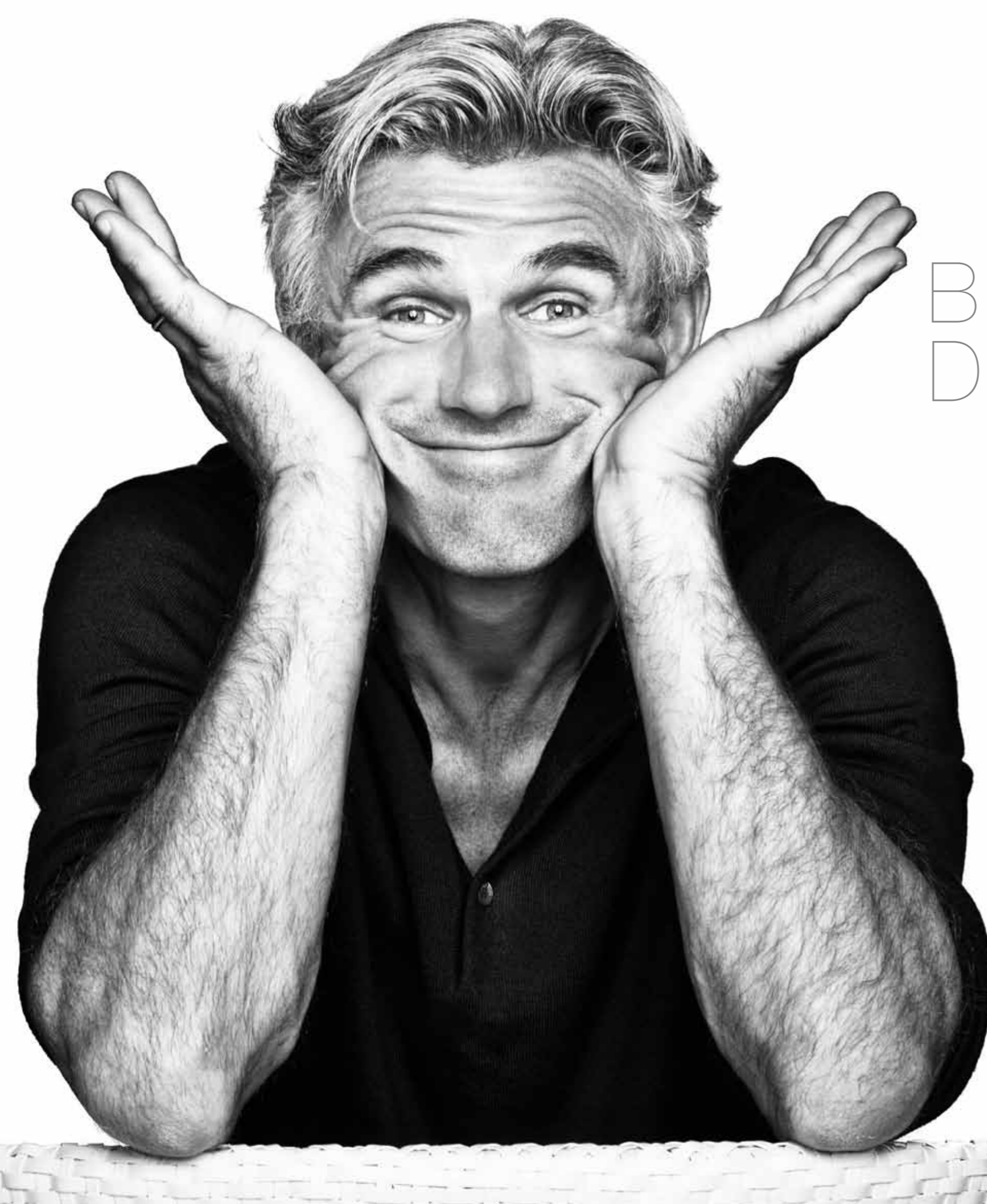


THE  
**DEEDON**<sup>®</sup>  
BRAND



# Bobby DEKEYSER

## *Founder and Chairman*

One day in English class, 15-year-old Bobby Dekeyser stood up and made an announcement. School was not for him, he declared, much to the amusement of his teacher and classmates. He was leaving it, effective immediately, to pursue a career as a professional goalkeeper.

It was a typical Bobby move – instinctive, spontaneous and not just a little foolhardy. And no less typical of Bobby, he somehow managed to pull it off. In four short years, at the remarkably young age of 19, he would sign with FC Bayern Munich, one of the most prestigious soccer clubs in the world.

