



## **Covid-19: Masking the true casualty in economic strategy**

In 2014 I was based at a Russell Group University researching within restrictive Eating Disorders. My research was around looking at pedagogical treatment interventions and although we had found a self management pathway that worked we could not find a working delivery model that would be cheap enough for the NHS. I grew frustrated by holding a pathway that was capable of helping people but thwarted because we could not make it cheap enough for state services. I was not only expected to be an academic but also a business manager in working for my Department. So I left the institution and decided that I would instead the model I was being forced to adopt and forge my own business. Initially set up a small Manchester Boutique based in the Northern Quarter of the city and ran a production company out of the back of my unit.

The production side of my business started to really take off we did some work for some new Manchester brands and were asked to be involved within Manchester International Festival. It was here that I entered talks with a large London Production Company and co-managed their Northern interests. The production company also held interests in a fashion brand, a performance agency and held franchises in Rome, Tokyo, LA, New York and Berlin. It wasn't long until my work with the company sparked further London interest and I was picked up by a bespoke events company based in Battersea, who tailored events and fashion shows for high net worth operations and hosted events mainly within Chelsea and Mayfair. Within my title of Creative Director I would direct all show content, looks, commission models and work with venues and own the handing of non-disclosures/copyright IP/contracts. Whilst in

post I also collaborated in design with Elit by Stolichnaya and House of Harlot.

Little did I know however that it would be at one of our smaller events, within Chelsea, that I would be hit by my past life and here be served one of life's junctions. . It was a show for a French couturier who had a bespoke list of high profile clients, what people dont realise about the fashion industry and model selection is that creative directors are bound by their stakeholders and like any business our success comes with how well our vision tailors to our clients brief. This couturier's demographic of client was largely very petit, very rich women, hence why they chose us for the event. I have casted for many shows and for anyone who knows backstage at any fashion event, its very busy and often it passes in a blur. At this particular event I just happened to have to pass the models changing area when looking for my Head of Events when I saw one of the girls I had commissioned going through the rituals of Anorexia pre-show. Its hard to admit but I probably had walked past these behaviours many times but on this particular occasion my past work resonated. I made an effort to speak to the girl after the event and what was remarkable to me was that this girl saw the Eating Disorder as merely a cost of a very successful and lucrative career. She said ' it wont be forever I know that and for now it works for me', I remember in that moment thinking I am part of the problem in this role. Well the answer is no, of course not, I am merely a part of a complex chain that places its demands on everyone involved, but I also knew that I could also make it easier for this model. So fast forward a year, and I had generated enough funds to establish Mr Eds Shed, our principle site to provide respite, coping and management training for those with disordered eating.

Our delivery was through five acres of green care and pathway involved animal assisted care, we used horses in helping people better understand their emotions and act as a safe other to act through psychodrama. Because of the amount of personal investment I decided to commit I established the centre in rural Staffordshire my home County and wanted to develop a fully sustainable business model that would provide its own independent revenue stream to fund a community arm that would enable those without financial means to access services.

We forecast that it would take two years to set up the site and train our horses, rescues from the local RSPCA centre and thus started to operate in September 2019. We took our first client in months a former Gucci model who walked during Tom Ford's era and was committed to

giving up the Eating Disorder and addiction that the industry had left her with. Operating between France and Notting Hill homes the concept was seemingly coming together, and on this basis we also took on a number of NHS clients at our cost. On January 29th 2020 COVID 19 hit and although we could still operate given we were an outdoor low ratio operating centre, social movement was halted, which meant that travelling from either London or France was also halted, meaning our private revenue stream stopped. This was at a time when local mental health provision was crippled with many services only being offered online at a time when people with OCD and compulsive handwashing were being told every day to 'wash your hands' or you will kill those who you love. Needless to say we were inundated with local referrals. The Covid funding rules meant that we were not eligible for any funding, as although we had been operating long enough it was based against profits over the previous year and because we were in start up we could only report loss. So to meet this need both my wife and I decided we would return to paid employment in whatever jobs we could get during pandemic. My role would be initially as a security manager for a food production plant and my wife as an STR for a mental health readjustment unit. Working these jobs enabled us to keep on our NHS clients at the centre throughout COVID 19 and saw us loan our struggling company over £65k to keep our site but with limits lasting on social mobility for the duration it did it saw our primary revenue stream diminish. Sadly our revenue stream would not be the only casualty during COVID-19 but as a family we also lost 5 friends, three family members and two pregnancies during its height, so in 2022 we stopped taking on NHS clients, I returned temporarily to lecturing so I could afford to keep the site and horses and allow some healing.

We have had to re-invent ourselves to find a new revenue stream from local market and it is only in September 2023 that this could be realised. Our Vagal NerveCentre is an entirely new project which we will be focussing all our efforts to grow. It still involves some of the psychology and horsecwork used within this pathway but caters for the wellness market not only restorative mental health care. If we can get the vagal nerve centre established with the help of the local community then we will slowly bring back some of the other endeavours that Mr Eds Shed was established for. We are proud to have sustained our centre personally to help those struggling most heavily through COVID 19 but now need to ask you the community to invest in us so we can restore this unique, ethical and sustainable model to mental health.

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