

FEBRUARY 2024 | DIGITAL AND INNOVATION

# BUSINESS BULLETIN

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New report by AGCC and Gilson Gray shows positive outlook for region.

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launches brand new  
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**Aberdeen &  
Grampian  
Chamber of  
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# Life begins at 40

## The rise of Aberdeen's tech maestro

**When Jeanette Forbes moved to Aberdeen with her late husband in the 1980s, she - by her own admission - wasn't much of a tech genius.**

"Thinking back, I wasn't doing anything different to what anybody else was doing or could do. All I used to do was Ctrl, Alt, Delete, and start the computer again and it worked."

Her bluntness and candidness is refreshing for a woman who was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire in 2022, before receiving honorary degrees from both of Aberdeen's universities within five days of one another less than a year later.

"I started as a receptionist, progressing my way through my career path and I always remember this particular chap who I worked with said to me 'have you ever thought of going into technology?'

"That's how it all started. He did kind of sew that seed and say you need to do something in technology."

Jeanette, originally from Halifax in West Yorkshire, has made Aberdeen her home for most of her life. It's a city she holds dear to her heart and, with a number of successful companies across sectors to her name, a place she's giving back to.

"My late husband was Aberdonian, and I moved here with him when his parents became elderly. We lived with his parents when we first arrived in Aberdeen, we didn't have a home, we didn't have jobs or schools for our children, and we didn't know what we were going

to do or how we were going to survive back then. We didn't have any direction whatsoever; we just knew family was important and we needed to help.

"I landed a job at ARI communications centre because I knew the phonetic alphabet of all things.

"I was on the switchboard and back then ARI managed all the hospitals. I remember this particular night, which was July 6, and I had just gone onto a night shift. My colleague and I were just getting set up for our night shift when we took the first call from Piper Alpha. The events from that night is something I've never forgotten."

Like most, July 6, 1988, had an enormous impact on Jeanette.

"I remember saying to myself, 'I've got to put something back into this city and sector'. I just knew I wanted to give something back because of what I'd experienced that night."

And put something back she did, but not without years of hard work first.

"I went away and studied, because, apart from home economics, religious education and English, I had no other A-levels. I couldn't study through the day at university because I had children, so I went to night school and qualified there.

"Then I went and worked for a company who was starting to get really engaged in tech. I took some knocks, some real hard knocks through that initial career path.

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**If I don't try, I'll be forever wondering what it's like to run your own tech business.**

"I found out that one of my male colleagues who was doing the same work as me was earning £26,000 and I was earning £12,000, when I approached the HR department to ask why, they said that my salary was based upon the receptionist job description as they did not know what to pay me. I moved to another company because I was so disappointed to find this out.

"I was headhunted very quickly and started working for a new company and then some years later was made redundant and then said, 'that's it'."

'Life begins at 40', as the adage goes. And it was no different for Jeanette.

Start-ups, especially in tech, are by no means a young person's game, as some may believe.

Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk, the two richest men in tech, are worth a combined \$400billion according to Forbes. They were in their 30s when they started up their respective companies. Steve Jobs was 52 by the time the first iPhone was launched, arguably Apple's most successful product.

Jeanette, 40 by the time she launched PCL, was perhaps the perfect age.

"I was just going to give it my best shot, and if it fails, nobody can say that I haven't tried. But if I don't try, I'll be forever wondering what it's like to run your own tech business.

"I started PCL Group and then very quickly it just took off."

The company very quickly "grew arms and legs", she added.

"We moved into the city from Portlethen in 2007 and started working down at Regent Quay in a three-story building at that time.

"Then, nearly two years ago, we moved into 14 Golden Square and we actually bought the building, which is a huge step for any business. I see it as a commitment to the city that says thank you for supporting us and we're now here to stay.

"It's key that you give back to a city that you take from, absolutely key," Jeanette said.

Now in her 60s, her passion and love for the Granite City has never wavered.

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## Do I still get excited by technology? You want to bet I do.

Giving back to Aberdeen is important to Jeanette. While money helps, she knows that time is priceless.

"I gave Belmont Cinema office space here so they can have their meetings.

"It's a really key asset. I couldn't help them financially at this time, but I can give them office space and they now use it as a registered address too, so small contributions via another means can really help to get initiatives off the ground.

"Bob Keiller is doing a great job at Our Union Street, he just needs more support and the business community needs to get right behind him if we want to see change."



Employing people in Aberdeen is also central to most things Jeanette does.

PCL employs dozens of staff in itself, but it's not her only venture.

"I've also invested heavily in other businesses in sectors that I knew nothing about, for instance, with Grape and Grain (Aberdeen's upmarket wine bar).

"For me, entrepreneurship is about creating jobs. It's about being able to create jobs that grow the economy and change people's lives.

"There are other technology companies getting off the ground, but none that have the history or success story of PCL. It's been a very tough journey, but I would not change it for anything as with every hard-knock, it is what you learned from the experience that matters.

"I see the company in another 10 years, when I'm perhaps not at the helm, progressing under the people that I've got here.

"I tend to call them my technical geniuses, because each and every one of them has his or her own strength or weakness which creates a very diverse team.

You don't have to look any further than the Forbes name for that

succession. "My two children work for me and I'm incredibly proud of them. Chris is the Operations Director and Joanne the Finance Director."

The pride Jeanette has for her staff extends beyond just her children too, no-one is treated any differently, family member or not.

"Adam Wilson, who came to us and spoke to us when he had Live Evolution, asked: 'how can you help us?'

"He said it was the Chamber who told him to come and speak to the PCL group.

"We'd actually started to move into that area in ourselves. We were already installing screens, and monitors, so it wasn't something that was new to us.

"My son, Chris, and Adam had a conversation and then they approached myself.

"It sounded like a perfect fit and look at him now. I am so proud of this guy when I look at what he's doing with his team, and how he's developing it and he's really engaged with it. He's really embraced the fact that he can do this."

After recently returning to Aberdeen from Pakistan where she is the Scottish Chambers of Commerce Ambassador to Pakistan, there really is no grass growing beneath her feet and she continues to take Scotland and Aberdeen to the world.

"We need to look much further now if we want our economy and people to grow in a world full of opportunity, diversity and culture and this is a great way to start any next business chapter," she added.

While Jeanette's love and passion for PCL continues to grow, it's her governmental role where she sees her future.

"I don't think, in the next five years, I'll be running PCL. I would like to get more into governmental stuff, where I am somebody that's bringing business to Scotland or bringing business to Aberdeen.

"Do I still get excited by technology? You want to bet I do.

"I really enjoy the challenges, I'm always very interested in innovation but I think from where I see myself with the remit for Pakistan, it's something I can really work hard at.

"I would love to be able to see people coming here, putting down roots here, bringing investment here, creating jobs here."

