

**"FOR ENTREPRENEURS IT'S ABOUT WANTING TO CHANGE THE WORLD AND ABOUT BEING ABSOLUTELY DETERMINED TO MAKE SOMETHING BETTER."**



# EMMA HARRISON: MADE IN SHEFFIELD

*Coffee here is served from a recycled rickshaw-come-kitchen, parked unapologetically in the centre of the busy reception. Painted with splashes of fuchsia and aqua blue, it matches the neon sign that sits above the welcome desk.*

Despite the large plasma screens and buzzy atmosphere this is not, as first impressions may give, an art gallery, nor is it a cutting edge media agency in London. It is in fact the home for training company A4E in Sheffield and a working drop-in centre for the city's unemployed. On the other side of the room to the tuk-tuk is an equally cheery VW camper van, surrounded by soft reupholstered chairs and sitting in one, A4E's Chair, Emma Harrison.

Flicking through a newspaper, Harrison cuts a relaxed figure with an easy smile. She is hours away from a holiday and her excitement is contagious. In fact, her enthusiasm is such that she has soon grasped a pen out of my hand and is scribbling the name of a music festival on my pad. Y-not, she explains is where she will

be taking her family to that afternoon; "to run off and hang out in a muddy field" in their very own VW camper-van – a far cry from her palatial home at Thornbridge Hall.

It quickly becomes clear that this positive attitude applies to more than just holidays. It could also be the reason her career has progressed rapidly, from running illegal tuck-shops at the age of nine, making a "total mess" of her A levels to where she sits today; a successful entrepreneur running a global training company that employs 3000 people and last year turned over a "whopping" £250m. Harrison is the embodiment of self-made success. Avoiding the obvious path and carving her own, she set her heart on studying engineering – despite the warnings that "no-one would marry her".

After refusing to fill in the forms or meet the deadlines required for her course applications, Harrison got on a motorbike and drove directly to the University. She knocked on the door and secured a place, before gaining sponsorship in an equally defiant manner.

**"I'VE GOT A BILLION POUND TARGET IN MY HEAD, I'VE GOT ANOTHER MILLION PEOPLE I WANT TO HELP. I'M GOING TO SORT OUT THE ENTIRE HEALTH SYSTEM. I'M GOING TO CREATE AN ENTIRE PREVENTION BUSINESS. I'M ABSOLUTELY DETERMINED."**

This tenacity has served Harrison well and she insists that she has "created [her] own opportunities". "I began to realise that every time something good happened it's because I created it, or persisted and I was developing this massive resilience."

Resilience is something Harrison has recognised in many of the entrepreneurs she has met and the ones she does mention hold some gravitas, with Richard Branson and Duncan Bannatyne getting swift name-checks. "For entrepreneurs it's about wanting to change the world and about being absolutely determined to make something better. They see something they don't like the look of and they want to improve it."



**"I BEGAN TO REALISE THAT EVERY TIME SOMETHING GOOD HAPPENED IT'S BECAUSE I CREATED IT, OR PERSISTED AND I WAS DEVELOPING THIS MASSIVE RESILIENCE."**

Harrison's challenge and personal mantra is, 'What are you going to do about it?' which she applies to both herself and demands of others, including her own children. "A lot of people will moan about things but it's what you do next that counts. I think it comes very naturally to me. I say to my kids; life's not fair but what are you going to do about it?" The defining moment when this approach shaped itself into a structured plan for Harrison came twenty years ago, when she took over her father's tiny training company.

Working as an engineer at British Steel in Sheffield, she witnessed her colleagues and production workers losing their jobs, with the only next step for them marked out as a college course starting in September.

"I thought, 'I need to help these guys'. What if they get laid off in

January? They shouldn't have to sit on the dole for ten months. By then they'll be ruined. My great idea was to start something on each and every Monday. So I went to Manpower Services Commission about it and they gave me a chance." Before long Harrison's training courses began everyday and quickly turned into a campaign for change.

"I would just go and bang on the door of Manpower Services Commission and ask them what they were worried about. I would go off and find out about it, work out how to sort it and go back and tell them.

"That very quickly turned A4E into a million pound business. I was, and still am, in the business of fixing things that people are worried about." Harrison makes it all sound very simple. To her, perhaps it is but she rejects the idea that good entrepreneurs are simply



born that way. "When people say to me, 'you're such a good entrepreneur' that's rubbish. It's called survival."

"I still don't think there are enough lessons in entrepreneurship. It's all about the professions. Entrepreneurship is about being who you are whereas a profession means slotting yourself into the mould of someone else's world. As an entrepreneur you create a world around you. You create companies in the image of you so it's a true expression of who you are. That passion keeps you going through the tough times."

Passion is clearly something Harrison has in droves, with a seemingly endless list of ambitious projects in the pipeline. "I've got a billion pound target in my head, I've got another million people I want to help. I'm going to sort out the entire health

system. I'm going to create an entire prevention business. I'm absolutely determined." This much is obvious, and it seems no subject can shy away from this entrepreneur's ambitious plans – her city included.

"I love Sheffield, it's my city but we need to be braver. Imagine it as the leader of a business, you just said, 'I want to be average'. I'd like to see more guts in the city," she says, thoughtfully.

"We've got two universities, the biggest college in Europe and hundreds of schools. It's not just steel that's made in Sheffield any more. It's all about its people, because its people are fantastic. I think tying in entrepreneurialism and education, that hallmark of quality, 'Made in Sheffield' – that should be on the people.

