



# Prisoner Reintegration through Entrepreneurship and Psychology

## Case History – Good as New Cleaning Services<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

Kevin Murphy had over two decades of addiction and criminality before his life began to change. His recovery involved overcoming crippling anxiety and low self-esteem to establishing a successful business. While there were many twists and turns to Kevin's journey, and many big challenges and even bigger self-doubts, he never let this deter him from his vision of living a better life. Kevin now runs a professional cleaning services company that employs three full-time and seven part-time staff who have experienced interactions with the criminal justice system. Kevin's business has grown from strength-to-strength and it is now one of the top social enterprises in Ireland. This is a story about success that was earned through hard work, passion and a strong desire to break from the mistakes of the past.

### **Personal Background**

Kevin grew up in a large family (one of 7 children) to a father, who was a skilled labourer, and a stay-at-home mother. He grew up in the 1980s, where a lot of economic difficulties and impoverishment was evident in his area. Kevin struggled in school with academic study and began to develop self-esteem issues. He began to act up and get in fights with other kids as a way of becoming noticed. Kevin's enterprising nature meant he was regularly looking for ways to make money, from cutting grass to finding lost golf balls at a local golf course and selling them back to golfers. *"So always trying to make a few pounds and ways of making money, and you know, that eventually led into substance abuse."* Kevin began at the age of 12 to smoke cigarettes and cannabis. By his Junior Certificate year (about 14/15 years old), he was abusing alcohol and a short time later he was introduced to heroin. *"It helped me to deal with a lot of my insecurities as a teenager."* Kevin's opiate use quickly led to addiction, which led to criminal activity and his first stint of imprisonment at 18 years of age.

After Kevin was released from prison, the vicious cycle of addiction led him back to reoffending and imprisonment once more. At 23 years old,

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<sup>1</sup> This case history is based on a real person and real events but the identifying information (names of people and places) has been changed to protect the person's identity.

Kevin describes having a "*spiritual awakening*" into the Evangelical Christian faith. From that moment on, he resolved to live his life differently. While serving time in prison, he completed his Leaving Certificate exams and remained off drugs. On release, Kevin quickly became overwhelmed with social anxiety. He dropped out of his college course and struggled to hold down a job. Kevin had reached his lowest point yet when he relapsed and returned to prison. During this time, his relationship with his partner, with whom he shared kids, broke down. When Kevin was next released, he participated in an addiction treatment programme. The centre operated under the Christian ethos, and as Kevin says "*it gave me a place to rekindle that faith and that desire to live differently.*" This was the beginning of a ten-year journey, full of twists and turns, that ultimately led Kevin to rebuild his life and pursue his entrepreneurial ambitions.

### **From Finding a Job to Building a Social Enterprise**

On leaving the treatment centre, Kevin's first priority was to secure a stable income. He pieced together a CV with very limited work history to his name. "*In fairness, my whole previous 10-15 years had been unemployment, you have no work history or no references, plus I'm ticking a box to say I have a criminal conviction.*" He applied for jobs, sent away his CV for consideration, and went from interview to interview. After three months of no success, Kevin began to consider his options other than mainstream employment. "*Self-employment was an option. So, I certainly said OK, what can I do? What business can I develop? And then, for whatever reason, I came up with the idea of valeting cars as an option.*" Kevin undertook a start-your-own business course, and on completion, he was able to qualify for the Back to Work Enterprise Allowance<sup>2</sup>. The charity, Release, connected Kevin to a mentor, a retired business man, who helped him to develop a business plan.

This same mentor was a pivotal figure in helping Kevin to realise his entrepreneurial ambitions and introduced him to the concept of a social enterprise. This is a business operator "*whose main objective is to have a social impact rather than make a profit for their owners or shareholders*"<sup>3</sup>. Kevin instantly bought into the idea: "*So I was really enthusiastic about the*

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<sup>2</sup> An entitlement from the Irish government to encourage people receiving social welfare benefits to become self-employed. The individual can keep a portion of their social welfare payment for a maximum of 2 years, at 100% for the first year and 75% for the second year. <https://www.gov.ie/en/service/f215a4-back-to-work-enterprise-allowance/>

<sup>3</sup> European Commission (n.d.) [https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/proximity-and-social-economy/social-economy-eu/social-enterprises\\_en](https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/proximity-and-social-economy/social-economy-eu/social-enterprises_en)

*whole concept of social enterprise because money doesn't motivate me....it was more, how much impact could it make".* As part of this social mission, it was Kevin's intention to first train in car valeting and then recruit and train-up people with criminal convictions who have similarly struggled to find employment. Through various contacts, Kevin gained access to an unpaid training apprenticeship where he learnt the car valeting trade for six months.

Kevin also began working on a freelance basis for Release, and other organisations, to deliver recovery courses and support people through relapse prevention. He still continued to do all he could to develop his concept for a social enterprise, but then a hurdle arose that changed everything. When Kevin applied for business insurance, he was rejected on the basis of his criminal record. *"That kind of business (car valeting) is a high-risk business for insurance brokers, even if you don't have convictions."* The insurers would only quote Kevin a very high premium and that would make his business unfeasible. *"I was a bit discouraged and disgruntled, you know, after years of trying to develop a social enterprise and being knocked back, you know. So, I had to sit back and reflect on the last few years really at that stage."* That same year marked the beginning of Covid-19 and the stream of funding for Kevin's role had ended and he became unemployed again. It seemed like Kevin's entrepreneurial ambitions were ruined, but it was during this time that the idea for a different social enterprise came into his head.

