

Against the odds

Nicolle Drake abandoned an early ambition to design jewellery, but it seems that she is a rare diamond herself. John Dodds talks to Nicolle about the incredible challenges she's faced and overcome.

Nicolle Drake Wood Appeal

‘Incurably optimistic and absolutely irrepressible’ are the first words that come to mind after talking to Nicolle Drake, HIA Business Partner of the Year for 2003.

The story of the successful custom joinery business she and her husband Trevor have built is studded with personal setbacks that would have caused many people to quit and look for jobs.

Nicolle ‘dropped out’ of school at 15. However, her parents let her study full-time at an arts college from which she graduated in 1979 with a well-rounded diploma in colour and design.



Her ambition at the time was to become a fashion designer, but she hated sewing. ‘So I had the brilliant idea that I’d design jewellery instead.’ She did that successfully for four years for two major Sydney firms.

At 18, with the protection of bodyguards, she was in charge of displaying the De Beers International Diamond

Awards – a collection then worth around \$10 million. It sounds as though she would have done well in jewellery, but she wanted to expand her horizons.

So, just before the birth of the Drake’s first child Tiffany, Nicolle moved on to manage a graphic design house. Trevor, originally a shipwright by trade, was at the time factory manager for a veneer manufacturer.

What drove them was sheer determination and the attitude that, even it didn’t all finally work out, at least they’d have ‘had a go’

Above: Nicolle Drake with husband Trevor (left) proudly accepts her HIA Australian Business Partner of the Year Award 2003, presented by sponsor representative Simon Carr, Large Car Manager, Holden Ltd.

Left: Some stunning examples of the high quality workmanship of Wood Appeal.



Tiffany was born with a rare congenital condition which required Nicolle to live on and off in parents' accommodation in a hospital for the first 16 months of the baby's life. Setback number one – but Nicolle doesn't think of it that way.

'Trevor and I were both working our tails off and decided that it would make more sense to work for ourselves – so we set up our company, Wood Appeal Pty Ltd.'

In the late '80s they began building kitchens and other residential custom joinery in the small fibro garage at home. Trevor worked all day in the garage assembling components and then put in long nights in a rented factory cutting the jobs.

Nicolle's role was design, materials specification, general administration and pulling in the clients.

'It was hard work, just the two of us. We were managing day-to-day, sharing one little car between us and trying to build the business,' she says.

But after about 12 months it all started to come together and Wood Appeal's workload outgrew the fibro garage and rented factory.

So they 'bit the bullet' and in 1993 leased new premises – one of the two factories they now own – and took on a part-time employee. The family had grown to four by then and they were desperately in need of another car – but Nicolle went to an auction and bought a table saw instead!

'It was tough going but the business was growing.' What drove them was sheer determination and the attitude that, even if it didn't all finally work out, at least they'd have 'had a go'.

Nicolle says, with a sort of rueful irony, that 'the fun began' about that time. A few months after the move to the new factory, the part-timer rang her to say that Trevor had had an accident and needed an ambulance. She raced to the factory to find Trevor underneath a half tonne stack of board which had collapsed on him.

'He was lying there with no feeling in his body apart from in his tongue.'

The adrenalin kicked in. Nicolle covered Trevor, treated him for shock and then wedged herself between him and remaining stacked board to stop more collapsing.

'When the ambulance arrived they took him to Royal North Shore Hospital as a spinal patient. They told me that his neck was broken – the vertebrae had virtually imploded.'

Trevor was in hospital for a month. 'When he left the surgeon told us he



shouldn't have lived, let alone walk out of the spinal unit as he did. But I never believed for a moment that he wouldn't walk again.'

Trevor was away from Wood Appeal for three months. That left Nicolle to run the business while also caring for five-year-old Tiffany and three-year-old Christopher.

Without Trevor they could design but not manufacture joinery. Fortunately, Wood Appeal had built up a sideline making lattice for hardware stores, and that was something she and the part-timer could manage.

So Nicolle made a lot of phone calls and drummed up as much of that work as possible.

She was also continuing the design work for a big commercial refurbishment job on their books and studying interior design one night a week – all because of her unshakeable confidence in Trevor's return and the future of the business.

It was a long shot but Nicolle says: 'We thought we were invincible.'

'I never believed for a moment that he wouldn't walk again'

It seems they were right. Trevor is an incomplete quadraplegic. The massive injuries he sustained in the accident, followed by major surgery, have prevented him from going back to his old one-man manufacturing role – but not from becoming managing director of a much larger Wood Appeal with 15 staff. Nicolle is the design, admin and promotion dynamo.

Two years after the accident Wood Appeal won the Manly Waringah Small Business Award for outstanding manufacture. They're keen to expand and have no thoughts of winding down, and the kids are thriving and already succeeding in their chosen careers – Tiffany as an artist and Chris as an actor.

The Drakes probably *are* invincible, and indestructible too. **H**



Above: Nicolle and her family; husband Trevor and children Christopher and Tiffany.
Left: Nicolle with her much loved pup Beau.

WHO ARE BUSINESS PARTNERS?

For more than 70 per cent of HIA members, a family member manages the business records, client communication, and banking paperwork. The role of these business partners underpins the success of the whole home building industry.

HIA's Business Partner Network (BPN) recognises the role of business partners in helping to run home building businesses, and provides help, information, education and networking opportunities to BPN members.

For more information on benefits and how to join, see page 21 of this issue.