Innate talent is the usual explanation for such a rapid ascent, but Bobby insists he had none. “I had no feeling for the ball,” he maintains to this day. “It didn’t do anything for me.” What Bobby lacked in natural ability, however, he more than made up for in passion, determination and perseverance.

Born in Leuven to a family of serial entrepreneurs, and raised mainly in Belgium, Austria and Germany, Bobby describes home life – what little there was of it – as “entertaining chaos.” The family moved frequently. A born rebel, Bobby attended nine different schools. “I had no idea about a house,” he recalls, “because we usually lived in an old factory.” His mother’s extended family – led by Grandpa Heinrich Hummer, an entrepreneurial inspiration to Bobby – were in the business of plastics extrusion. Consumed with their work, they took a laissez-faire approach to child rearing. There was plenty of love, but few rules and no supervision; children were expected to find their own way.

“I always wanted something normal,” Bobby says today, “a wife, kids, a house.” He responded to the absence of discipline at home by creating it for himself – he turned to soccer. Any sport might

have served, but soccer offered the self-described outsider an extra measure of social acceptance. Plus, it was a good way to impress girls.

By the age of 13, Bobby was training so intensively that he suffered his first stress fracture. At 14, he won a nationwide youth competition in Germany and earned the chance to train with his idol, Pelé, at the legendary striker’s soccer school in New York. And by 15, having given school the slip, Bobby was pursuing his professional ambition full time. Even a mandatory stint in the Belgian army wasn’t enough to slow him down now: Within a year of his release, he was clad in the colors of FC Bayern Munich, filling in admirably for the top goalie of the day, the great Jean-Marie Pfaff.

But in the summer of 1990, Bobby received an injury – a crushing blow to the left side of his face – that would change the course of his life. While recuperating in a hospital bed in Munich, he found out – not from his team, but from the papers – that he had been replaced. In the prime of a successful career, Bobby could have easily transferred. Indeed, the offers were already coming in. But he was angry, and the spell in hospital gave him time to reflect. Despite the realization of his boyhood dream, Bobby knew he would never be truly fulfilled playing professional soccer. The life was too hard, the pressure too strong, the warm atmosphere of home he had been longing for since childhood still missing. He was ready for a new adventure. And so it was that, at just 26 years of age, he made another of those impulsive, foolhardy, typically Bobby moves: He left sport and founded DEDON, right there in the hospital. Despite a heroic return to the pitch for three final matches – “probably the best games of my life” – he would never look back.

"I like to create atmospheres," Bobby reflects. "I never had them at home. They were always cut short by divorce, moves, different schools and so on." Though his soccer years had been good to him – he had learned valuable lessons, saved up money and married the love of his life – they too had failed to provide the atmospheres Bobby sought. But now, with Ann-Kathrin by his side, a growing family around him and a company to call his own, he could at last start creating those atmospheres for himself. "When I founded DEDON," Bobby explains, "I really felt like, boom, this is my world. I wasn't thinking about being a big business success. I just wanted to have fun with family and friends." That may sound like a rather unconventional reason for starting a business, but then Bobby has always been a rather unconventional businessman. He began DEDON, as he himself readily admits, not with a plan to make outdoor furniture but with the vision of "a warm, friendly environment where people enjoyed creating beautiful things together."

DEDON's first headquarters was a semi-detached house in the village of Dürrenhaar, east of Munich. Upstairs, Bobby, Ann-Kathrin, their two young children, Bobby's Uncle Seppi and Aunt Resi (brother and sister of his mother) and an au pair from Norway made themselves at home. It was crowded, to be sure, but it was also the cozy kind of living arrangement Bobby had long been craving. Down in the basement, the young entrepreneur got to work. "We had no idea what we were going to sell," he recalls with a laugh, "except for the skis."

Hand-decorated skis – that was the big idea in the beginning. To bring it to life, Bobby soon relocated DEDON to a 1,000-square-meter cowshed just outside of town, the interior of which he decorated to look like an Alpine landscape. Despite the sizable investment, however, his airbrushed skis were a flop. Of the 1,000 pairs he started with, only 80 were ever sold, and of those, 50 were returned. It was Bobby's first business venture, and already he was on the brink of bankruptcy: "If it weren't for the giraffes," he says today, "DEDON wouldn't have survived."

