

# BOTH SIDES

# NICHOLAS CARROLL

From school dropout to successful business owner with £14m turnover, Bradford entrepreneur tells his story

STARTING A business was never part of my long-term vision. It was more of a spontaneous decision. What began as a small family project has evolved into a thriving company with a turnover of £14 million nearly four decades later.

My academic journey wasn't exactly conventional. Up until the age of 11, I loved school but, when I moved to secondary school, things changed. I felt lost in the crowd. Around this time, my dad left home, which was a pivotal moment in my life. With everything changing so abruptly I found it hard to adapt and started skipping school then got on the bus to Bradford's central library.

The story of how the Carroll Cleaning Company began dates back to 1987. At the time, I had been working with my dad in his cleaning business, Carroll and Smallpage. He'd built it to a modest size, and it was doing well but, after his sudden death from leukaemia in 1986, his shares went to his wife and I felt there was no future for me there anymore, so I decided to start my own venture.

I gathered my siblings and pitched the idea of starting a company and, before we knew it, we were up and running. By the end of May 1987, we had incorporated the business, and by July, we had secured an office.

My sister, Debbie, left her job at the Yorkshire Post, and our brother, Simon, followed soon after, leaving the army in early 1988, and my twin sister, Anne-Marie, joined a year or two later so, by 1990, we were all working together. There was no big plan. We didn't have a hefty budget, fancy graphic work, or a solid network. We simply thought, 'Let's give it a go', and we did. We bought two



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second-hand desks, which we installed in this dingy, underground office. We got a couple of phones, and, on that Monday morning, we just opened the phone book and started ringing people. Eventually, we landed our first big contract with the Halifax Building Society, a connection that grew into something much bigger, helping us to establish a reputation in the market. But we still had much to learn.

There was a time when our overheads were significantly bigger than our income

and we were virtually on the brink of insolvency. But, despite these early setbacks, we pushed on. We were young, without families or major responsibilities at the time, and failure wasn't really something I considered. I thought if we did it and worked hard, we would succeed.

We made more mistakes, of course, but each one taught us something valuable and, by our third year, we were finally turning a profit. The first million-pound turnover was a huge landmark for us, but each million that has come since goes virtually unnoticed. Since then, the company has grown steadily and, today, we're a regional player with a turnover of £14 million.

The lessons I've learnt along this journey are lessons I never could have learnt in a classroom. I never relied on formal education to guide me. I didn't have a degree or A-levels. I believe the real secret to success comes from learning through experience. Looking back, I have no regrets. With nothing but a couple of second-hand desks and a bit of money in the bank, we were willing to learn, make mistakes, and persist and, after almost 40 years, I still find joy in the process, always looking for way to make the business better.

Interviewed by Saffron Carroll.

