**Under 5’s Swimming School**

**24.05.2018**

XX set up the swim school BP in 2012; swimming lessons for under 5s across Devon, Dorset, Hampshire, North Somerset and Wiltshire. 1 son 7 years, daughter 5 and 2 years.

CG; If you could just give me an overview of before and after you set the business up?

XX: So I did 4 months at University but never really settled and I instead started working for D in Winchester when I was 20. It was a temporary job at first; I worked my way up to a management role. I was running a team which I absolutely loved. They were all quite young, in their early 20s too and I really enjoyed the coaching aspect of the job, supporting their development and the challenge of solving problems. I am doer; I’m not really a sit down analyser.

So when I went on maternity leave with my first child, I had no doubts that I would return to work. The company had always been really flexible with mums. During the year I was off, there were big changes and my female boss left. The company was sold and my old role was very much linked into the parent company, so it wasn’t a huge shock when they made me redundant when I was on maternity leave.

I thought, right I need to step up, it was a challenge in me to do something, to motivate myself. On maternity leave though it’s when you are at your most insecure, so it was hard. I noticed that I really enjoyed my sons swimming lessons, so me and my husband sat down (he does the finances) and we worked it all out; it could be a viable business. So tried to get a swimming pool but I really struggled, then a friend ran a spa pool in Brockenhurst and offered me 3 hours a week in the mornings, a Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday mornings; 9-10. So we just started and I went off to get trained and I built up to that 3.5 hours for about 18 months. Then I fell pregnant with Sophie.

CG; So you were doing all of it at that point?

XX; Yes I was teaching in the pool, doing all the admin, the bookings. I was everything, just me doing 3.5 hours a week. I loved it. I did really miss the management side of it that I had left.

So at the same time I became the Chair of the local NCT, so then I had a team and I could do both “jobs”.

CG; Clearly something in you needed to manage.

XX; Yes so then I came across, I’ll always wanted a pool close to home, when I was pregnant with C2 I started to look for somebody who could cover my hours at B I came across N, who still works for me now. When I went off on maternity leave I got this call in Winchester from another 2 hours a week, Tuesdays and Thursdays. So I recruited for a teacher there and then we set up in Winchester when C2 was about 8 weeks old.

Then after that I noticed on a Swimming Teachers Associated Facebook page that somebody was selling a business in Devon. I talked with my husband and decided that I was ready to grow, quiet considerably. So we got in touch with this lady and ended up buying her business. So we expanded out to Devon, which was a big jump.

CG; How did that happen? Were you pushing for it, did you work as a team?

XX: I do have a competitive side. By bolting on that business I could make a serious jump. The only way to describe it is that I am competitive, not against other people, but against yourself. You have a vision of what you want to do and who you want to be and how you want your business to run. I want to challenge myself to be bigger, do more and take on more. You know ooooh it could be bigger, so let’s explore that option. So that’s what happened.

Then a year later an opportunity arose in Winchesters. I knew that there was a local business that was really well thought of in comparison to, because there are some really big franchises in Winchester in the baby swimming industry that charge a lot of money, they are huge companies and there really wasn’t anything in Winchesters apart from this huge company and this smaller company. Anyway the smaller one was really well thought of because they ran really lovely classes and quite gentle and kind, very like what I was doing.

CG: So it was a good fit.

XX; Yes and I happened to find out that the lady running the smaller business was also working full time and might be at a point where she would like to sell the business.

CG: How did you hear about that, was it through a network of friends?

XX; Yes through friends! Winchester is a small place and you do have to work to find your opportunities that way sometimes. So I approached her directly and said I bought this swim school last year and I am really interested to find one in Winchester as I live here. We talked about it and I bought that business.

CG; So do you negotiate and set all the terms etc? Does your husband support you with the numbers of do you have an accountant?

XX; Yes I make the approach and handle all the negotiations. My husband supports me. I have a strong opinion on what the budget should be, but I am not methodical. So he puts a framework in place and I fill in all the numbers. I know the business, I know what works. I feel more, as in read people in a negotiation. So when I was buying both business, I understood at what point we just couldn’t push it any further because that would push them away and therefore I sensed this was the best deal I could get. Both were women that I bought business from and I had a great relationship with both of them and I had a good opportunity to talk about our positions, completely honest conversations about what both sides needed. There was no confrontation and for both ladies I bought from, it was just the right time for them to sell. They needed to give up what they were doing for personal reasons and actually wanted their business to go to somebody who was passionate about the business and took the same approach to the swimming classes as they did. So it was really lovely, the lady I bought from in Devon still runs her other older children swim schools there and we are still are relatively close. So she is somebody I can go to for advice because she has a lot more experience that I have in the swimming industry.

CG; Could you give you business advice?

XX; Well I know enough about the business already. A lot of people involved in the swimming industry were swimmers or involved in the leisure industry, but they haven’t necessarily worked in a business environment. I have found my own business experience really useful in helping me run my businesses. So when I was buying the Devon business and taking on employees for the first time, N was working for me on a contract basis back them, I had to make sure I was across all the HR issues. I knew who to contact and what questions to ask and which processes were required. That background has really helped.

