

THE BRAINCHILD OF **JANE MASON**, VIRTUOUS BREAD IS A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE CONCEPT THAT INVOLVES BRINGING COMMUNITIES TOGETHER THROUGH BAKING THE STAPLE LOAF. HOW DOES IT WORK AND WHY DID IT COME ABOUT? *SUZANNA HUNTER* MET WITH JANE, ARMED WITH THE QUESTIONS



NICK DAWIE

I met Jane at her home in South London eating bread she had baked earlier whilst sitting in her kitchen and with the smell of bread baking in the oven. As a character she is very energetic, bright, articulate and clearly possesses very strong values which have led to a complete sea change in her life and work. Bread and baking bread in particular have been fundamental to this change. So where does this interest come from?

Jane grew up as the daughter of a German mother and British father in Canada. Her mother was appalled at the “white plastic which was sold as bread” when she first arrived and set to baking her own. Jane grew up with German style bread baked at home weekly and found that as an adult she would turn to baking bread as a form of relaxation and reflection. This was particularly the case when she left the strategy consultancy she had been a Partner at for five years in 2005, to become an independent consultant. Quite simply, she felt that her vision and that of the organisation were no longer aligned and that it was time to leave. Jane was disillusioned with the partnership.

“I felt we were trying out ideas which had been developed academically, and were being implemented for the first time within in our own teams, without really thinking through the

# Angels,

implications. I just felt incredibly uncomfortable.”

Jane went on to become a successful independent consultant, continuing to work for some of the world’s largest financial services institutions. By 2010, and having worked steadily through the financial crisis of 2008-2009, she found that again she was questioning values and behaviours. A key piece sat around the term ‘virtue’ and she began interviewing a number of leading thinkers in the UK from CEOs to Muslim Clerics, politicians and actors around this theme with the view of writing a book, a work which is still in progress.

Throughout this period Jane was avidly baking bread and was selling it in specialist delis and stores in the local area – it was a hobby. She found herself teaching friends how to bake bread. Word spread and she was teaching friends of friends. It struck

Jane that life revolves around bread; it is nourishment, a social activity and also a commercial enterprise. It provided a virtuous circle. Added to which there is only very limited waste and virtually no by-products being used, as grain comes straight from the mills to which only water and salt is added. Packaging can be kept to a minimum.

With this realisation came the concept of Virtuous Bread. In Easter 2010 Jane decided that she would have 12 months to really focus on the creation of the business as an enterprise. Would there be a way in which to earn a living, while at the same time contributing to society in a variety of different ways?

With this in mind, Jane has now created an organisation which is centred on bread making, but also provides a range of different services.

The most simplistic of these is that she continues to bake for local shops and neighbours. Expanding upon this Jane has created a school where she teaches bread making for personal consumption and pleasure. Building upon this further Jane then created a concept called Bread Angels. They are individuals who have a passion for baking bread and then sell this bread on in their local areas. Jane reckons it is possible to earn about £50-70 per week doing this. The focus for Bread Angels is not to create a full income, but a supplementary income.

The final income stream comes from running team building workshops or conducting board meetings around the process of baking bread. The baking process itself is structured such that it offers time to both reflect on the detail of the meeting as well as providing a social setting.

A separate component to Jane's work is that she spends time at schools, nursing homes and prisons (including The Clink) where she provides her time free, teaching bread making skills.

Whilst this sounds very worthwhile and is certainly a huge contrast to her former career, my big question is whether this works. Six months on from her original deadline, where is she?

Jane is a fascinating character. Throughout the first part of my conversation she has struck me as an 'Earth Mother', focused on virtue as a value and a way of life. Her reaction to the commercial question is refreshing and honest.

She admits that she still does not take an income from Virtuous Bread and is funding this from her savings. However, the feedback she has had over the 12 month trial period she gave herself was positive, not just in the sense that she is doing good, but that this is a vehicle to build a social enterprise. Her



commercial activities are designed to cover her costs and time, so she can continue her voluntary involvement. Jane agrees that, in essence, anyone working with her on the commercial aspects of the business has to be confident that she is not 'off buying designer handbags and such like' (truly a hard concept to imagine having met her in person). But that is the idea behind social enterprise.

Jane's work in prisons and schools has especially shown her how others have taken pride in their bread making; her work has led to individuals developing skills, creating small businesses, all over the country. There are Bread Angels in Suffolk, Norfolk, Wales and Scotland to name just a few locations.

Using her skills from her earlier career, Jane has begun to seek out appropriate grants and funding opportunities for Social Enterprises. She was awarded her first small grant in November last year and is in the running for two others currently.

My lasting impression is that I have been given a real and rare insight into an individual's transformation. It is clear Jane has gone into much more detail around her value set and change of life than one would normally expect. It would be easy to

# bread and virtue



recognise that she is someone who is lucky enough to have the financial security to be righteous. I am not sure that is really her motivation – it is about her own personal fulfilment. Jane's motivation is baking bread and the truth is that her passion is infectious. Forget all the explanations that led Jane to the creation of her own business – there is a tremendous sense of achievement in baking your own bread and it is delicious as I experienced. Jane adds dried fruit, nuts and in some cases beetroot to give variety and difference to her loaves – all of which are based on German bread. I can see how this process can act as a tremendous framework for a number of settings and is simply a great way of getting to know people and of having fun. ●