

## MONEY

# THE ACCIDENTAL BUSINESSWOMAN

FROM TEACHING TO CAMPAIGNING TO STARTING AN ETHICAL CLEANING AGENCY, IT'S ALL ABOUT THE PASSION, ANTOINETTE DANIEL TELLS **ADELINE IZIREN**

**A**NTOINETTE DANIEL, 47, a former PE teacher, founded ethical cleaning agency Just Helpers eight years ago, with only £10. The business turned over £1 million this year.

An accidental businesswoman, whose staff have cleaned the homes of the Bishop of London and the Rothschild family, Antoinette started Just Helpers to help pay her bills, after she sold her house to get involved in working for an overseas anti-human trafficking organisation.

Antoinette decided to pursue this worthy cause despite being on course to become a deputy head at a school in Croydon, south London, where Just Helpers is based.

Her love of education stems partly from her mother, who taught her to read at the age of two. But sadly, Antoinette's mother fell ill and she went into foster care when she was seven years old. From the age of ten until she was 16, Antoinette was fostered by a Jamaican woman whose daughters attended a private school in south London. Bright and talented, Antoinette received funding to attend the same school, and this paved the way for her to go on to university and pursue her teaching career.

## What was your first job - and what was it like?

My first job was delivering papers for three local newsagents, seven days a week. I was 14 at the time and started a paper round with just one newsagent, but when I realised that the two other newsagents in my area delivered to the same roads, I managed to bag paper rounds from both shops.

Because I was a girl, I was given the easiest paper rounds. They were the easiest because the five roads where I delivered the newspapers were short and closest to the newsagents. This made my morning rounds very efficient and very profitable because I honed the whole thing down in 40 minutes. My early entrepreneurial experience helped me understand how to consolidate opportunities and laid the foundation for Just Helpers.

## How much were you paid per hour?

It was £1 a round back then, in 1988, and £2 at the weekends, so all in, I earned £81 a week. Christmas tips were great as this bumped up my weekly earnings to £200. Doing paper rounds was actually a game changer for me. Delivering newspapers really liberated me, as it meant I was able to pay for school dinners, public transport, buy shoes and trainers, which I needed as I was a very sporty child who sprinted, did the long jump and played netball. I played netball at county level and even had trials for England.

## What would you buy, money no object?

This is a challenging question as material things don't necessarily motivate me, but what does is having memorable experiences with friends



Clean living: Ethical cleaning company boss Antoinette says owning a business is a lifelong learning curve

and family, and also causes close to my heart. One of the things I aspire to own - a money-no-object purchase, you could say - is a holiday home in the Caribbean, where I could retreat to annually. I would love my loved ones to join me there, or use it with their friends and family, too.

## What luxury would you not give up?

My home in Worthing, West Sussex. It overlooks the sea and this feels like a blessing and a luxury every day. As I mainly work from home now, seeing that view dramatically decreases the everyday stresses of running a business. The view also helps me find creative solutions, as well as to dream up new ideas to expand the Just Helpers cleaning and housekeeping service.

## What has been your biggest financial regret?

Selling my house to enable me to attend a mission training college, to prepare me for my plan to work in India to prevent human trafficking. It was hard for me to get a financially supported place in India and so my role was based in the UK.

I did a lot of speaking in churches around the country and in community jobs, ran training for the police and social workers, all work that was partially paid and when the money from the sale of my house ran out, I needed a side hustle to help me pay my bills. I remember announcing to a room of my middle-class friends that I was going to be a cleaner. Their initial silence still makes me chuckle.

Regret is a big word, as if I'd had my home as a safety net to fall back on, I

never would have started the cleaning business, which has created jobs that pay the Living Wage and transformed so many lives, including that of the company's fourth cleaner, a lady from Bulgaria. She is now my sales manager and doing a degree in administration.

## Has the way you worked changed over time?

I laugh about this often. When I started the business it looked more like a charity, with the company losing out on profits in order to keep the clients and cleaners happy.

Now we focus much more on creating win-win-win scenarios where the company also profits.

For example, we've increased the cost of cleaning for our clients by 10 per cent and we charge them



100 per cent of the cleaning costs if they cancel the service due to no fault of our own.

## Are you a spender or a saver?

Both! My birth mother was a prolific saver and her efforts helped me secure my first property, as she gave me £10,000 to add to my savings of £6,000. She taught me to save money each month and to have long-term and short-term goals. I apply this both personally and in the business. My favourite fun account is entitled 'Holidays and nice things.'

## What challenges have you overcome as a result of setting up and growing a business?

Owning a business is a lifelong learning curve. I have had to learn to forecast, prepare for all eventualities - though a pandemic was a bit of a curve ball - and to take big but calculated risks at every growth point.

I have also had to learn to trust my own voice and instincts, plus swallow my pride and outsource any bits that I'm not good at or don't enjoy, as early as possible.

Finally, I have had to believe that a black, female care leaver and PE teacher from Croydon can create, own and run a very successful business.

## What advice would you give to anyone starting a business?

Be passionate about what you plan to do. Also, have an aim beyond personal wealth accumulation, because on the days when you want to quit, it's your passion for what you do and the impact that it is having that will help you keep going.

## Do you consider yourself savvy with your personal finances?

Yes, especially over the last decade, as my personal finances are entwined with those of my business.

## What was your last impulse buy then?

A Jeep instead of a bog-standard hire car on my recent holiday to Barbados.

## Cash or card?

Card, as it's a safer way to spend.

## What was the first thing you spent a lot of money on?

A holiday to Zimbabwe 20 years ago. The memories of that trip are still bright in my mind. I'll never forget seeing Victoria Falls and the rainbows hovering over the top of it. It was also my first trip as an adult to Africa. (Antoinette visited Nigeria, her mother's homeland, as a baby. Her father is from Dominica, Caribbean).

■ [justhelpers.co.uk](http://justhelpers.co.uk)