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Throwing a new design on life

A New Life

When your hobby becomes an all-consuming addiction, it's time to change your life's priorities. **Michelle McDonagh** reports

Although she had always been very interested in pottery and ceramics and felt very comfortable working with clay, it wasn't until Michelle Maher signed up for pottery classes in her local VEC that it ever occurred to her that she could actually "be a potter".

Having just given up her high-powered six-figure salary position as director of operations with a major supermarket chain, Maher decided to take up pottery classes as a hobby which very quickly became an all-consuming addiction.

"I was sitting in the class at the VEC, the teacher was chatting away and I said aloud 'Imagine working with clay, that would be brilliant'. A woman turned to me and said 'I'd say you'd love that. I had never met her before and I hadn't even started the classes but she was right."

"At the end of that 10-week course, I was addicted and there was no stopping me."

Originally from Bunsha, Co Tipperary, Maher graduated from NUJ Maynooth with a masters in history in 1996 and went into retail management.

With her family in the furniture business, she had retail in her blood.

In 2000 she became area manager for German supermarket chain Aldi which was just setting up in Ireland at the time. As area manager, she found herself travelling between Aldi's stores in Dublin, Cork and Galway and enjoyed the excitement of building up the new business.

She was very quickly promoted to store operations director, becoming the first woman in the UK and Ireland and one of a handful within the company worldwide to achieve this high-powered, six-figure salary position.

"I was sent to the UK in summer 2002 to get experience as operations director and ended up on the road for a year living in hotels all over the UK from Scotland to London. It was quite horrible. If I got a free weekend break in a hotel now, I'd say 'no thanks, I'll stay at home,'" she laughs.

Before starting with Aldi, Maher had enrolled in a pottery course in Dublin but from the beginning, it was apparent that she would not have time for hobbies in her new job.

Ceramic artist Michelle Maher in her studio. Photograph: Matt Kavanagh



Although she would eventually have been moved back to Ireland when a vacancy for a director of operations arose here, she quickly realised she wasn't happy in her new role. It wasn't as exciting as being an area manager zooming around from store to store fighting fires but involved a lot of strategising for the future.

She was also quite homesick as her partner of 13 years was still living in Ireland.

"I left Aldi in 2003. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I just knew I did not want that life anymore. I knew something would happen for me, I just didn't know what it was going to be."

It was at this point that Maher enrolled in the pottery course at her local VEC in Dublin, the first of a year of numerous classes - 600 hours in all - in everything from pottery and ceramics to start-your-own-business and professional management. Having saved money while working with Aldi, she was in the fortunate position of not having to work for a while.

After a three-week full-time course at the National College of Art and Design, she made the decision to build

her own studio at the back of her house in early 2004 and set up her company, Ceramic Forms.

"It was like going from the sublime to the ridiculous, it's so completely different from what I was doing before. I still shop in Aldi and when I tell my former colleagues there that I'm an artist, I might as well be telling them I'm an astronaut."

"To them, I'm this tough boss, a total professional in a suit. A lot of people think artists are flighty and run around in smocks which I'm certainly not."

In order to bring in an income initially, Maher decided to start teaching art classes in her studio. She started with one student and worried that it would never be a viable business, but is now running five evening classes a week as well as weekend workshops.

"I was very sure from the start about the kind of work I wanted to make, it's not very commercial or subtle and I use very dramatic colours."

"Teaching classes meant I had a regular income and could afford to stick to my guns and persist with the

work I wanted to do after I was turned down by a number of shops."

Maher's persistence paid off when the chief executive of the Kilkenny chain of shops, Marian O'Gorman, saw her work at an exhibition at the RDS and placed an order with her.

She is currently taking part in the Kilkenny shops' Craft in Action initiative and can be seen working on her designs in the store from July 19th to 21st. Her work is also being sold in The Design Yard in Temple Bar, the Craft Granary in Caher and Rossa Pottery in Cashel. Her larger sculpture pieces can be seen at the Botanic Gardens, Airfield House in Dundrum and featured in the recent Bloom festival.

"I used to work 60 or 70 hours a week sometime, 100 for Aldi, but as a ceramicist, I would never dream of counting my hours. I do work very long hours and have to make myself take time off. I could be doing the accounts one minute or working on my website and rolling out lumps of clay and glazing the next."

"It's very intense, but I love the variety of it," she says.

On the Co



Una Anderson R

Occupation: Chairwoman of Park Association of Ireland.

Personal/family: Married to Denis and seven grandchildren.

What figure from the world of health do you most admire? Mary Harney. She has the will to get Irish health services on a par with the best in the world. I admire her courage to take on it.

What other career might you have pursued? Law perhaps.

If you could grant three wishes service, what would they be? I would ensure there are mental health services in every district. I was Parkinson's nurse specialist to a contract ensuring they can work hospital and community to deal with problems in their own homes and discharged. Finally I would ensure patients get equal service regard health service area they live in.

What is your greatest fear? I don't really have a greatest fear but I do have a fear of heights and don't dwell on it.

Have you ever been a patient a good patient? Yes. I have had breast cancer for has travelled to the bone twice. I am a good patient.

When or where are you happiest? Lying in the sun on a beach listening to the waves.

How do you cope with stress? I distract myself by entertaining grandchildren. For example today I had a cake and coffee. I'll be up with a Bacardi and orange.

What is the trait you most admire in a good listener and have a good deal with Parkinson's patient?