Those giraffes, 2.0-meter-tall raffia statuettes his sister had sent home from Madagascar, were rather plain-looking to start with, Bobby recalls. "Luckily I still had all the airbrush equipment we used to paint the skis." He got right to work, organizing the local women – at one point, as many as 40 – to paint the giraffes in brightly colored spots, and before the

craze fizzled out, he managed to sell some 15,000 of them at 50 euros apiece. All the while, he was working on yet another new idea – or rather, an old one he had taken up again.

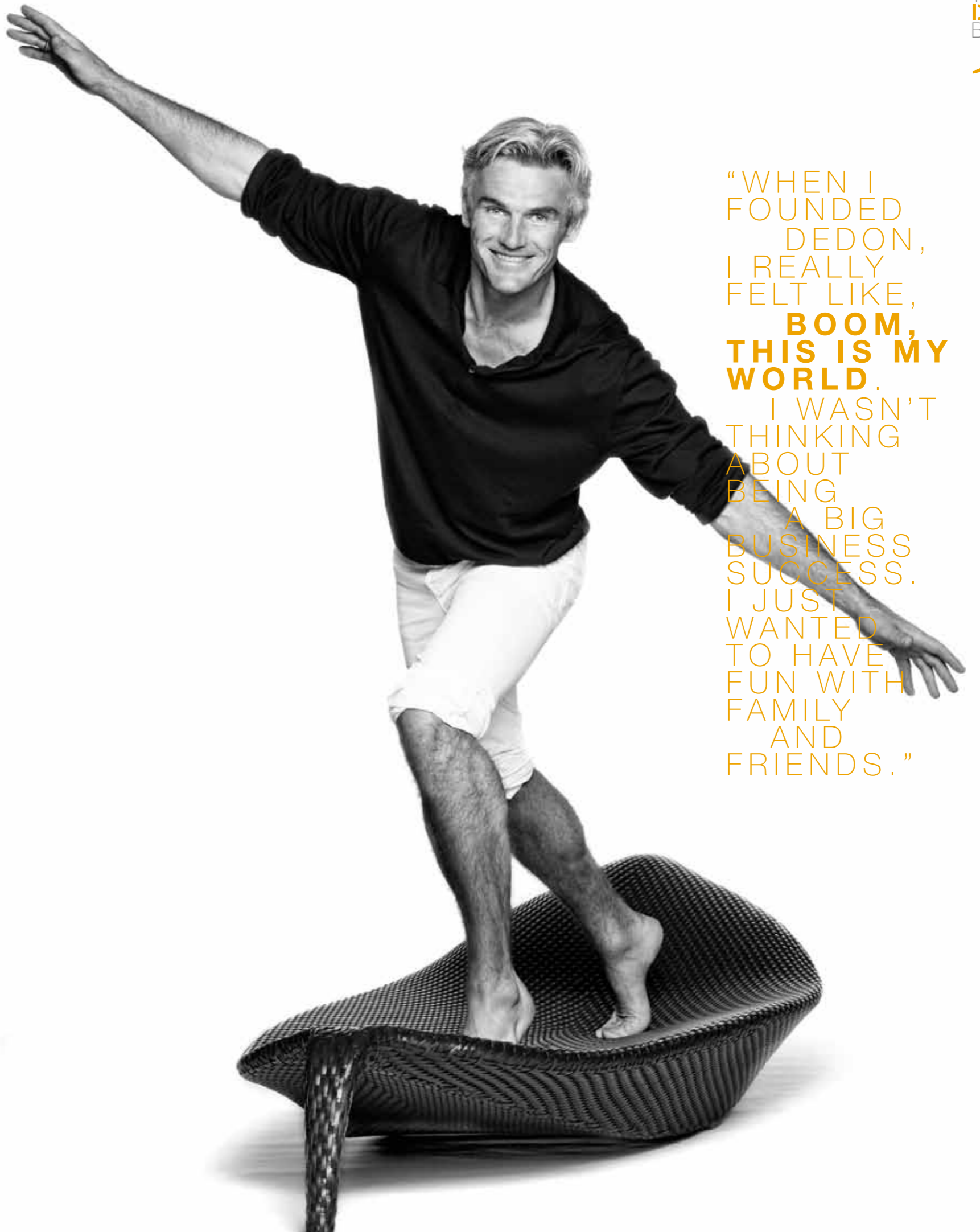
Bobby had always preferred being outdoors to in. "I sometimes think I was born outside," he says. Back in the early days, before they had a garden of their own, he and Ann-Kathrin would spend more time and money on their balcony or terrace than on or in any other part of their home. But the rattan furniture the couple favored was always breaking. "We would never accept such poor-quality furniture in our living room," Bobby says. "So why accept it outside?" It was out of this realization that Bobby came up with the idea of creating furniture suitable for an 'Outdoor Living Room.'

