



CHANGING ATTITUDES

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When Kilmarnock lost a key contract in late 2010, it cast a real shadow over the future of this unique organisation dedicated to providing training and work for people with intellectual disabilities. Seven years later and Kilmarnock is a thriving social enterprise operating out of its own purpose-built premises. Kilmarnock's dynamic CEO Michelle Sharp is not done yet in her quest to change perceptions and unlock potential.

Throw away your old preconceptions of what ‘a sheltered workshop’ might look like. In its place, insert the image of a modern enterprise hub that includes a well-organised factory floor, a spacious staff cafeteria, an exercise studio and a suite of offices.

Welcome to ‘Basecamp’, Kilmarnock’s new headquarters at Wigram Business Park and New Zealand’s first example of large-scale social impact investment. (Both the BNZ and the Christchurch City Council came to the party with funds to support it, along with the Rata Foundation). The name ‘Basecamp’ stems from the idea that Kilmarnock is a warm, safe starting point for ambitious journeys through life.

So this is a place where people can prepare and become equipped before going on to achieve incredible things. Who knows what they may achieve in future?

At Basecamp, I meet ‘the Minister of Happiness’, at least, that’s what the sign says on the door to CEO Michelle Sharp’s office.

“I have the best job in the world,” she says, with a welcoming smile. “It is the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world who do it. I’m so passionate about what we do.”

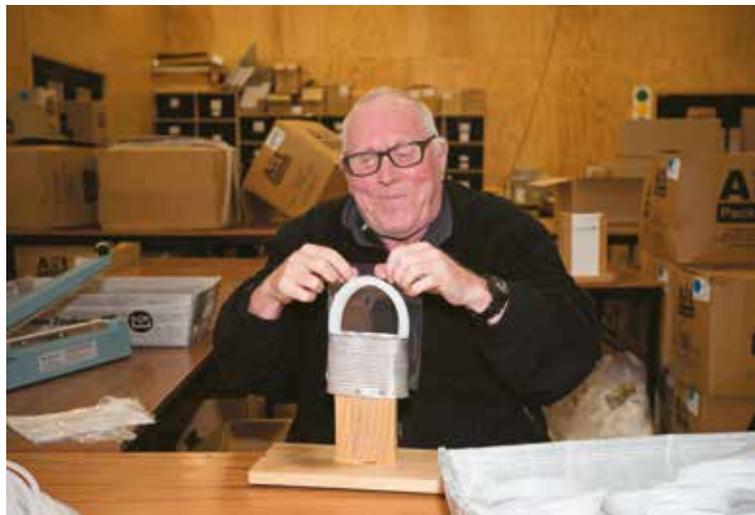
That passion is clearly infectious. It has worked its way through the culture of this place since Michelle started here as a business development manager in 2010, before taking up the reins as CEO in 2013.

She started work with Kilmarnock at a challenging time. In late 2010 it lost its long-running contract to make poppies for the RSA, effectively cutting its revenue stream by a third. Faced with such a setback, people even started to question if Kilmarnock had a future.

The values of its founder, Christabel Robinson, fuelled Kilmarnock through 60 years, her vision being to restore hope and dignity to people who had been stripped of opportunity. She saw how the provision of education and employment had the power to change lives. For many years, Kilmarnock thrived through private patronage, government funding and some contract work. Yet gradually, the underlying social reasons for its existence began to be forgotten and community support dwindled.

In retrospect, Michelle sees the loss of the poppy contract as the wake-up call that was needed.

“The first thing that had to happen is that we had to become a workplace that embraced diversity and everyone’s unique abilities, where hierarchy didn’t exist and where we were all part of a team. I knew if we got that right, anything would be possible.”



ABOVE Kilmarnock employee Bruce is pictured packaging tubes for Gough’s fluid analytical testing kits.

BELOW In Kilmarnock’s E-waste department, Bradley disassembles old electronics for recycling.

OPPOSITE CEO of Kilmarnock, Michelle Sharp. PHOTO Johannes van Kan.

Kilmarnock has also reinvented itself as a social enterprise. Translated, that means it is balancing a social commitment to provide employment, education and training for school leavers with intellectual disabilities, with a strong focus on trading activity as a contract manufacturer. Today, some 85 per cent of its income is derived through trading.

The scope of its productive activity is vast. From refurbishing headsets off international flights for Air New Zealand, to food repacking, E-waste recycling, woodworking (toys to office furniture) and office services, Kilmarnock is more than holding its own in the market. It has many influential clients including Fonterra and the Gough Group.



