

Opening a community café

Creating opportunities as well as exquisite chocolates

w&h NEW DIRECTIONS

GIVING BACK and making money

Thanks to The School for Social Entrepreneurs, three women tell how their businesses benefit the community as well as them

Starting a local cycle scheme



BUSINESS IN FIGURES
LAUNCHED: 2012
START-UP COSTS: £6,000
TURNOVER: £125,000
WEBSITE: harryschocs.co.uk

'My son inspired my chocolate business which gives a chance of work to those with autism'

Mona Shah, 45, is married to Shaz, 48, an electrical engineer. They have a daughter aged 24, and a son aged 16, and live in Sawston, Cambridgeshire. Mona runs Harry Specters chocolates, which trains and employs people on the autism spectrum.

THE IDEA My son Ahsan, was diagnosed with autism when he was about three. It was a very stressful time. He was late with all his baby milestones – walking, talking, etc – and gradually stopped talking and just sat and rocked. We managed to get him a statement of educational needs and into a special school. The teachers were marvellous, and he made great progress but I was very worried about his future.

I was working for the NHS in corporate governance but all the time I wanted to do something to help Ahsan and children like him. In the meantime, we tried to keep life as normal as possible. I loved baking and making chocolate deserts, and I went on a two-day chocolate course as part of my hobby. It was fantastic, and a light bulb went on in my brain. I made chocolates for the staff at work who loved them, and I started to take orders. Ahsan, who was 12 by this stage, loved helping me make them. At first I thought I'd start a chocolate-making business and donate profits to autism charities, but it seemed very difficult and complicated. Besides which, I wanted to do more than that, I want to give people like my son work opportunities. Many autism sufferers are very high functioning, intelligent people – they're just not very good at communicating. Job interviews are a nightmare for them and many fail to get employment. I wanted to create a business where they could gain confidence and skills in a safe, non-threatening environment.

One evening I was doing research about fundraising and stumbled across The School for Social Entrepreneurs (SSE) website. It said that start-ups could get grants and support if their idea directly benefited an area of the community. This was exactly what I'd been looking for.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT I applied for a grant from the SSE of £4,000 and to go on their course to learn about being a social entrepreneur. I had to pitch my business idea which was terrifying but they loved it and I got through.

BREAKTHROUGH MOMENT When the learning director of the SSE said my idea was brilliant, I burst into tears. It's so important to have support and I remember that when things are tough. I can see the difference I'm making to those I employ every day. People with autism are incapable of duplicity and they have great ideas. I couldn't ask for more diligent employees.

WHERE I AM NOW We've just completed a mammoth order for a German company to include our chocolates in 22,000 hampers! That's 132,000 chocolates. Because all our chocolates are handmade, I personally sat and filled 4,000 a day over a month. I worked for 18 hours a day and had only six hours' sleep. We pulled in everyone we knew to help. It was worth it because now we have a great proposition for investment and can really expand.

I want to employ as many people as I can on a full-time basis (at the moment it's only on a casual basis), which will depend on how big we can grow the company, but I'd like to see us taking on at least 20 or 30 in the next couple of years. It's estimated that around one in a 100 people are on the autism spectrum and I want to set up Harry Specters social enterprise businesses across the country, giving opportunities to those who have autism but want to work.

GLITCHES Because of the huge order from the German company, I had to sacrifice all my Valentine's Day range, which was all made and ready to go, because we couldn't trade online as well as meet this massive order. I just gave all the lovely heart chocolates and truffles to everyone who works here.

TIPS Be clear what your social objective is and be very specific. Get it down to one line – "I want to give people with autism jobs". Clear and simple so everyone understands exactly what you're doing. Don't get carried away with the altruistic side. This is a proper business and has to be profitable, otherwise you can't do the philanthropy. >>

BUSINESS BREAKDOWN
EQUIPMENT: £2,000
MARKETING: £1,000
INGREDIENTS: £1,000
PACKAGING AND POSTING: £2,000



Mona's son, Ahsan, came up with the brand name, Harry Specters



'I turned my passion for cycling into a scheme that helps people in so many ways'

Heather Evans, 50, is married to Perry, 53, who works in IT. They have two children aged 13 and ten and live in Winchester, Hampshire. She runs Bespoke Biking, a social enterprise company whose profits go towards encouraging more people to cycle, for fitness and the environment.

THE IDEA I've had a variety of careers including retail, events management and, in my late thirties, I trained as a primary school teacher. I was working as a supply teacher

at my son's primary school when he embarked on his Bikeability training (cycling proficiency). I could see what a difference it made to children who were less academic. My supply teaching was drying up and, luckily for me, we can survive on Perry's salary so I could afford to think about what I wanted to do. I liked the look of the cycling course so I got in touch with a local training company to train as a biking instructor. I was quite a confident cyclist and hoped to become an instructor but there were no jobs. Instead I freelanced, making £300 to £400 a month running adult cycling courses for council staff and local businesses. The people were always staggered at how beautiful my routes were around Winchester. I spotted a gap in the market and suggested the council should start up tourist cycling tours. It wasn't their remit, but someone remarked that I should set up a social enterprise business and do it myself. It was my light bulb moment.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

I met a lady on one of my bike tours who was an accountant specialising in social enterprises. She helped me set up as a Community Interest Company (CIC) registering me with Companies House. It was through this I heard about The School for Social

BUSINESS IN FIGURES

LAUNCHED: 2012
START-UP COSTS: £4,000
TURNOVER: £30,000
WEBSITE: bespokebiking.com

Entrepreneurs. They run a course all about business models, governance and how to raise funds for business. It's free and lasts a year (there are study days for one day each month for the year), but you have to apply to get on it. You present to a panel who decide whether your idea is good enough. It's pretty nerve-wracking, but I got through. They also awarded me a start-up grant of £4,000. Most of what happened next was a series of coincidences. I wanted to set up a cycling "hub", where people could book courses, get their bikes fixed, buy tools and cycling kit and have coffee. When the manager of our local YMCA café said they'd host us for free to give a unique selling point for the café, it suited us both. They also let us use their backyard to store bikes and tools, the council helped with a leaflet campaign and I found a good website designer. I took bookings for tours, training courses, bike mending and maintenance and still ran guided tours.



