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Rosemary Conley

Inventor of the Hip and Thigh Diet

When 29 overweight women showed up at Thurnby village hall in Leicestershire on a cold winter's evening, Rosemary Conley knew she had found her passion in life. What she did not know was that this passion would eventually turn her into a household name and transform an £8 investment into a £13 million business empire spanning diet books, exercise DVDs, television shows, a magazine and a nation-wide chain of diet and fitness clubs.

Conley first captured the public's attention in 1988 with the publication of her *Hip and Thigh Diet* book, which has since sold more than 2 million copies. Proclaiming the virtues of eating low-fat food, the diet turned conventional dieting wisdom on its head and Conley into an instant media celebrity. But her seemingly overnight success really began 17 years earlier when her weight ballooned while working in an office as a secretary. After managing to lose two-and-a-half stone she decided to start a slimming club to help others do the same. Her plan was to go one better than



existing clubs by providing grooming advice and exercise classes as well as diet tips.

After trying out her ideas on neighbours round her kitchen table, she spent £8 getting 30 posters printed and booked the local village hall. She charged £1 to join and 25p to attend each weekly session. She says: 'It was so exciting when people got on the scales each week and I could tell them they had lost as much as seven pounds. They were thrilled. I suddenly realised I was doing something to make people happy. That was so rewarding. I didn't look at it as a big money earner, I just did it because I liked doing it.'

Six months later her classes were so popular that Conley left her secretarial job to concentrate on her slimming club. She opened more and more classes to meet the demand and eventually sold the business to IPC Magazines 10 years later for £52,000.

It was an unlikely achievement. After leaving school at 15 without qualifications Conley's CV to date had largely consisted of running Tupperware parties and doing any job

that would allow her to take along her Pyrenean mountain dog, Sheba. She says: 'I wasn't a very significant child. I suffered from asthma and was quite sickly so the expectations of me were zero. Maybe there was a bit of me that wanted to prove I could actually do something worthwhile.'

After the sale of her slimming clubs to IPC, Conley stayed on with the group to oversee the expansion of the clubs across Britain. But while she appeared to have hit the jackpot, the reality was quite different. She says: 'It was one of the toughest times of my life because I hadn't got the experience or the capability to do such a big job. I felt under a lot of pressure and seriously thought I was going to have a nervous breakdown if I carried on.' She managed to struggle on until IPC decided to disband the clubs a few years later, but the long hours also contributed to the breakdown of her marriage.

In the event the pressure of her job indirectly led to the creation that changed her life. Admitted to hospital with gallstone problems, Conley opted to go on a low-fat diet as an alternative to undergoing surgery because she did not feel she had time to spend months recovering from an operation. The diet not only postponed the need for an operation for many years, it also led to dramatic fat loss.

Conley says: 'Right from the start I knew I had hit on something really special. The low-fat diet was an absolute revelation because it worked. I just dropped inches off my hips and thighs.' She got a local radio station to try out her diet on a group of volunteers, and when it worked for them too she wrote the *Hip and Thigh Diet* at the age of 41. She was paid an advance of £750. By the time the updated version was published a year later she was paid substantially more – and bought a silver Jaguar XJS with her first royalty cheque.

She says: 'Looking back, I was so fortunate because by the time I hit the big time with the *Hip and Thigh Diet* book I had already had a 17-year apprenticeship in diet and fitness. So I knew what to do.' She has built on the success of that first book to create a diet and fitness empire that so far encompasses 30 books and 30 fitness DVDs, a *Rosemary Conley Diet and Fitness* magazine, and a franchise chain of 180 Diet and Fitness Clubs with 80,000 members. She also has an online slimming club, www.rosemaryconleyonline.com.

She says that while it certainly did not feel that way at the time, coming close to a nervous breakdown actually ended up changing the direction of her life for the better. She says: 'It was very tough but I wouldn't be where I am today if I hadn't gone through that painful experience. People say that there is no such thing as a mistake if you learn from it. And I definitely learnt from that one.'

Now 62, and awarded a CBE in the 2004 Queen's New Year's Honours List, Conley says: 'The biggest lesson I have

Fact File

Date of birth: 19 December 1946

Marital status: twice married with one child

Highest level of education achieved: high school

Qualifications: RSA in Exercise to Music

Interests: animals, skiing, interior design, flower arranging, walking, Christianity

Personal philosophy: 'Always have something to look forward to, someone to share it with and always try to make a difference.'

learnt along the way is that you can't know everything yourself. If you want to be successful in anything you have to surround yourself with experts who are able to guide you and educate you. It is no different from someone who wants to become an Olympic athlete – they need to have a good trainer and a good manager. Now I only do the things that I alone can do – and let other people do the things that can be done by someone else.'