



The Irish Shop, 1981

NURSE TO ENTREPRENEUR

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Une infirmière hygiéniste à Toronto explique comment une de ses collègues, qui est devenu entrepreneur-importateur, a dû faire face à mille problèmes en tant que femme. Par exemple, pour obtenir un prêt bancaire, les femmes se heurtent à des difficultés inconnues aux hommes. Par contre, l'on s'étonne si elles réussissent aussi vite qu'eux!

RETURNING from an afternoon of browsing through the fashionable Yorkville area of Toronto, I could not help being excited by the evident success in retailing of my former colleagues in nursing. Here they were, with years of nursing experience, running successful businesses of their own.

How did these women make the transition from 'outer-directed' professionals to 'inner-directed' shop owners? Was it difficult to

switch from a service career to one of sales and entrepreneurship? What skills from their nursing years contributed to their success in business? How did they get started? These and many more questions ran through my head as I delighted in their apparent success that day.

Take Mary Mahoney of the Irish Shop as an example. Ten years ago (October 1971) Mary opened a small shop in a large Victorian house she rented on Avenue Road. Growing up in Ireland, she was always interested in the crafts and clothes from that country and had started selling these items from her home in Toronto in a small way a few years before. While Mary ran the shop in the daytime with the help of friends, she continued to work as a nurse at night in St. Michael's Hospital. In fact, she emphasizes how important the support of friends and family were to her success, but opening a shop was her own idea and instinctively she felt 'Alone is best.'

During these early years she rented out many of the rooms in the big house to help pay the way. Her shop continued to grow with an increasing variety of beautiful craft and gift items from Ireland. As well, she always carried an excellent selection of Irish literature and recordings and a wonderful line of clothes and fabrics. The shop exudes a friendly 'walk-around' atmosphere and there is a very genuine rapport between salespersons and customers.

A YEAR AFTER Mary opened the Irish Shop, she met and (sometime later) married a banker, Derek Keaveney. Her husband has enthusiastically supported her enterprise from the beginning. With his own Irish background, financial expertise and great interest in people, he has contributed enormously to his wife's success.

The shop was a viable operation from the beginning. Last year, the shop moved to a more prestigious, busy location right on Bloor Street with four full-time employees and some part-timers on staff. The move was accomplished by ten years of

hard work leading to success. Mary has always been totally involved in her business, seldom taking much time off. 'Taking responsibility for your own business with its obligations, both financial and to the suppliers, makes it an exciting full-time job,' she says. Mary Mahoney is obviously a person who enjoys the challenge of risk-taking.

... Women aren't expected to be successful as quickly as men. . .

What of the shop now, one decade later? A clientele of faithful, long-term customers has been established. There is a larger selection of stock of quality crafts from Ireland. Irish manufacturers are now producing more fashion garments. Mary has started designing her own clothes, using good Irish fabrics and Canadian women as dressmakers. She has always loved Irish crafts, music, writers and weavers and keeps up to date with them on annual visits to her former home country.

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I ask her what qualities were necessary in making her business a success. 'Perseverance and a belief in what you're selling is essential,' she says. Excitement and enthusiasm are important too. She attributes her success to astuteness and common sense, as well as an awareness of economics. 'If you can't sell, you can't buy.' It is essential to keep a good association with the suppliers. 'They are your bloodstream,' she states. Also important is the emphasis on distinction of design. 'Retailing is very competitive, so the more unusual the design, the better.'

Mary Mahoney believes that more people should be establishing their own businesses. 'This is important for the fabric of any society. As Canadians we've always

looked across the border; we need more faith in ourselves, especially as entrepreneurs.' Although the corner store is disappearing and chain stores predominate, Mary believes that the individual small business can still compete successfully.

HOW does being a nurse relate to being a shopkeeper? As a nurse, one is usually in a totally female environment with a lot of responsibility, which is a good background to have in the retail business. She has no regrets about being a nurse and feels that the discipline and flexibility of the profession has helped her enormously. She still retains her professional nursing status and even entertains the possibility of returning to nursing one day. 'Nursing training enables one to be responsible and organized, but does not help you to think in financial terms. At first, dealing with money was embarrassing.' But, as Mary emphasizes, 'You are motivated to sell and learn to be a convincing salesperson rather than a hard, pushy one.'

What about being a woman in the business world where most institutions are dominated by men? Obtaining bank loans is often more difficult for women than men. However, there is not the pressure on women to be successful as quickly. Mary Mahoney believes that being Irish has helped. She comes from a line of strong women who may appear subservient, but this is only on the surface.

OTHER NURSES who have started retail enterprises for themselves feel that business is natural for women. They are used to change and are more flexible by conditioning. Few other areas offer women as great a chance to be successful without much formal education as business does. Women are not blocked by masculine hierarchy as in the professions, for instance. If a woman is fit, persistent and willing to work very hard, as well as ambitious and self-motivated, running her own business can be a highly fulfilling achievement.