What is the trait you most dislike? My intolerance when people do not properly.

Do you use alternative or complementary medicine or therapies? Yes. I am a great believer in naturopathy. They must be combined with conventional medicine. I get reiki and Thai massage regularly and drink herbal teas.

Who or what makes you laugh? I don't really laugh that much. If I can amuse, I just smile.

What is your motto? If it can help somebody as I pass living will not be vain.

What is your favourite TV or radio programme? The news, Questions and Answers Street and a good film with a true story.

What books would you bring to an island? Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence by Gaiman would be a good one. It is also about bringing some books by finally I'd bring the book I keep Victorian treasury of verse and I can't remember it.

Lifelines

MODELS OF LEADERSHIP: Clare-based philosopher and writer Dr John O'Donoghue will team up with American educator Dr Dan Siegel and professor of psychiatry at Stanford Medical School David Daniels at an event entitled Leadership Through the Power of Presence on Saturday and Sunday, July 21st and 22nd at Newtown Castle, Ballyvaughan, Co Clare. Through a series of talks, discussions and mindful awareness practices, all three speakers will invite participants to explore new models of leadership. Cost €490. E-mail: cath@burrenleadershipforum.ie or tel: 085-7083949 for more details.

RELATIONSHIP WORKSHOPS: The west Wicklow wellbeing centre, Chrysalis, is now running non-residential workshops in Milton Park, Sandford Road, Ranelagh, Dublin. Forthcoming workshops include *The Art of Effortless Relationships* on July 21st and 22nd. Led by Ingrid Dazci, American healer and author of *The Art of Effortless Living*, the workshop aims to help people identify and release beliefs and attitudes which limit their relationships. Cost €195.

On August 11th and 12th in the same venue, Jesuit priest Fr Jim Dolan will lead a retreat introduction to the teachings of Anthony de Mello. Cost €155. Bookings for both workshops on tel: 045-0404713. See also www.chrysalis.ie

Nutritional event: Ask the Expert is the theme of a public event in which nutritional experts will answer questions from the public at the Riverside Theatre, Coleraine on Monday, July 16th. The panelists, all of whom are attending an international nutrition science conference at the University of Ulster Coleraine campus, will include Dr Mhairi Gibson, PhD, Dr Anna

TVScope

A chemical solution to an obsessive problem

Chemical Castration Channel 4, Thursday, 10.35pm

Earlier this summer, the then British home secretary John Reid announced that anti-depressants would be offered to some paedophiles on an experimental basis to help them control their sexual urges following their release from prison. The move is one of a number of measures which will include enabling parents to find out if a person involved with their children has a conviction for sex offences.

The effect of anti-depressant therapy will be monitored over a period of time before a decision is made as to whether to extend its use. Anti-depressants such as Prozac can result in loss of libido and a reduction in obsessive thinking. It is with those sex offenders who have an obsessive compulsive disorder that it is most likely to be effective - but some

used to describe the use of the drug Lupron to reduce sex drive and obsessive thoughts. In the US, the use of Lupron is on the increase in prisons but remains controversial.

Some experts maintain that it does not reduce sex drive sufficiently and simply offers offenders a way to get out of prison earlier than they would otherwise be the case.

Lupron also increases the risk of osteoporosis - though this may not be a particular concern to people outraged by the behaviour of sex offenders.

In this excellent Channel 4 documentary, convicted paedophiles in several US maximum security hospitals and prisons spoke of their experiences with chemical and surgical castration. Fred Hoffman, who has spent 20 years of his life in prison for paedophile offences, says the use of Lupron has removed his fantasies and origins in relation to

treatment. So Grant had himself surgically castrated.

Needless to say, parents remain unhappy about the prospect of paedophiles being released into the community even following chemical or surgical castration. Indeed, a urologist who carries out surgical castrations expressed the view that while the procedure helps people to be more at peace with themselves it does not make them safe for release into the community.

There is still no definitive research to show whether these approaches work. In an Irish context, unfortunately, it all seems rather academic. We have a few psychological treatment programmes for sex offenders but these remain small scale - even though such programmes can be successful and are well worth providing.

I didn't really want to watch this programme but it turned out to be an excellent documentary - well

On the jobs front

My Working Day

Karl Heneghan of Inclusive Recruitment, loves helping people find the right job

I work with Inclusive Recruitment, an employment agency specialising in the placement of people with disabilities. We support about 260 people who work in a variety of fields such as catering, retail, libraries and manufacturing.

Our service is a division of St Michael's House, which was set up by parents of children with special needs. The Inclusive Recruitment service started in 2003 and I've been here since April 2006. My role is to match the skills and preferences of our service users who are seeking jobs with employers who are recruiting staff. Once a client has been hired I provide ongoing support to them and their employer.

Sometimes I begin my day in the office, other days I meet for



Karl Heneghan: His biggest challenge is finding jobs for all those on his waiting list.

have a list of employers and a list of people seeking work, except that we use a free service. The

hour part-time job company may this would be interest such few hours. B service users are I short hours and w companies a pers their needs in the Some employers are when it employ some intellectual disab our bigger empler reference for us, I help to the service Many employe is important to in in their practices finding jobs easie When one of o job we provide th coach who will as getting settled in involved in their i cases people setti both employe an happy.

I enjoy my job immensely. There in the job and I've all walks of life. The job has give insight into many of work and I part share with our c