



Celebration of business success stories for Women's Enterprise Day

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MEN ARE still three times more likely to set up their own business in Ireland than women – a statistic which a conference next week in Limerick aims to rectify.

Alison Ritchie (30), of Polar Ice in Laois, is one of a number of businesswomen whose success stories are to be showcased during Women's Enterprise Day, on Thursday and Friday next.

Ritchie took over the family business from her father and two uncles in 2002. "Up until that point they were making wet ice cubes and importing dry ice," she says, adding the company then spotted a gap in the Irish market.

Dry ice, or solid carbon dioxide (CO₂) which is much colder than normal ice at minus 78 degrees, is neither poisonous nor flammable. It is colourless, tasteless, odourless and creates an inert atmosphere. These properties make it extremely valuable as a refrigerant, not only for chemical and technical applications but to a large extent in the food industry.

It is critical to airlines (as fridges cannot be used on aircraft), shipment companies which need to export frozen goods, universities, hospitals and laboratories, and it is also used for special effects in entertainment.

After a lot of planning, a trip to the US and a period in which the company "begged, borrowed, but stopped short of stealing", it raised funds to build a dry ice manufacturing plant here. It is currently the only firm doing so in the State, and enjoys 70 per of the market.

A ".co.uk" web address set up recently to attract businesses from Northern Ireland has resulted in a number of UK businesses contacting the company.

Ritchie has also set up Polar Ice Tech, a dry ice blasting service for industrial cleaning akin to sand blasting.

The young entrepreneur's suc-

cess is particularly impressive when considering she has 2½-year-old twin daughters to rear, something Ritchie says she just gets on with it. "You just get through it. It's amazing, you'll always get the strength for whatever you need for the day. You just get up and get on with it."

This get-up-and-go attitude is one shared by three Dublin sisters, the Boardmans, who have set up different businesses in various parts of Ireland. Valda Boardman runs an eponymous PR firm in Dublin, Gillian is a consultant occupational therapist in Tipperary, and Alison, who speaks five languages, set up the Unique Voice Language Institute in Kerry in 2002.

"I had been travelling for 10 years and when I came back I was asked by different agencies would I interpret," Alison explains. She quickly realised there was a lack of translation services adhering to the quality guidelines she was used to from working at a language school in Portugal. She set up her own business, which now has three threads; a 24/7 interpretation service for the spoken language, translation of written documents, and language teaching.

Having started with community and individual contracts, Shannon Development and Enterprise Ireland helped Alison identify a corporate client base. Based at Kerry Technology Park, she now employs 10 people.

Three pieces of advice she would give to those thinking of setting up a business are to do so in an area in which they have expertise; to talk to other trusted individuals about it; and, overall, not to be afraid to network.

"Confidence in your own service, confidence in what you're doing, is key to women being successful in business. Men automatically have it for some reason, they'll go out and they'll do it, whereas women pay more attention to detail, which is important

as well, but it's important to get out there," she says.

So why does she believe there is such a disparity in the numbers of men and women setting up businesses in Ireland? "I think it's actually fear of success for women rather than fear of failure; the fact that it can be a million dollar business," she says.

That, however, is an attitude which Donna Daly Blyth says is changing, and for the better. When she set up Donna's Dance studio in Cork 26 years ago, she didn't consider it a business. "It was really about creating an income. That's why being involved with the enterprise board really helped me . . . [to] step back from being in the business, to looking at it from a much more businesslike perspective and look at it in the managerial sense and put proper business structures in place."

More recently, Daly Blyth set up the Angelina Ballerina Dance Academy based on the children's cartoon series of the same name, which she hopes to bring nationwide next year. She now has 12 employees, including her choreographer daughter.

Dance has traditionally had its own gender divide, something Blyth says has changed. "It's becoming quite acceptable now that dance is something men can do and do really well because they're really good at it."

The same could be said about business, and Blyth says younger women have undergone a "sea change" which she and other female entrepreneurs now hope to pass onto other women thinking about setting up a business.

National Women's Enterprise Day takes place on November 18th and 19th at the Limerick Strand Hotel. See www.nwed.ie. For advice for those interested in setting up their own business, see www.enterpriseboards.ie



Alison Ritchie's Polar Ice raised funds to build a dry ice plant here after spotting a gap in the market.