

A new book provides a very personal insight into one woman's journey from troubled childhood to millionaire entrepreneur. **Simon Donohue** speaks to Karen Coleman about the sacrifices of success

Risking everything to make dreams come true

KAREN Coleman could quite deservedly be described as a solid gold survivor. In spite of several suicide attempts and a terrible start to life which threw mishap after mishap her way, the single mum has gone on to build a business which gives her an estimated fortune of £17m.

Today Karen is enjoying a purple patch, with a new man in her life and a successful company, Apex Nursing and Care Services, boasting nine branches and 4,500 registered staff.

"You can put away the handkerchief," she says. "Things are pretty good at the moment. But it hasn't always been plain sailing."

Now 48, Karen, whose business is based in Berrage, says that many of her problems can be traced back to her experiences with a mother who wasn't particularly maternal and a step-father who treated her badly throughout her childhood.

By the age of 16, she had had a child of her own, a daughter, from a short-lived relationship which she now admits was an attempt to create "a normal family unit".

Tragically, the youngster went to live with her father and his family just a couple of years later, and Karen has not seen her since.

"It was for the best because I was pretty messed up," she recalls. "I was off the Richter scale. I'd tried to kill myself two or three times and I didn't know what I was doing. I did try and get in touch around five years ago but I never heard anything."

Karen's relationship with the father of her second child, Gareth, broke down because he was physically abusive towards her.

And it was only in later life, the insecurities of her teenage years behind her, that Karen met and married another man with whom she would start Apex.

No longer together, but still friends, Karen says she has finally managed to put the psychological scars of her early years behind her.

Most importantly, the insecurities which left her desperate "to please people" have in part helped her turn Apex into a massive success story, paving the way for a happy and secure financial future for both Karen and her son, now 27 and an employee at Apex himself.

But even running the business has presented Karen with some problems, resulting in a nervous breakdown which she blames on her inability to let go.

"I didn't think that anyone knew better than me when it came to my business," she adds. "I now have a fantastic and talented team around me and they make sure that I delegate



some of my responsibilities. I even consider that to be a strengthening experience now."

Karen was bringing up her son single-handedly and working in the care profession when she came up with the idea of Apex Nursing and Care Services, an agency offering the kind of training provision and quality of service which simply wasn't commonplace in the industry at the time.

She opened for business above a takeover in 1992 with assistance from the government's Enterprise Allowance Scheme and has built a company with nine branches and 4,500 registered staff.

Today she is a paper millionaire and loves luxury travel but says that being an entrepreneur isn't only about the money.

"It takes a certain kind of risk-taking personality," she adds. "If it was easy, then everybody would be doing it. A lot of people have a boundary which they are not willing to step over."

"It took 10 years of my life to get where I am, with no holidays and very little time with my child. He's 27 now and has a great career ahead of him with my business but you don't get that time back. In the early days it was simply about surviving. Now it's doing the best job we can."

However, there is one thing that Karen likes about the money.

"I'm able to provide for myself and my larger field of friends of family and I enjoy that," she adds.

"I'm not constantly worrying about paying the gas bill. Trust me. As a single parent, I know what that feels like."

Karen is just one of the "case studies" in a new book about self-made millionaires by Malcolm McClean and the businessman was inspired to write about entrepreneurs while enjoying a night out with friends in Alderley Edge.

As more and more punters pulled up a chair, he came to realise that a relatively tiny area of Cheshire could lay claim to enough material for a book examining the make-up of a self-made millionaire.

The fruits of his labour - *To The Edge: Entrepreneurial Secrets from Britain's Richest Square Mile* - is now in print.

McClean, 50, and a veteran of no fewer than five entrepreneurial ventures, says the project provided him with insights into what makes a successful business person.

"The common theme is that they are people who are willing to take large scale personal risks, and some people can't do that," McClean suggests. "These people seem willing to risk everything, including their sanity."

McClean believes that other common factors include a talent for creative thinking and problem solving coupled along with a never-say-the approach.

"They have a certain tenacity about them and a tremendous work ethic," he adds.

Perhaps surprisingly, McClean says that most of the people he spoke while researching the book were driven by motivating factors other than money.

"It's not about the money. The money is a by-product of what these



EDGE OF GREATNESS

Karen Coleman, above left, is now worth £17m after a lifetime of struggle and is featured in a new book on entrepreneurs by writer Malcolm McClean, above

"They are people who are willing to take large scale personal risks. They seem willing to risk everything, including their sanity"

people do. All they want is to build a successful business.

"They are so passionate about it that it has been described as almost a sickness."

As much as it is an investigation into entrepreneurial spirit, the book is also a celebration of some of the lesser reported traits of Alderley Edge.

"There is a richness of experience, talent, acumen, attitude, enterprise, tenacity and grittiness, which if you could bottle it, would be an immensely powerful source of guidance and inspiration for any would-be entrepreneur," McClean adds.

"To the Edge bottles the essence of the self-made entrepreneur and enterpriser, by looking where nobody has bothered to look before."

» *To The Edge - Entrepreneurial Secrets From Britain's Richest Square Mile* is written by Malcolm McClean and published by Capstone, priced £12.99.