

STANDARD BANK / LIVING AND LOVING
Mompreneur Competition
2008



AN EXPERIENCE OF LIFE, DEATH AND SURVIVAL

“What do you want to be when you are older”, said a mother to her 5 year old; “I want to run my own business!” responded the child with absolute conviction.

That was me, 28 years go. When I reflect on my life, I often realise that a pat on your own back is not arrogance but simply an appreciation of achievement. Since I was a sperm, I have had a positively competitive edge (well, I made it to the egg before anyone else, didn't I?). More than that, since I can remember, I have always found power in knowledge and when just 21 I began the journey of learning. It all started in London on a 2 year working visa (which ended up being a 5 year personal development expedition).

It was not long after our arrival, that my boyfriend (at the time) and I parted ways. I found myself alone with no family, friends and now no boyfriend, however I had my job. The job was a dream come true for most; lots of money for pretty much doing nothing. I quickly realised that I was not one to remain idle and decided to pursue distance learning, whilst saving my pounds. I entrenched myself in what I realised was a deep interest, Stress Management and the Biological effects of stress, Personal Development, NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming) and not forgetting to learn of the corporate environment too, which introduced me to the world of Recruitment and Selection.

On my return to South Africa I was fortunate enough to assist with the NAM Summit (Non Aligned Movement) where I was groomed to handle not only Mandela, but all the Heads of State from various countries. My elevated training was one thing but learning to cope with the stress of such a conference was a new experience all together.

It was during this time, I recall meeting a man who took the time to understand me, calmed my frazzled nerves (from the summit stress) and taught me self awareness. This man became my husband in the summer of 2004.

Just before our wedding, I recall having decided that I would no longer drain my soul for another company and whilst the National Recruitment Agency that I was employed by (4 years) at the time, recognised my achievements through incentives and prizes it was still not worth the glandular fever, the constant fatigue and body ailments that the stress of the high demands was causing.

You see I am a perfectionist, an opportunist and a person who sets her goals on achievement; but enough was enough. I wanted to put that effort, commitment and energy into my own business. So I did it, I took the plunge and resigned – probably the riskiest decision I have ever taken, considering I was getting married the very next month.

The wedding was a blast, the honeymoon...well say no more, and the return to start my own business was more exciting than a child tasting ice cream for the first time. I was petrified but only focused on the positive. My very first challenge was working out my restraint of trade (which I had naively signed). Although an ethical move, it set me back to half my salary for an entire year. However I survived that challenge through accepting help from my incredibly supportive mother who offered me a small opportunity to sell her training courses, I managed to scrape by earning pennies but learning all about Skills Development and Training – a new world I had not tapped into yet.

Soon after my loooooong year of earning pretty much nothing, I joined a group of lawyers, trainers and HR gurus, who saw my potential and offered me the opportunity to start my business under their consortium, whilst I felt safe with their support, it did not last long as my goal had been stifled – I was once again working for someone else. I needed to try working for myself to see if I could make a 5 year old child's dream come true, so I did.

I opened up SPICE Consulting and working from a small office block where I started off with offering a full circle of service for across-the-board recruitment. I worked days, nights and weekends. I built my database of clients; attending events, workshops, networking and slowly developing a CRM programme. I also grew my candidate database ensuring constant advertising for calibre staff, interviewing and thereafter marketing the top find. I typed up CVs, completed references, conducted verification checks, set up agency and client interviews, handed the financials, so the list goes on. There are no two ways about it, to succeed at starting your own business is demanding. My husband was amazingly supportive; I couldn't have done it without his incredible understanding.

I decided, for me to excel in my line of work, I needed to study further and courageously opted to start an intense 2 year coaching course, in hope to add the new found skill to recruitment, giving me a competitive edge in the market. I loved every moment of learning about the self, others and how to ensure top performance (in every sector of life) through life and business coaching skills. The course came with assignments, coaching hours, weekend and night lectures, learning groups, additional courses, meetings and a lot of research, reading and inevitably, a lot of learning.

