Model Mafia and Role Models

Management, New York-based True Model Management is hoping to harness the power of model voices while also working philanthropy into their bottom line. Founded by former model Dale Noelle, the full-service agency donates a portion of their fees to nonprofits that support education, cancer research, clean water and more, as well as matches a percentage of what models donate to charities. "I fully realize the importance of funding foundations and charities, and the impact these philanthropic organizations have on the lives of others," says Noelle, who is also a cancer survivor.

While external efforts are a priority for Model Mafia, whose collective social reach with all members has climbed into the millions, some of Campbell's and Russell's proudest moments have been the impact the collective has had on each member.

"The #MeToo movement brought us together to express our care for each other privately, so we talked about our own experiences and what we can do to keep ourselves safe," says Campbell, who said some of the issues that surfaced during the gatherings coalesced into real change at the agency level, such as getting clear information from agents about whether a shoot includes nudity or sex, and ensuring adequate changing areas.

The focus on empowering all the voices of the table sets Model Mafia apart with Campbell and Russell at the bureaus, but with the other fashion organizational infrastructure in place. "We believe in fairness and equality, and we want to create a community that reflects that," says Campbell. The group, she adds, "has a very democratic feel but is with an aim to support each other while helping elevate the sounding of every member around their chosen cause." ■

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