

THE STARTUP VANGUARD

CELEBRATING ENTREPRENEURIALISM
WITH A HEART-LED TWIST

as told to **RACHEL SHARP**

Brilliant businesswomen Lisa King, Joanne Howarth and Jenna Leo work in very different fields, but have two wildly impressive things in common: their young businesses help others without sacrificing profit, and each is the equal-first Australasian to be named among 21 global finalists for the Cartier Women's Initiative. Created more than a decade ago to empower female social entrepreneurs, the prestigious annual fellowship provides top-tier mentoring to help finalists grow their business to its full potential. "Their curiosity, audacity and openness mirror the values deeply anchored in the culture of our maison," says Cyrille Vigneron, president of Cartier International, of the alumni, whom he calls a "community of conquerors". While the person awarded the Australasian region's \$100,000 US first prize won't be announced until June 15, this trio are already winning: their companies possess the potential to change the way our society and world operate.

Marketeer Lisa King, 43, spent 15 years promoting big-name snack foods before teaming up with a celebrity chef to create a business that sees corporate customers fund healthy school lunches for vulnerable children.

"There was a media frenzy five or six years ago around research that showed 27 per cent of kids in New Zealand, a country of 4.5 million, live in poverty. One of the minority government parties put forward a bill to feed kids in lower decile [socio-economic] schools, but it wasn't passed. It felt like everyone was talking but no-one was doing anything.

"I loved the Toms shoes model—for every pair bought, the company gives another to a child in a developing country—so I decided to apply it to kids' lunches. I approached one of NZ's best-known chefs, Michael Meredith, who grew up in poverty in Samoa. He knew what it was like to go hungry as a kid and came on board as a shareholder.

"We launched seven months later, in June 2015. By the second week of business we were already making 400 lunches a day in my kitchen at home, so I left my corporate job. By week 12, we hit our three-year business forecast. We've now given almost 1.5 million lunches to kids across 79 schools in Auckland and Wellington. In the early days, I'd get up at 4am to make the lunches myself, then Michael and I would deliver them to the schools. Today, we have 42 staff and up to 30 volunteers daily. Before COVID-19 shut down schools, we were feeding around 2,000 kids a day.

"Most of our customers for the adult lunches are busy corporates who want something healthy delivered to work. The school lunches are always nutritious: a wholemeal sandwich, lots of vegetables and protein, fruit and a treat, like a gingerbread man or popcorn. All of that goes into a brown paper bag with no branding, so it looks like it's from home.

Lisa KING

EAT MY LUNCH, AUCKLAND
AND WELLINGTON

"I'd volunteered in charities before Eat My Lunch and seen the amount of time, effort and resources that went into [fundraising] to operate. I didn't want to

do that. Profit is not always a dirty word. We employ 42 staff and if the business isn't self-sustaining, we're ultimately going to have to tell the kids we can't help them anymore.

"I've spent a lot of time with the kids, trying to understand why they come to school with no food. Everyone assumes it's because the parents spend their money on things they shouldn't, but a lot of these families are really struggling. They'd tell me things like, 'We have no food at home—payday is tomorrow.' Often older kids would give what little they had to younger siblings, then go hungry. A lot of them weren't getting breakfast either, so the schools moved lunchtime forward to 11am. Teachers tell us they always notice a huge difference in behaviour after the kids have eaten.

"The COVID-19 lockdown means we had to completely rethink our business model at short notice. Now we're using our supply chain and logistical know-how to deliver fresh groceries to customers' homes, which means we could start delivering food packs full of ingredients to the kids we were feeding. We've started with 1,500 food packs, with the aim to work up to 2,000.

"Having your own business is a 24/7 job and much harder than going to work for someone else, but my advice to other women who have an idea is to just try. That first step is always the hardest, but it's worth taking."

Eatmylunch.nz





Joanne HOWARTH

PLANET PROTECTOR PACKAGING, SYDNEY AND AUCKLAND

South Sydney-born MBA graduate Joanne Howarth already had a thriving seafood business when an epiphany about the polystyrene boxes they used inspired her to develop a genius biodegradable alternative. Now, the 50-year-old diverts the equivalent of 44 Olympic-sized swimming pools of the compressed plastic from landfill each year.