### **As Good as New Cleaning Services**

After his first idea fell through, Kevin reflected on his learnings. He knew that his next idea needed to be approached more cautiously and with the knowledge he had gained through making mistakes. *"I really felt confident that I knew how to approach the social enterprise in a different way".* Kevin thought of what he had learned about car valeting and of possible ways in which these skills could be made transferable. He thought: *"what if, rather than cleaning cars, my business was cleaning buildings instead"*? The idea for Good as New Cleaning Services was born.

The question of how to fund the setting-up of the business with minimal capital weighed heavily on Kevin's mind. Fortunately, in September 2019, he had secured a position as a Key Worker with the Salvation Army. Kevin

bootstrapped<sup>4</sup> the business by investing his earnings from the Salvation Army into his enterprise. He worked night shifts which allowed him a few extra hours during the day to build his business. He began providing small cleaning services to family and friends at a discount rate, so he could learn how to provide a professional service. He started with the tools and equipment he had available to him and then reinvested the money from initial sales by purchasing better quality and bigger items.

Throughout 2022, Kevin was developing the structure for his not-for-profit social enterprise, creating the business constitution and putting the Board of Management together. By 2023, the business had been registered and insured, and Kevin became full-time employed in running Good as New Cleaning Services. The business has experienced over one full year of trading and has exceeded expectations. The business offers a full suite of cleaning services, including power washing, gutter cleaning, window cleaning and soft washing to commercial and residential properties. There are three full-time staff, including Kevin, and seven part-time staff.

As part of the social mission of Kevin's business, he trains and employs individuals who are distant from the labour market owing to their criminal record. The employees in full-time positions act as mentors and trainers to those working on a part-time basis. Kevin is happy to see these employees either progress to full-time or move outside the business if that should work better for them. *"So not everyone wants to clean, you know... some of course want to move on, then I'm happy to enable that because there's always guys looking for work."* It is vital that Kevin strikes a good balance between taking on and training new employees, and sustaining a highly reputable and professional service for clients.

In addition, Kevin has to be careful not to spread himself too wide with his activities as that could create physical and mental stress. He is often pulled between the office side of managing quotations and administration, and providing practical on-the-job support. Kevin is currently holding interviews for a part-time employee who can offer administrative support to the business. Kevin is also conscious of having a limited cash runway. *"I'm only doing this based on sales, so I'm really only as good as the work that I've lined up for the next couple of weeks."* As such, Kevin is always looking for grants and funding supports to diversify the revenue streams available to the business.

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<sup>4</sup> Bootstrapping is to finance a business with the minimum amount of money, using anything other than debt or external investment. For example, personal savings or initial sales.

Kevin is also conscious of how he sells or advertises the social enterprise to new customers. He recognises the importance of building a relationship of trust and cites an example of one client which was a property management company with a portfolio of expensive properties. *"So, they gave us small jobs at the start, you know a little bit of trust here, a little trust there. They really, really love what we do. That whole thing of us being ex-criminals or whatever isn't even an issue anymore."* Depending on the client, Kevin will choose whether it is good (or not) to lead with the social enterprise mission that underlies Good as New Cleaning Services. Kevin is ultimately very proud of the social mission of his business and believes it highlights the business' openness, transparency and trustworthiness, but some potential clients could be turned away by the prospect of using the services of a company that employs people with criminal convictions. For other clients, they only care about the quality of the service and have no concern about the background of the employees or the mission of the enterprise.

The company's social enterprise status has occasionally opened doors to new business. *"If we weren't a social enterprise, I probably wouldn't have the success that I have now because... people have seen the benefit that it's creating for other people."* Kevin wishes to promote how the enterprise has a two-fold impact as the clients have their buildings cleaned to a high-quality and the workers gain a sense of meaning and pride in their work. However, operating as a social enterprise is not enough to guarantee customers, and so Kevin has had to ensure that Good as New Cleaning Services is as good as, if not superior to, its for-profit competitors. Kevin considers the business' unique selling point to be its closeness to the customer's needs and its reliable, professional service. *"Reputation has been a thing that I've been trying to build with customers and clients, and then that word of mouth has helped us as well."*

## **Running a Social Enterprise – the Challenges and the Opportunities**

Kevin's initial lack of self-belief was a hurdle to his dream of running his own social enterprise. Another major stumbling block identified by Kevin was his lack of business experience and education. This often left Kevin with a severe bout of imposter syndrome. *"I can have doors closed very quickly because they [partners/clients/funders] go 'oh, maybe this is amateur or this is a risk I don't want to get involved in'."* This led Kevin to become very conscious of how he presents himself and his business to potential stakeholders.

After one full year of trading, Kevin better understands the challenges that the business may face as it grows and develops. The first major challenge he anticipates is in hiring and training the right staff. Kevin is conscious that many of the people he wants to recruit lack professional experience and training. This requires training new staff to a level that they can be trusted not to tarnish the enterprise's hard-earned reputation. The second major challenge is in the fluctuating demand in work which can vary week-by-week and month-by-month.

There are, however, many more opportunities that Kevin can see for Good as New Cleaning Services. In his view, the enterprise has emerged at the right time when large corporations are now, more than ever, conscious of their societal impact and are pursuing socially responsible procurement practices. *"The opportunity to really grow and scale up over the next couple of years is really positive."* For Kevin, a growth in business means a growth in the number that can be hired and given a chance to turnaround their lives.

### ***Final Thoughts from Kevin***

Kevin understands the many and varied difficulties people experience when released from prison. In addition to getting a job, people also need to find a place to live and may have to rebuild relationships with their families. They may also struggle with recovery from addiction and may need to avoid certain people whom they knew in the past. It is not an easy journey, but Kevin knows that there are people like himself who want to give people with criminal convictions an opportunity to create a new life for themselves. He also knows that self-employment might be a good option for some people and he would certainly encourage people to seriously consider this possibility as it is very rewarding. No success comes easy, but Kevin knows that the rewards make it worthwhile.