She was a passionate human and animal rights campaigner who revolutionised the cosmetic industry by creating The Body Shop. On the third anniversary of her death, Mandy Appleyard celebrates the extraordinary life of this maverick entrepreneur.

As the morning sun streamed in through the windows of the tiny green shop, a woman sat inside, frantically writing labels. ‘We’re nearly there. It will all be worth it,’ she said, rallying the three friends pouring coconut shampoo into tiny plastic bottles. They had been working through the night.

The woman was Anita Roddick, and the date was 26 March 1976: the opening of the first-ever Body Shop. What happened next reinvented the UK’s cosmetic industry and turned Anita into one of the world’s most famous and successful entrepreneurs. By bringing trade and ideals together, she was the first businesswoman who made it sexy to care. The Body Shop (continued)
Life Stories

products came in simple packaging and promoted health. The result was a multi-national company and £53 million fortune.

This year marks the third anniversary of her death from a brain haemorrhage and, last month, The Body Shop finally launched the campaign she had been working on in the last weeks of her life—the Stop Sex Trafficking of Children and Young People petition.

Speaking exclusively to Marie Claire, Anita’s youngest daughter, Sam, 38, says: ‘The things I love are rooted in what Mum gave me. She was captivating. She taught me about the environment, different cultures and human rights. She had a silly side to her, too, which the public might not have seen. She believed we only have one life, so mustn’t compromise it.’

Born in 1942 to Italian immigrants, Anita Perrelli grew up in an era of hand-me-downs and food shortages. As her family struggled to make ends meet, her mother, Gilda, taught her how to use mayonnaise as conditioner and beetroot juice as blusher. Anita trained as a teacher, but her personal life was making headlines. Despite claiming that an ‘open marriage’ was the secret behind their 30-year relationship, she was distraught when it emerged that Gordon had had an affair with PR executive Kelly Lachford. But still, the couple remained strong. ‘It would take a miracle for us to split up,’ she said. And so, in 1995, in Brighton, The Body Shop was born. With its trademark green building blocks for the original 20 products that had. And in, 79%, in Brighton, The Body Shop was born. With its trademark green decor, the premise was to provide high-quality, ethical skin- and haircare products. There wasn’t enough money to buy fancy containers, so instead Anita stockpiled up on cheap plastic bottles used by hospitals to collect samples. Gordon was still trekking the Americas, so with the help of her friends, she set about filling each one with creams, handwriting the labels, and asking customers to bring them back for refills. It was the start of a reusing and recycling culture that would encapsulate The Body Shop brand. Anita’s pursuit of environmental and social change dovetailed with a wider public appetite for ethical products; within six months she opened a second shop. By now, Gordon was back and had come up with the idea for ‘self-financing’ new stores through a franchise network. The company went public in 1984. For the next two decades, Gordon remained in the shadows working full-time on the business, while Anita was the face and voice of their campaigning. They were a formidable team: Gordon was the business brain, she provided the passion. In his words, ‘She dreams and I make her dreams come true.’

It was pioneering work. The Body Shop’s signature products (nobody survived the 80s without Peppermint Foot Cream and Basil Nut Conditioner) caught the consumer imagination and put her company on the map. She wasn’t a natural speaker, but her enthusiasm made people pay attention. By 2006, The Body Shop had 2,045 stores in 51 countries and was hailed as a cultural phenomenon. It earned the Roddicks £31 million, and Anita the title of ninth most admired woman in the world. Gordon, in June this year he won the lifetime achievement award at The Observer Ethical Awards, which recognised his work on founding The Big Issue and providing micro loans for those on low incomes. Gordon has his own ways of remembering his wife: ‘I miss her voice, her sense of humour and the way she used to buzz around like a bee. The world is a richer place for having her been here.’

When Anita died on 10 September 2007, age 64, it was sudden and shocking. ‘The day before, she complained of a ‘sore head’ and started to lose movement in her legs. She was rushed to hospital, where she died half an hour later.

Anita’s cremation in a biodegradable coffin marked the end of a remarkable life. Paying tribute to her, Topshop owner Philip Green said: ‘Anita was 20 years ahead of her time in ethical trading.’

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For information about The Body Shop’s Stop Sex Trafficking of Children and Young People campaign, visit thebodyshop.com/stop.