Soon after leaving soccer, still possessed by this vision of an Outdoor Living Room, Bobby had gone to see his uncle, Seppi Hummer, an engineer and expert in the family business of plastics extrusion. Together, the two men created an ingenious synthetic fiber. It was supple yet strong, natural in appearance yet completely resilient to the elements. When at last they had developed it to his satisfaction, Bobby went so far as to copyright their secret formula. Not knowing what step to take next, however, and with other business ideas – airbrushed skis, anyone? – more pressing, he decided to put his vision on hold. Until now.

Attending a furniture exhibition in Cologne, Bobby met with destiny when he happened upon the exquisitely woven wicker chairs, loungers and daybeds of an entrepreneur from Cebu island, the Philippines, named Manny Climaco. What if, Bobby wondered, the same weavers who created these pieces were to use DEDON Fiber instead of traditional rattan? Six days later, Bobby was on a plane to the Philippines, a 47-kg roll of fiber slung over his shoulder, determined to find out.

Convinced that his new idea held promise, Bobby soon relocated his entire family to Cebu, where, for six straight months, he worked with Climaco and his weavers to bring his vision of an Outdoor Living Room to life. When the Dekeyzers finally returned to Germany, DEDON was a furniture company.

Looking through a real estate magazine on a flight to the Philippines, Bobby had seen an offer for a fixer-upper of a farmhouse, some 200 years old, near the medieval town of Lüneburg, in Northern Germany. Just an hour's drive from the port in Hamburg,



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where DEDON furniture would soon be arriving, the property cost about a fifth of its Munich equivalent. From his hotel in Manila, Bobby faxed Ann-Kathrin the details.

For years it had been the couple's dream to live on a farm, closer to nature, and the moment Ann-Kathrin saw the farmhouse near Lüneburg, she knew it was the one. It took three years to renovate – a labor the family, led by the skilled Uncle Seppi, took on themselves – but at last, Bobby could set about creating an Outdoor Living Room of his own. As for DEDON, the two-story chicken shack on the property was now its world headquarters, the old barn its warehouse.

The early years of DEDON consisted of steps forward, backward and sideways. Bobby often felt as if he were leading an experiment – and somehow, he was. Schleppling from trade fair to trade fair, struggling to stay afloat, sometimes unable even to give his samples away, the fledgling entrepreneur was on his way to revolutionizing outdoor furniture. There was no formula for this. He was making it up on the fly. But the values Bobby brought to the task – determination, perseverance, flexibility, balance between work and life, and an insistence on having a good time with family and friends (Bobby cites the example of Oya Ogurcu Yalun of Istanbul, our first ever importer and one of Bobby's closest friends to this day) – remained constant. Indeed, they're inscribed in our company's DNA.

“Within the first ten years of launching the business,” says Bobby, “I had more than enough reason to dissolve the company and myself into despair.” He remembers back to his very first large order, a thousand rattan-framed chairs for a major hotel resort. Within months of arrival, the chairs, every last one of them, had fallen apart. Bobby personally purchased plastic chair replacements for the resort and, using the disaster as an opportunity to rethink the construction of his product, eventually replaced every chair in the initial order, turning the resort into a loyal return customer in the process.

It was thanks in no small part to lessons learned in soccer that he never gave up. “Soccer is a unique preparation for life,” he says today. “It trains your spirit, your reflexes, your resilience and your discipline. And it teaches you to be an optimist. It's natural to be afraid. But soccer showed me that

“I LIKE TO CREATE  
ATMOSPHERES”

when you're out there on the field, the only way to overcome your fear is to believe in yourself and your team – to believe that, whatever the odds against you, you're going to win.”

Though business was slow to take off, it was during these early years in Lüneburg that DEDON made many of the innovations that later would serve it so well. In 1997, for example, after a number of quality catastrophes caused by the rattan frames, Bobby switched to aluminum just as it was entering the furniture business. Shortly thereafter, he met designer Richard Frinier – the “king of outdoor furniture,” as he's widely known, and a close friend to this day – who set Bobby on a course toward high-end contemporary design. It was also during these years that Bobby's sister, Sonja, took on marketing responsibilities, developing the brand image that would help put DEDON in a league of its own.