Just before the end of the second year of the course, I found out that I was pregnant and to be a first time Mother. I was ecstatic but nervous. My pregnancy brought to light the importance of looking after yourself for the sake of another, I needed to rest and rejuvenate....I did but maintained the steady flow of energy and commitment to my business. Within the last 3 month's of my pregnancy, tragedy struck!

The story goes like this;

A frantic call came through on my cell phone. A desperate voice muffled by a wailing cry pleaded; "come quickly, the baby has stopped breathing". It felt as though my heart stopped for a brief moment

while I gathered my thoughts to try and comprehend the words I had just heard. Shivering with fear, we gathered our scraps of paper and raced to my sister's home.

We were met by what seemed like millions of people gathered around the outside of her gate all faced in one direction, where the small lifeless body of my nephew lay. My sister was pale with panic, inconsolable! I started to cry desperately, asking anyone and everyone what had happened, why was he not breathing. I fell to the floor holding my tummy to cushion my baby. I wanted to put my arms around my sister and take the worry away, like I had done a million times before, but when I tried she pushed me away as if gasping for breath. I wasn't allowed to approach little Sebastian, for the fear that the shock could induce the birth of my baby. I watched from a distance whilst the paramedics pumped his small heart to bring him back to life and they did, for a short while.

We waited in the ICU ward where our precious Sebastian lay fighting for his life. Tubes and machines engulfed his small body. In the early hours of that morning we were called; his vital signs were not good. On arrival, my mother simply gave me "the look", I knew there and then that our beautiful baby boy of 8 months had joined God's angels. I walked into the room where my sister rocked her little boy for the last time. His eyes closed, as if just sleeping and his small hand nestled in her neck. She held him close as tears streamed down her cheeks. I will never forget that sight. I fell to the ground and sobbed uncontrollably.

In one foul swoop, my life gained new meaning. The controlled, competitive, ambitious perfectionist in me, started to question my very own existence. Somehow in the muddle of the tragedy I realised that there was learning to be done. Until this day, the phrase "life is short" had little meaning. Now I cherish every single moment I have with those I love. I have stopped my obsession with work and have tried to find a new balance in my life. I might add that with changed perceptions and new found priorities, this had an impact on my working environment. I now wanted to be closer to my child and opted to start working from home.

The shadow of death blanketed our lives. To begin to express the loss of this magnificent life taken so young, is not possible – there are simply no human words. In the depths of my sorrow, I had to somehow survive; a child was still growing inside of me, supporting my sister in every possible way was non negotiable, I had to ensure my business was still functioning (I needed the 2nd income) and I had started a course that I had put too much effort into, to just end, not to mention I was also still a wife to a man who equally suffered the loss of Sebastian, being his godfather.

On that note, I now understand the vows of marriage; "in sickness and in health, in good times and bad..." Deane was my life line, my pillar of strength and my ultimate support – thank you to a man that did not stop loving me, caring for me and looking after me, when I was at my lowest.

For the first time, I had to learn the biggest lesson of all, *to let go*, allow my family to grieve, feel the void, the sadness and the hurt of this tragic experience. I had to watch them contend with their own emotions and let them deal with the loss without interruption but I was able to be there as a guiding support – in short, this is the essence of coaching, my learning came at an opportune time to play a pivotal role in my survival of this tragedy.

Cassandra Anne Nothard was born 3 months later. Her life brought back a ray of sunlight. I was a new Mom. I could hardly believe it. Experiencing motherhood is a learning journey of its own, it was hard but with the unconditional support from members of my family, I surely would not have made it! I thank you Deane, Mam, Papa, Bene, the list goes on, but especially thank you to my precious sister, Nadia, who miraculously managed to visit me regularly holding Cassie and showing her deep, unconditional love despite the indescribable pain and loss of her own little boy.