I covered my expenses, but I didn't pay myself a salary because I want to build the business and so I plough all the profit back into it. I'll probably pay myself next year.

BREAKTHROUGH MOMENT

Getting accountant services at a discount and then a £15,000 grant from South Downs National Park in our second year gave us a big boost.

WHERE I AM NOW

I want to take on young people struggling to get work and help them gain confidence and skills. The public response has been amazing. I still need more bikes, tour guides and cycle trainers.

GLITCHES

I wanted to reach out to children in local deprived areas, so I set up a biking club at a school but no one turned up, which was heartbreaking. I thought people weren't interested, but I just hadn't got the message across. Now we work hard at marketing our message.

TIPS Accept help. Don't try and do other's jobs – people do rise to a challenge if they're left to take responsibility.

BUSINESS BREAKDOWN

BIKES: £1,400
MECHANIC FEES: £500
TOOLS: £800
WEBSITE: £300
MARKETING AND ADVERTISING AND SUNDRIES: £1,000

WORDS: FIONA WRIGHT PHOTOGRAPHS: ALISTAIR DEVINE, INDRA FLACK

new directions

'Our café has made a difference to the community and to me'

Anna Sandland, 35, is married to Frazer, 41. They have two children aged eight and 12 and live in Polmont, Scotland. Together they run the Gingerbread Café, a social enterprise company which gives local, disadvantaged young people training and employment.

THE IDEA My job was in social care administration, but I'd always wanted to help people in the community. Looking round the local village, my husband and I both felt it was crying out for a café, and I wanted to create somewhere to pull the community together and also employ local youngsters. Polmont itself isn't deprived, but some surrounding areas are and, working in social care, I was aware of the difficulties some young people faced getting a job. Frazer has a background in catering so he could help me understand that aspect, but as far as accounting, marketing and publicity went, I was in the dark. I carried on working and tried to look into setting this up in my spare time. It felt overwhelming at first and we had no savings to use. Then I stumbled across Business Gateway, which is the Scottish business enterprise advice service. They told me to apply for a loan from a scheme which BP was running for social enterprises. It was for £4,500. I had to go before a panel which was nerve-wracking, but I got it. They put me in touch with a business mentor

who told me about The School for Social Entrepreneurs. I went on their course, which was one day a month for 12 months then home study for the rest of the time.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT I managed to receive funding of £5,000 from the Firstport and Sons of the Rock Society, which support community organisations, and found premises for the café. I'd resigned from my job by now, so I felt under pressure to make it all work. I got the keys in

March 2013 and then it was a race to decorate and furnish it. I managed in just under a month and opened in April. Although I'd done some publicity, I was terrified no one would turn up. I couldn't have been more wrong. We were overwhelmed and incredibly busy. Everyone loved it and said a café here was long overdue. I was elated. I had lots of volunteers to work in the café and I took on four young people and a couple of older ladies on a rota basis. Watching these youngsters blossom gave me the most satisfaction. At first some of them have no confidence and can barely pluck up the courage to take a cup of tea to a customer. But gradually, they build up to making eye

contact with customers, then chat and develop rapport with them, then they learn to work the till, take orders, make sandwiches and keep the café running efficiently. Within months they are different people. It's so exciting and is really creating the community I wanted.

BUSINESS BREAKDOWN

SOLICITORS FEES: £1,000
EQUIPMENT: £2,000
FOOD SUPPLIES: £2,000
PREMISES RENTAL: £3,000
FOOD: £500

BREAKTHROUGH MOMENT

It was during our birthday celebrations. I realised that if we closed, everyone would really miss us. We've created something that is valuable and making

a difference to the community.

WHERE I AM NOW We're on our way to becoming profitable and we're able to pay ourselves a salary. Now we want to diversify slightly.

GLITCHES The boiler broke on the first day and we nearly had to close until luckily, a kindly plumber fixed it. Now we've made sure we have a good relationship with local services in case anything goes wrong.

TIPS Be certain there is a need for the service that you want to provide. If the community doesn't need it, it simply won't work. **w&h**

BUSINESS IN FIGURES

START-UP COSTS: £8,500
TURNOVER: £65,000
WEBSITE: gingerbreadcafe.org.uk



Anna's café has had a great response from the local community

Have a great idea?

The School for Social Entrepreneurs (SSE) is a charity supporting people with ideas for social enterprises and community projects. Their flagship programme is Lloyds Bank Social Entrepreneurs Programme, which offers a free place on a 14-day start-up course, a business mentor and a non-repayable grant of £4,000. The programme is funded by Lloyds Bank and the Big Lottery Fund and there are about four applicants for every place. To apply you just need a good idea for a social enterprise. Applicants are invited to attend a one-to-one interview and, if successful, go on to pitch their idea at a *Dragons' Den*-style panel where the final selection is made. Find out more at yourideastartshere.co.uk