CG; So you bought the Devon and then the Winchesters swim schools ….

XX: And then we have just grown organically from there. We’ve grown in Dorset, Hampshire, Wiltshire, Somerset and Devon. So yes that’s where we are at the moment.

CG; So when you started the business, was that your aspiration?

XX; I think I probably wanted to have a business in locally in Winchester because of the ease of it around my children. I was motivated by the fact I didn’t want to go back to an office. I wanted to earn enough money that I didn’t have to go back to an office. The motivation has changed, because if I was still doing everything I could be earning a lot more money. I have chosen to spend a lot more money on staff at the moment because we made the decision for me to take a bit of a step back to look after the children. Also I do think that it changes monthly, yearly not only my motivation but actually the focus for the business. It feels like it has been very different every year.

Up until we bought the Winchester school, we were still finding our way. We didn’t have a complete system and processes for our admin. When we bought Winchesters it came with a couple of people who were doing customer service. Up until then I was doing everything myself, so at that point we started to introduce admin hours, so that people were doing the email inbox. That changes everything is you are not doing it useful, you need it to be a lot more organised.

CG; Yes f you are delegated you have to control how it is done.

XX; Yes exactly clear processes and also basic things like having a shared email inbox. That is simpler now because of the cloud but at the time it was a pain to do. So we took on new software for emails and payment collection which really simplifies the process. So at that point it really changed year on year.

Then the following year after the Winchester buy was bedding in all the admin processes. The last year we heavily focused on branding and introducing a new “Milestones Programme”. It’s something I have wanted to do for a while; it’s a progression plan for the children to follow.

With that is place it’s a lot easier to recruit swim teachers and take them down your road. I was always a bit nervous about recruiting people and them doing stuff that wasn’t what I wanted. When I recruited N, we are so similar it was really easy with her but when I took on Devon the teachers down there were quite different to me, so I had to work hard to get them to understand what we are about, what my vision is. That was a big challenge. But now we have this is place it gives a consistency. I don’t want it hugely standardised because I want my teachers to have their own personality in their lesson, but it does give them an identity.

Then this year has all been about budget, because we spent so much money last year on the branding. It was always going to be expensive, but I really pleased with it. So yes seems to change and evolve all the time; we are constantly taking on pools and occasionally losing some at the same time because we will take most opportunities that come our way. Some of them don’t work, based on location or hours. It is becoming a saturated market in some locations so it’s not always that easy to expand. Buying might be the better way, we’ve just been discussing that. Buying another swim school is the best way.

There are a lot of small swim schools that have been running for a long time that has people in them that might be ready to move on, or retire maybe. You know I think the baby swimming industry has been going for 20-25 years and so we might be about to go into a change cycle. That might be our future, but at the moment we are consolidating.

CG; In terms of long term aspirations, do you still want to grow?

XX; Yes, I still would like to grow; I have it in me to grow. I have a great team with two exceptional managers; they have great qualities to support me. That is making all the difference. So one of them has just been off on maternity leave until April, I missed her a lot. Her maternity leave combined after mine, so we did have a year last year when everything was a little bit up in the air. But we still grew and developed. So now I can see we have the capacity to grow and start moving again.

CG; How have you found it managed children around all these milestones?

XX; I am a bit of a winger with the kids. I think it was probably in synch. When I had one it was smaller; I was teaching with set hours.

CG: Did you have a childminder?

XX; I had my mum. And my husband. I am really lucky to have my mum nearby and she picked up everything I needed. Then my husband helped out too.

CG; Then when you bought Devon, that’s bigger and you had two children? At that point did you get a nanny?

XX: My children have only ever done a pre-school environment. I have never out them into nursery, well Sophie did a day a week for a while. It was a lot of very long evenings. I would just be doing stuff every evening and weekends and when they were down for naps or playdates. We are coming out of that now, but it was really hard.

CG; So you have built around them, adapted and created wherever you can. Building a business whilst still being with your children?

XX: Yes that’s right and I’ve had a lot of the guilt that comes with having a laptop on all the time in every room I am in. I can be cooking dinner and still be managing the business. Recently my other manager came back from maternity leave and I don’t need to do that so much anymore.

I am actually quite distant from the operational side of the business at the moment. The majority of my time is generally to support them. For some, we don’t live that near each other so it is generally long conversations on Google Hangout. I have to say I am a huge fan of Google, I think it has opened up a massive world to me in terms of effective communication, sharing files.

CG; So you can almost be virtually working in the same place.

XX: Absolutely, it can feel like you are in the same office. Although I do miss the banter, but we do video calls now; nobody wanted to do then at first and now they love it because it means we can have a cup of tea with each other in our kitchens! We can see one another. It really, really works. Of course there will never be anything better than someone physically sitting next to you, but I think it’s the next best thing. It certainly does work for us. If you want to grow you have to trust and that about a relationship, this helps when we are so far away.

CG; So how many employees do you have now?

XX: 26; everybody is part time and the majority are swim teachers, all female and mothers apart from one Exeter University student. Anything up to 12 hours per week, some around full time jobs doing weekends, some their only job around family. A couple we have poached from another job, so we have invested in them in order t get them on board, so we have trained them. I have two part time managers and one full time admin role.