Maternity leave was cut short, I had to start working again, within my first month of having Cassie, I worked from home and began to slowly contact my clients, explaining my story to give meaning to my silence. They were incredible (thank you); they simply understood and continued to support my little growing business. *The first rule of thumb when running your own business is; solid client relationships are worth every effort (well it certainly worked for me).*

Within 6 months I managed to learn about motherhood, I completed my coaching course and moved offices to a more suitable environment to accommodate my new life (in more ways than one). I settled in a separate section of my mother's premises and have turned the room into a professional office. I found Victoria who is now Cassie's second mother. They come to work with me and have their own garden space, playroom and can visit me in the office at any time.

Subsequently, I grew the business to having 7 people on my payroll. When Nadia (my courageous sister) was able to face the world again, I offered the opportunity to work at SPICE; she is now my Client Relationship Manager doing a fabulous job. Chantal Summers joined us a few months later bringing stability and confidence back into a little company that needed it. She is our efficient Operations guru. I have also employed cleaning staff, whilst Catherine and Bernard Martin (my parents) and my wonderful Grandmother remain the silent stability that supportively offers more than they realise. Then there is me, perhaps the best way to describe my role is the compass that steers the ship.

Since the growth of SPICE Consulting, the typing of our CVs and financials has been outsourced to the most competent people I could have found (Melody Pavid and Michelle Jackson respectively). I was also fortunate enough to bring on board my own personal Business Coach (a senior Director from an International Blue Chip company), Charles Wilkins who has helped me move SPICE to new heights in the last year.

From a simple local recruitment agency, SPICE Consulting now offers; Executive Recruitment (both corporate and culinary) on a National and International Level (Mauritius, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Australia and soon, UK) – although this is new, we are working on developing this side of our recruitment. We have also launched an Event Administration division and Coaching division with Skills Development being outsourced to Catherine Martin. Additionally, SPICE has recently developed a full CRM programme that is being successfully used. We are about to complete the final stages of our website, a Newsletter has been designed and a full company profile presentation has been completed to use when presenting to potential clients.

Some future plans for our developing empire include; growing the staff compliment, 3 social responsibility programmes that we have started strategising for, a publishing division (name and registration is already done) and a marketing strategy that will ensure SPICE is the next household name.

Being a serious business woman, a mother to 2yr old Cassie who has recently started school, swimming lessons and attending parties (AND now planning her sibling), a wife to my incredible husband Deane and ensuring a relationship with myself, my theme to success is BALANCE.

The following has helped me to implement balance in my life:

- I can't be everything to everyone – I have learnt to say NO (people actually understand)
- I have learnt to accept family/friend support (you don't have to be Super Mom)
- I have surrounded myself with other professionals (you can't know everything)
- Employ passion, efficiency, initiative and a "learning attitude" above skill
- I have a business / life coach (they extract your own answers to your own needs)
- I now transform daily mundane chores into fun games with Cassie (live every moment)
- I try hard to ensure a romantic setting (home/away) with Deane (fuel the romance)
- I have re-registered with Virgin Active (exercise is imperative to support body /mind balance)
- Eat right, get enough sleep and don't burn the candle at both ends (It DOES NOT WORK)
- I pamper myself when I can (hair, nails, massage, facial, reading around the pool etc)
- I have now made a HUGE effort to see friends regularly (they bring light / laughter)
- Learn something new (it stimulates the mind)
- I have both a business and life plan which I re-visit regularly when I am feeling lost
- I have studied my own strengths and weaknesses to help me understand my abilities better

I have somehow managed to use my organisational and planning skills to ensure that the above is incorporated into every week of my life. It has helped me overcome my challenges, ensure my survival and taught me new life skills. No one said life would be easy, hell they were right, but I believe you create your own world so make it a good one! I always reiterate the lesson that our dear Sebastian taught me; "Stop to smell the roses, life is happening now, not tomorrow, never wait for

tomorrow, it might be too late and always appreciate everything you have, for it can be taken from you in one foul swoop”

I am left to share a Chinese Proverb which somehow emulates my story; “Live as if you’re going to die tomorrow, learn as if you’re going to live forever”.

Thank you for reading my story

Virginie Nothard



Recruitment > Coaching > Skills Development

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"... Do not be a prisoner of your past, be the architect of your future" Dalai Lama

Things have subsequently changed since the winning of this competition