“It all started through my business, Fishermen’s Wharf Seafoods, in Nelson Bay in NSW. The trawlers unload directly into our market—our takeaway shop has won best fish and chips in NSW many times. In 2014, I started supplying Australia’s leading subscription meal kit company with fresh fish, and soon after we won the contract to pack and distribute all of their home-delivered boxes nationwide. It was a huge operation with 170 staff moving many thousands of boxes a week, all made of polystyrene, a plastic that’s been the go-to for keeping things hot or cool since the ’30s, but ends up as landfill or in our oceans as toxic microplastics. I felt like I was single-handedly destroying the planet, so I started to look for a sustainable alternative. Eventually, I found a product made from wool developed by a packaging engineer 10 years ago in the UK, but Australia’s extreme weather meant we had to completely reformulate it. I had no idea

about natural fibres and it was a very steep learning curve. I also assumed we’d have no issue with supply here in Australia, but the product works best with coarse reject wool from the sheep’s underbelly. Our local merino wool was too high in quality and expensive for our purposes.

“Eventually, we created a biodegradable solution that really worked. The meal kit company, which at that stage supplied 35,000 households a week, came on board as our foundation customer. In 2018, we took out four categories in the WorldStar Packaging Awards. Today, we employ 25 people in Australia, 20 in New Zealand and supply many businesses, including DHL and Blackmores. Initially, it was less expensive to keep using polystyrene, but as we’ve scaled up, our price is on a par with it. Now we have to educate people that the product is reliable. If you’re transporting a \$6,000 chemotherapy drug, you want to know its temperature stays constant during transit.

“You need lots of tenacity to be an entrepreneur or pioneer—when you get knocked down, you have to get up and try again. There’s unconscious bias underpinning women entrepreneurs, so it’s wonderful Cartier has the vision and commitment to promote gender equality. I am so inspired by the other finalists I’ve met online, all doing remarkable things around the world.

“Two years ago I was faced with a very serious health challenge and people said to me, ‘Give up work, stay at home and rest.’ While I value my health, it’s my passion for what we’re doing that drives me. There’s not a day I come to work and don’t love what I do. It’s my dream to get rid of polystyrene entirely. If we do nothing, by 2050 there will be more plastic in the ocean than fish. I’m committed to leaving the planet a better place than I found it.”

Planetprotectorpackaging.com

Jenna LEO

HOME CARE HEROES,
SYDNEY AND NEWCASTLE

Long before the world was in the throes of COVID-19 isolation, Jenna Leo was fixated on easing others’ loneliness. Since launching in 2016, her business Home Care Heroes has provided more than 300,000 hours of social support to disabled and isolated members.

“Sometimes the best ideas come from the heart. I was working at Roadshow Entertainment and teaching yoga when my now-husband Mat’s parents came to visit from Canada. His father was in remission from cancer and his mother was recovering from memory loss related to encephalitis, and Sydney was big and confusing to them. They’d get lost often and Mat [he and Jenna are both 33] would spend an hour every day using [the app] Find My Friends to get them home, which was upsetting emotionally and practically. Finally, we engaged a friend to take them on outings, and that’s where the idea for Home Care Heroes came from. We’re a government-approved provider offering disability support [but] our heroes don’t do clinical care like lifting and showering, or domestic tasks like groceries and cleaning. Rather, they build relationships through activities, helping people become more independent and feel really valued.

“Imagine, for example, a young guy with a physical disability who loves sport and wants to go to the footy. In a traditional care agency arrangement, he’d probably be matched with an older lady to take him straight there and back for \$70 an hour. With us, he’s able to choose the hero he wants—someone who loves footy too, and who might take him to the pub after the game—for a flat rate of \$40 an hour.

“We once had a hero go on schoolies with a young member who’d unfortunately suffered a stroke. He didn’t need a nanny, just someone to remind him to take his medication and do some specific things. We found him another 18-year-old and they both had a brilliant time.

“Founding a startup isn’t easy, but Mat and I were committed. We left our jobs and moved back to my parents’



house, so we didn’t need to pay rent, then were accepted to Remarkable, a 16-week accelerator program for startups funded by the Cerebral Palsy Alliance. By the time we finished, our business had increased fourfold. That was April 2017. Today, we have a team of 10 in Sydney, Newcastle and the Central Coast of NSW, and just over 2,500 active heroes, who’ve been rigorously vetted.

“To me, having a business that is both profitable and socially impactful is the ideal. It was hard in the beginning when people said we should be a charity, but getting out of the not-for-profit sector has made us a lot more efficient and effective because our goals are aligned in terms of revenue

and impact. I love that the Cartier program is focused on female-founded social enterprises. They pair you with a mentor to help you scale your already-performing business, then help give you the tools you need to raise capital.

“If I could do it all over again, I would first join another startup I respected, to learn. Just because you’re not the founder doesn’t mean you can’t be an intrapreneur and make an impact.”

Homecareheroes.com.au



