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Angela Wright

Founder of Crealy Adventure Park

Angela Wright had to get pretty good at tidying her bedroom when she was a child. She was brought up at Hayes Barton farm in east Devon, the birthplace of Sir Walter Raleigh, and every afternoon her parents would show visitors round the house for 20p a time. She says: 'Every day at two o'clock it would be "Oh my goodness the visitors are coming up the path, quick go and tidy your room." Sometimes I would be too late so I would have to hide things under the bed.'

As she grew older, Wright earned pocket money by serving cream teas to visitors on the lawn. She says: 'I only realised with hindsight that it was a really wonderful, magical childhood. I could make dens in the barns and climb the trees and run wild over the common. And yet it was a safe adventure because it was cocooned.' The memory stayed with her after she left home to go travelling and then work nearby as a secretary. When her parents bought a farm of their own in Devon she decided to



recreate the magic of her childhood by turning it into an adventure park. She says: 'I wanted to provide somewhere where families could have a really magical day and children could realise their own capabilities and courage through adventure play.'

It was a bold plan. Wright had just had her first child and had no experience of running a business. She spent six months researching the idea before plucking up the courage to even suggest it to her parents. She says: 'Their initial reaction was it would be too much to take on. They thought it would be very daunting and they didn't know if it would work.' In the end it took Wright a further 12 months of research before she was able to convince her family to provide the financial backing for the park.

She says: 'I had to draw up a very solid business plan for my family to want to get involved, not just financially but also from a lifestyle perspective. I remember telling them I would make sure they wouldn't have to work any harder.' But there were still hurdles to overcome. The Highways

Department refused to allow her to create an access to the adventure park from the main road. When it finally agreed, it was on the condition that Wright build a turning bay and entrance at a cost of £70,000. The only way she could justify the expense was to go back to the drawing board and find a way of accommodating more visitors.

Crealy Adventure Park finally opened for business in 1989. It was divided into six areas to suit different age groups, including an animal realm where children can hold newborn chicks and feed lambs, and another area with family rides. It reached its target of 40,000 visitors in the first year of operation and moved into profit in year three. In 2001, however, the business faced the prospect of ruin with the onset of foot-and-mouth disease. While the park itself was not directly affected, visitor numbers fell by a fifth, which had a devastating effect on profits. Wright responded by diversifying into corporate hospitality, but it was a fraught time.

She says: 'It was a real disaster. We didn't know what would happen or how much our business would be affected. A lot of lateral thinking went on. It really made us look at our business and remember that crises can come out of nowhere and that it is really important to protect what you have.' Visitor numbers gradually recovered, and the park, now renamed Devon's Crealy Great Adventure Park, attracts 500,000 people a year.

Early in 2004 Wright also added a second park to the business, buying the former Shires Family Adventure Park in Cornwall for several million pounds and reopening it as Cornwall's Crealy Great Adventure Park. It currently has 150,000 visitors a year and Wright now plans to build eco-lodges at both parks so that visitors can stay overnight. Total turnover for both parks is expected to be £6.4 million in 2009.

Wright also decided that instead of just having a five-year business plan for the company, she would have a 25-year plan. She explains: 'During an appraisal a member of staff told me that having a five-year business plan was all very well, but that Crealy was her career and so she wanted to know what I was going to be doing in 25 years' time. Initially I thought oh no, but it has been really interesting to do. And I always think that until you have something written down, you can't improve on it because ideas in your head are too ephemeral.'

Despite the company's expanding size Wright's family is still very much involved in running the business. Her father is chairman, her mother is a director and involved with the buying, her brother is finance director and her husband is in charge of running the new park in Cornwall. Wright herself is managing director.

Wright, 47, who has five children of her own aged between 10 and 23, says: 'I feel fortunate to be able to deliver some of the most memorable moments in children's lives.'

Fact File

Date of birth: 20 January 1962

Marital status: married with five children

Highest level of education achieved: secondary school

Qualifications: eight O levels

Interests: spending time with family, travel, reading, and politics

Personal philosophy: 'Be too busy to have time for regrets. And always look for the best in people.'

When I see a child walking across an aerial walkway or holding a chick, that's quite special.'

She says getting her whole family involved in realising her dream has driven her determination to make the business a success: 'It has been a real privilege to work with my family. But I do feel a lot of responsibility to make the business work because they trusted me and jumped on board with me. I would still have started my own business, but it would have been very different. I would not have achieved what I have and I can't imagine that it would have been as rewarding.'