ABOVE Adrian cleans lids for Gough’s fluid analytical kits. RIGHT TOP Packing mustard in Kilmarnock’s food department are Arul, Robin and Ryan. RIGHT BOTTOM Kilmarnock employee Sam Webb (left) and Kilmarnock CEO Michelle Sharp are pictured in the toy store.

Kilmarnock reinvests the majority of its profits towards addressing its social mission – and it is winning contracts on merit. Quality underpins its production, supported by industry-standard certifications. It was named Champion Charity at the 2015 Champion Canterbury Business Awards and scooped an ACC Workplace Safety Management Award in 2014.

“We have gone from being beholden to one customer and a government contract to no longer being beholden to any customer or income stream.”

In meeting its social mission, Kilmarnock takes a holistic view that sustainable employment is only possible if a person is ready for it in the broadest sense. So it has put in place a comprehensive health and well-being programme for its almost 90 employees.

“It is the kind of thing every good employer should be doing,” Michelle says. “People are feeling happier and seem to have more energy now than they did before.” Every employee also has a personal development plan to help them reach their non-work goals.

The proactive approach is bringing tangible results, with work attendance levels climbing from 89 per cent to 94 per cent over the past two years.

Michelle is now rolling out the next big step for Kilmarnock and it’s a big vision. In May, the Kilmarnock Academy was launched to deliver formal, NZQA-certificated training. At the moment, only Kilmarnock employees are able to take part but Michelle is exploring ways of extending it to non-employees too.

“It would mean school leavers could come here for further education. We want to be able to give people with disabilities more chances to succeed in future.

“My dream is that within five years every Kilmarnock graduate would be seen by the business community as the most employable person ever because they would have the right work ethic and the right health and safety training.

“I believe local businesses should partner with us and assist the growth of this academy because we’re preparing an incredible workforce.”

Michelle’s own journey through life is a fascinating story. The daughter of a businessman and a teacher, she grew up in Spain and Mexico. She was sensitive to Mexico’s profound social inequalities and aware too of her own imperfections, having struggled in early childhood with dyslexia.

Moving from Mexico to the UK to finish her schooling was a huge upheaval and she recalls “a lot of bullying” simply

Sam Webb - Planning her future with confidence

Not so long ago, Sam Webb was a shy school leaver with little hope of being able to forge a place for herself in the workforce.

After eight years at Kilmarnock, the 26-year-old has turned her life around and is now looking forward to taking up a part-time position with local car sales yard Turners.

Looking back, she credits her experience at Kilmarnock for helping her grow into the confident young woman she is today.

“Kilmarnock gives people with disabilities the chance to work. It’s very hard to gain that work experience anywhere else. Currently, I work half-time in reception and half-time as a factory hand. I also helped design our new toy store.

“I have made friends here too and we do a lot of fun challenges like Mud Sweat & Tears. We do things like Zumba and boxing and have our own dance studio upstairs. It’s pretty good!”

It has been a big milestone for Sam to have been accepted for a part-time position at Turners, her first job in the mainstream workforce since leaving school. She also plans to maintain her connection with Kilmarnock on a part-time basis once she takes up her new job.

“Everyone here has helped me so much. Being able to come here has been great.”

because she did not look or sound the same as other kids. It didn’t hold her back though; she went on to complete a degree in mathematics, even convincing Vodafone to sponsor her studies.

“I was their first ever sponsored graduate...When I graduated I got a job in one of the marketing departments and was part of the team that branded them as ‘Vodafone’. After leaving there, I became a founding director of a few other companies, such as Timico Ltd. I was very ambitious; I wanted to be a managing director by the time I was 35 and I got there by 32.”

Yet, by then, something was missing. Her instinct to be ‘an includer’ was not being satisfied. Corporate burnout was looming and Michelle had also become a mother. (She and her husband are parents to Louis, 10 and Isabella, 12).

“I’d married a Kiwi and we decided to pursue a better work-life balance by coming to New Zealand. When I came across Kilmarnock, I was really struck by the whole power of ‘business for good’ and using business as a vehicle to do good things.”

In a wider sense, Kilmarnock’s social enterprise focus is also starting to drive change in community attitudes. Mainstream employers are waking up to the potential of its people.

“Three of our employees go to Gough’s every morning as laboratory assistants to work on their site. Our marketing manager Islay Rackham and I make presentations to up to 5000 people each year and we have thousands come through our doors [on tours] to see what we do ...

“We’re so good at what we do and we have got this incredible group of people whose attention to detail and quality is second to none. There has always been such opportunity here.” ■

Michelle will be speaking at the Social Enterprise World Forum in Christchurch this September. Details online at www.sewf2017.org


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