So I am now fulfilling my manager role because I have now got lots of team members. I feel like I have a great team.

CG; So you have come full circle; you’ve created your own business to fulfil that manager role.

XX; Yes I have. And I have continued with the NCT and I am now chair of the PTA too. I have really enjoyed the volunteering side of the role, being involved with the community.

CG; Did those connections help with your business?

XX: Hhhmmm I’m not good at selling to people I know. I want them to come to my lessons and people know what I do, I have 3 kids in Winchesters so I do go to many events and people know me. Baby Paddlers is well known and we are rivalling the big franchise now in terms of customer numbers. I meet and know a lot of friends who do swim with us, so I have got over being in anyway shy about it, but I wouldn’t walk into the school playground with my company hoodie etc.

CG; Have you ever done a business women type network?

XX: No I have been thinking I need to do that. I was a finalist in the Venus Awards Hampshire and Isle of White last year. I went to the ceremony and met so many interested and varied women and it was really inspiring, so I must do more.

CG; So you don’t regret setting up the business, you could have found a corporate job instead?

XX: No not even close, it’s been the best for me. I’m not actually very risk averse, I don’t have a problem taking a calculated risk. I am happy to jump in with both feet, I can get nervous about things but then I am also happy just to push through it.

CG; Do you think this has met your needs as both a business woman and a mother?

XX; I think that I am happy which is really important, I think I am fulfilling what I need. You know the business is about me as a mum really, because everything I do is based in what I think mums want. I understand them, I mean every mum is so different and we come across many but ultimately every mum that I come across I know they are doing the best for their child and so that is what the business is all about for me. I think our service is about having fun with your child, bonding with your child, having fun in the water together. And as an employer, it’s about giving some women the opportunity that I had, to have some flexibility around a job, some understanding. If there child is not well we are understanding, even if it creates a problem for us.

I think my business and my family just intertwine all the time, on so many levels.

CG; Are they ever in conflict?

XX; hhmm no, well yes invariably there are times when I feel I should be doing a better job but only generally in relation to the business and I try not to let that happen with the kids too much. I think it’s really important that the kids need to understand that we have to work. My son is old enough now to have that conversation where he understands some mums can’t do drop off every day. I don’t do it once a week because I teach in the pool then.

I do have a very good support network in the area which really helps, and my husband supports me. It’s been more so in the last year, the website and finances which I would have to outsource if he didn’t do that and I think that would change the dynamics of how we do things. I do need him for those things.

CG: So what has been the biggest challenge if you look back?

XX: I think there have been times in our lives when it can be a bit overwhelming. When it was a tricky time with the kids. We had just bought Devon and Sophie was just turning one, harry was having potty training issues, you know real day to day mother issues that was a really, really hard time. Actually my husband has left his job and was trying a new job in London, but after 3 months it just didn’t work for us so luckily his old boss got him a new job, had she not done that I don’t know what we would have done. It was a really difficult time in my relationship, with the kids and a major step up in the business.

Also recently my father-in-law died very unexpectedly; it was the biggest shock for us. Everything changed after that actually, that was when we increased the management hours and stepped back a bit from the business. M couldn’t do a thing and I was involved for only as much as was needed. So I had to rely on people, whereas before I was probably a micro-manager I have had to step off the peddle.

CG; So because your business is so intertwined with your family and it was scaling up at the time, but still small when buying Devon , you didn’t have the management capacity to delegate to and therefore the personal crunch point was very difficult. However now the business is bigger, you do have that management structure and processes that can pick up the business, so this personal crunch point was more manageable?

So in a way you have built the solution to your interconnected family business.

XX: Yes and I think we have just reached a point now, before we grow again, where I can do sit above it and not get lost in the operational stuff. So I can think and reflect. Also I do still teach for a couple of hours a week, which is really so important to me. If I don’t teach how can I know what is going on?

So I think I have the best of both worlds at the moment; I can manage the team, do a bit of teaching to keep across the product and customer and still be there for the kids. I’m sure at some point I’ll be back on that spreadsheet, on the phone to customers. To at the moment I’m not and that’s great.

CG; Also I presume it helps you to think more strategically?

XX: Oh yes absolutely because we are looking for our next steps, how and where we will grow.

**Personal Details**

Age: ~~16-29~~ 30-39 ~~40-49 50-59 60+~~

Nationality: British (white)

Country of origin: UK

Mode of working: Full Time~~:~~ Mostly ~~Part time:~~

Children: (1) ~~0-2 3-4~~ 5-11 ~~12-18~~

Children: (2) ~~0-2 3-4~~ 5-11 ~~12-18~~

Children: (3) 0-2 ~~3-4 5-11 12-18~~

Children: (4) 0-2 3-4 5-11 12-18

Highest educational qualification: A’Levels

Location of business: Winchester

Home working: Mixed

Last position held in employment: Customer Relations Manager

Husband Occupation: Accountant

Husband highest educational qualification: Degree

Household income: Dual ~~Single~~ (both incomes required)