It was also in these years that Hervé Lampert first came into the picture. A self-described farmboy from Alsace-Lorraine, Hervé was doing an internship at the same plastics factory in France where Bobby was extruding DEDON Fiber. The two hit it off immediately, and before long, Bobby had convinced the 20-year-old to join DEDON and the Dekeyzers on their family farm.

From the moment he arrived in Lüneburg, Hervé was a help with everything, from loading and unloading containers to organizing the papers Bobby kept on his office floor to accompanying him to trade fairs. So it was only a matter of time before Hervé started joining Bobby on business trips to Asia, as well. And it wasn't long after that that he was traveling there on his own, meeting with suppliers and pushing them to improve the quality of their products.

In 2000, fed up working with the sloppy practices of suppliers in Thailand and China, Bobby and Hervé took matters into their own hands: They established a factory of DEDON's own on Cebu island, the Philippines, the place where the very first DEDON chair had been manufactured back in 1993. Though the factory got off to a rocky start, Hervé soon stepped in – moving, aged 23, to Cebu, where he still resides today – to set things straight.

Until this point, the DEDON story and that of Bobby Dekeyser had been pretty much one and the same. Now, though, the story of DEDON was starting to take on a life of its own, just as Bobby had always

wished. Within a year of Hervé's arrival, the Cebu factory had kicked into high gear. Having complete control of the creation of its own products, from start to finish, was starting to pay dividends: DEDON was growing at a rate of 80 percent a year. Opening the factory was the right move at the right time.

Down in Barcelona, meanwhile, Bobby's sister, Sonja, and her new husband, Jan van der Hagen, had set up DEDON's first international showroom and sales office. With Jan heading up worldwide sales and distribution, and Sonja devising ever more effective ad campaigns, DEDON was turning into a global brand practically overnight. By 2003, a year after Jan had come aboard and a little more than two since production had been ramped up in Cebu, DEDON was represented in 30 countries.

Back in Lüneburg, too, things were moving as never before. By 2002, the local team had grown to 23 people, far more than the Dekeyser's farm could comfortably bear; the warehouse space was severely lacking and sales were more than doubling by the year.

It was Uncle Seppi who found DEDON's current site on Zeppelin Street. The former warehouse of a Japanese electronics company, some 10,500 square meters of space on 45,000 square meters of land, the property wasn't much to look at back in 2003, and the asking price of almost ten million euros was well beyond DEDON's means. But that wasn't enough to deter Bobby. "I never thought I could buy it," he says, but "as a joke" he made an offer: one million euros and just three days for the sellers to decide. When, in the final hour, they accepted, Bobby had to invest more than three million euros to transform the space into the bright and airy "Club Med" (as he describes it) that it is today.

