



Louise Harris:

FRANCHISING'S WONDER WOMAN

Self-proclaimed “gobby franchise director” Louise Harris, isn’t backwards in coming forwards. With over ten years of experience in franchising, the Wilkins Chimney Sweep director isn’t afraid to push the boundaries.

In recent months, the challenges facing women in business are at the forefront of discussion surrounding how we view women in the boardroom. Being judged solely on your gender, is unacceptable, and many women believe they probably would have achieved more – had they not been female. For Louise Harris, personally, this has not been an issue which has held her back. “As a woman you can do anything you put your mind to! And you don’t need to apologise for being fantastic at what you do.”

The feisty director of Wilkins Chimney Sweep, recently awarded the EWIF Special Recognition Award, has been on both sides of the franchising fence, from franchisee to franchisor. She also used to co-chair EWIF, and currently serves on the board of the bfa. An inspiration to others within the franchising family, she is often called upon to share her knowledge and experience right across the sector. So who does Louise take inspiration from?

“The UK is filled with some strong-minded women, but it was my mum who taught me there are no barriers. If you want to work, you work. Do what you like and grow. It’s up to you. After my mum, Deborah Meaden. If I’m struggling with a challenge, will think, ‘what would Deborah do?’ She is fierce, but she’s kind. What I love about her is she has this soft underbelly, but she’s direct. I think on the face of it because I’m outspoken, and because I’m big and tough, people don’t expect me to have feelings. So, occasionally when I want to sob quietly in a corner, I think about what Deborah would do!”

It might come as a surprise to discover the third woman Louise has been influenced by, “I was 12 when Margaret Thatcher was elected as Prime Minister. At such a young age, I witnessed a woman reaching the position of the ultimate power – running the country. Seeing women like her in the public eye removed any barriers to what women can achieve. I don’t know enough about politics, but in terms of a role model and as a woman who knew what she wanted – she is somebody I’ve always admired. She entered one of the toughest industries and stayed true to herself. Love her or hate her, she achieved her goal.”

We all have things that throw us off or keep us on our toes. Sometimes, obstacles hinder progress. But staying true to yourself is one of the key values Louise feels strongly about. “It’s about living to a set of ethics and values. I have worked in two organisations where I felt deeply uncomfortable about some of the behaviours exhibited. It wasn’t a fair environment. So, I left very quickly; I choose to be fair; I want to work somewhere which promotes fairness, both in and out of the work place. People assume I must be stuck in the mud, as I don’t like change, but it’s because of this overriding issue of fairness. I must be fair even if it means not doing favours for my franchisees. I’m true to myself.”





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Louise and Peter Harris took on Wilkins Chimney Sweep in 2011. The husband and wife team grew their network to 14 national franchisees over seven years. But now, with pastures new on the horizon, they have just sold Wilkins to StumpBusters UK Ltd. "Our plan was always to sell the business on. At the beginning of 2018, we had an opportunity to sell. It made significant sense to do it. So, we did. I think it's important franchisors and franchisees clearly think about their exit strategy."

Louise doesn't deny sexism in business exists, there's enough official evidence to suggest the UK has a challenge. But she has discovered the best way to approach your career is with determination. "When Peter and I first started networking, people were shocked when they realised I owned and ran the business. For example, when we exhibited at the franchise shows, people assumed I was just a helper or 'a bit of totty', so would talk to him. They were surprised when he responded, 'I can tell you all you like about sweeping the chimney, but if you want to know more about the business, talk to the boss!'"



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Louise admits as a business woman, she hasn't taken as much time for herself as she should have. However, with the change in focus since the sale of Wilkins, and as she changes direction later in the summer, Louise has discovered an unorthodox, and particularly adrenaline-fuelled approach to escapism. "I find it difficult to step away from the business. But one thing I am doing is learning to ride my motor bike!" she laughs. "For me, there is a huge sense of mindfulness in its purest form when I am on my bike."

Dedicated to making the best out of everything franchising has to offer, Louise implores her fellow-franchisors, "Focus on you! Surround yourself with people who share your ethics, values and standards, and who also have a vision. We operate in a small industry; you can either jump in head first and have a blast, or sit back on the periphery and watch what everyone else is doing."

Wilkins' gobby franchise director is most definitely one of EWIF's most ambitious, self-motivated and strong women, which is why she was awarded the Special Recognition Award. As she turns her attention away from Wilkins, into new territory, we look forward to seeing even more of what the franchise world's **Wonder Woman** has to offer.

For more information about this years' EWIF Awards and Louise's win please visit www.ewif.org



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