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Heather Gilchrist

Founder of Happitots

For many entrepreneurs the hardest part of setting up their own business is coping with the financial aspects, but for former nurse Heather Gilchrist by far the biggest headache in launching her chain of children's nurseries was having to deal with staff. She says: 'When I started I naively thought that if I was nice to people and treated them really well, they would be happy. In the early days, if someone left because they didn't like the job or they weren't happy, I used to take it personally and get really upset about it. But I learnt that you can't make everybody happy all the time.'

She also found it extremely lonely being the boss. 'When I was a nurse I was part of a team and would go out drinking with my colleagues from work,' she says, 'but I realised that I couldn't be one of the girls any more. They don't want me to go out for a drink with them because I am the boss. It has taken me a long time to get used to that. It's really hard because I am a friendly person and there are lots of staff I think I could be really good friends with.'



Gilchrist hit on the idea of opening a nursery when her son Thomas was born. She started looking for a place in a nursery for him in Edinburgh where they lived. But she quickly discovered she had left it far too late and that only the worst nurseries still had places available. So Gilchrist decided to start one of her own. She says: 'There was a demand for quality and I knew I could do better than a lot of other nurseries I had seen. I can be pretty determined once I have decided what I want to do. So I got in touch with the relevant official bodies and found out exactly what the requirements were.'

However, finding suitable premises was a lot harder than she expected. She bought a street map of Edinburgh and marked on it where every existing nursery in the city was located. Then she went to talk to estate agents in the areas which she felt needed one. But that was where the problems began. 'I knew exactly how many square feet I needed, but nobody took me seriously', she says. 'It was horrendous. I think if I had been in a pinstripe suit and spoken in a posh accent, it might have been a bit easier.'

In desperation she spent hours driving round in her car with her baby by her side looking for something suitable. Eventually a friend spotted an empty church building and called her. As soon as Gilchrist saw it, she realised it was exactly what she wanted. She bought the building for £90,000, paying for it with £20,000 raised from remortgaging her flat and £70,000 borrowed from the bank. Six months later she opened for business.

It was hard work at the beginning. She had so little spare cash that she could not afford to buy a washing machine or a dryer for the nursery and had to take all the dirty laundry home each night. But she did not have a dryer there either and so would have to drape wet sheets and towels around the house.

Fortunately Gilchrist was used to dealing with challenging situations. Brought up in Cheshire, she trained as a nurse after leaving school and then went straight to Papua New Guinea for two years to work with the Red Cross. After that she spent five years in Australia nursing AIDS and HIV patients. She returned to Britain because her mother had breast cancer. She had planned to stay only briefly but while in this country she fell in love with a man she met and decided to stay.

Gilchrist opened her first nursery in Edinburgh in 1996 and it did so well that two years later she opened a second one in Glasgow. When that went well, too, she opened more. However, she soon discovered that the parents and staff at her first nursery found it difficult to accept her changed role. She says: 'Because it was my first nursery the staff had been used to seeing me there every day. Then all of a sudden I wasn't there all the time because the business was growing. But staff and parents still expected me to be there and would be asking why I wasn't coming in. I was getting really stressed about the situation. And I couldn't be businesslike about it because it was my first nursery and I was very

attached to it emotionally. So I had to sell it. I needed to let go of the first one in order to move on.'

By 2004 Gilchrist owned 12 Happitots nurseries throughout Scotland, which between them catered for 2,000 children up to five years old. She had also opened a training division to train nursery staff. Then in 2007, with turnover of the business by now £4 million, Gilchrist sold the entire operation to a small nursery operator in Scotland for a substantial undisclosed sum. Although no longer involved in the day-to-day running of the business Gilchrist has kept a 10 per cent share in the company and stayed on as chairman. She has used the proceeds of the sale to invest in buy-to-let properties in Scotland.

Now aged 47, Gilchrist says she has always been driven by a desire to show she could make a success of her venture. She says: 'I wanted to prove to myself and my family that I could do it. I wouldn't have ever believed I could do this. Now if anyone tells me they want to do something, I always tell them to go for it.'

Fact File

Date of birth: 15 April 1962

Marital status: married with one child

Highest level of education achieved: secondary school

Qualifications: six O levels, one A level, Registered General Nurse

Interests: going to the gym, socialising, theatre, reading

Personal philosophy: 'Live for the moment. Don't put off anything you can do today.'