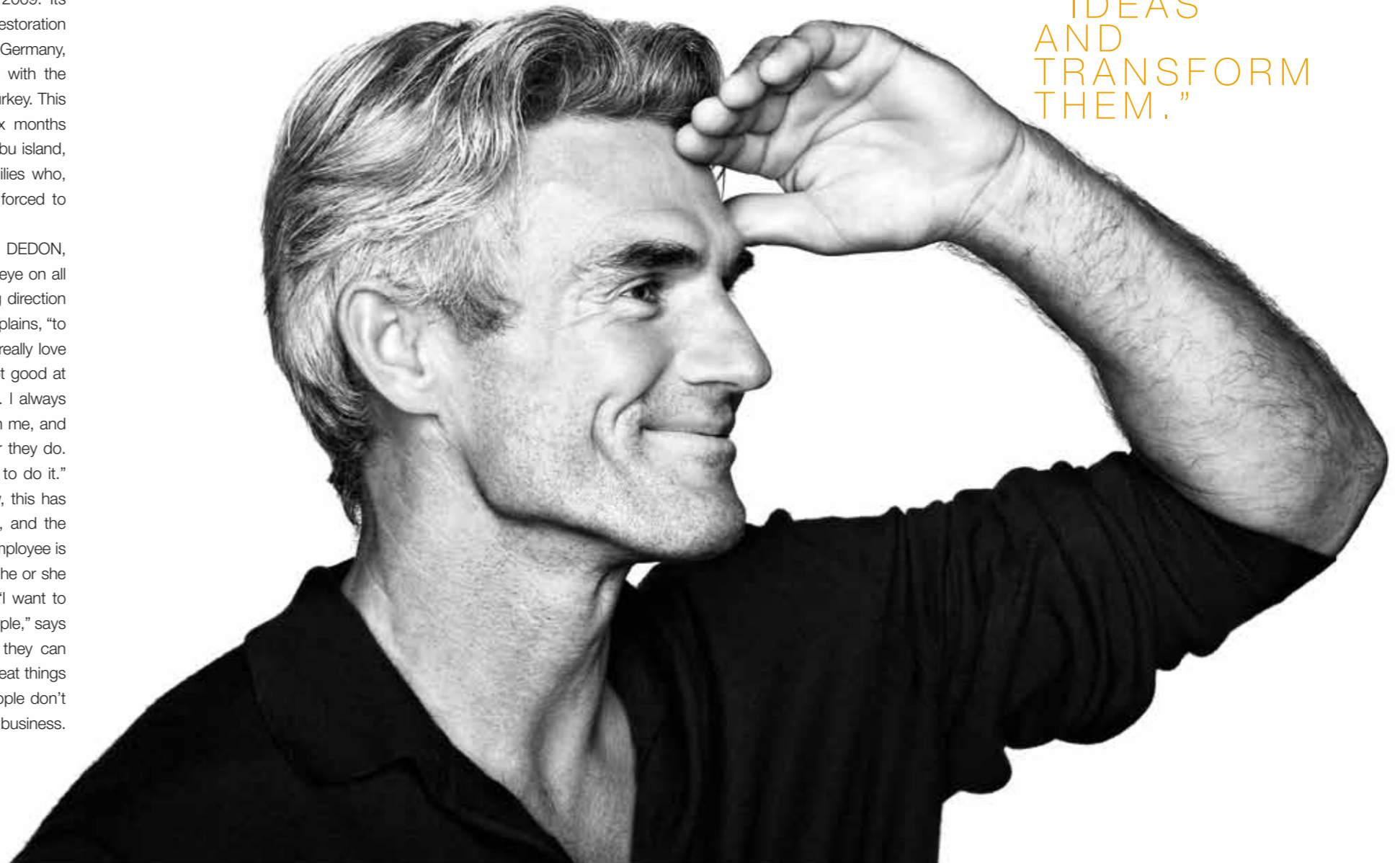
Any other owner of a small but growing business like DEDON's might have looked at all possible ways to cut corners on the renovation, save money and invest it back into the business. But for Bobby, creating the kind of place where employees feel truly satisfied – and where the company's philosophy and values are made concrete, as it were – is the best investment of all. Over the last five or six years, as DEDON has continued to grow and Bobby has been selected as one of Germany's top three entrepreneurs (in both 2005 and 2007), the Lüneburg headquarters have become a focal point for media stories about his visionary leadership.

As Chairman, Bobby has stepped back from day-to-day operations in recent years, leaving it in the able hands of his managing partners, but he continues to exert that same leadership today. DEDON's success, meanwhile, has meant that he's free to pursue other passions of his as well, in particular that of creating and overseeing an independent foundation – Dekeyser & Friends – aimed at inspiring and supporting the dreams of young people across the globe. "DEDON has always supported social projects around the world," says Bobby, "and will continue to do so. But with Dekeyser & Friends, I wanted to go one step further. The foundation offers 18- to 28-year-olds full scholarships to participate in unique cultural, social and sporting projects, learning from experienced mentors – the Friends – and creating a plan to follow their own dreams in life."

With a highly talented 28-year-old, Florian Hoffmann, as CEO, the Dekeyser & Friends Foundation got off to a successful start in the summer of 2009. Its maiden project, the reconstruction and restoration of a 17th-century farmhouse museum in Germany, was followed by a group dance project with the famous Fire of Anatolia dance troupe in Turkey. This year, 18 young people are spending six months participating in a rehousing project on Cebu island, building a new village for scavenger families who, due to their extreme poverty, had been forced to make a garbage dump their home.

From his vantage point as Chairman of DEDON, meanwhile, Bobby continues to keep an eye on all aspects of the company as well as giving direction to the future. "I like to make frames," he explains, "to give my ideas and then find people who really love to take them and transform them. I'm not good at anything, but I'm interested in everything. I always look for people who are much better than me, and who have complete passion for whatever they do. And then I try to give them the freedom to do it." As those of us who work with him know, this has always been Bobby's management style, and the autonomy that each and every DEDON employee is given to fulfill his or her responsibilities as he or she sees fit is very much in keeping with it. "I want to create something that is a platform for people," says Bobby. "They can discover themselves, they can express themselves, and we can make great things together. It's all about friendship. And people don't understand this because they think it's all business. But it's more. It's life."

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