Obituary | Fine work for women

Steve Shirley countered sexism by founding her own company

The refugee, entrepreneur and philanthropist died on August 9th, aged 91

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SHE LEARNED the ropes pretty fast at Computer Developments Ltd. In 1959, she had to. Not so much the coding, with paper and pencil at her desk, until it could be punched up and sent to the computer; to anyone as fond of maths as she was, that was just fun. No, she also learned to stand against the wall in case a male colleague tried to pinch her bottom. And if she wanted to make a sensible point at a meeting, and was bluntly told it was nothing to do with her, she had to silently accept it. The day after that particular slight, however, she handed in her notice and decided to create a company herself. One just for women.

Stephanie Shirley knew exactly what she wanted. A company employing university-educated women, who were otherwise laid off when they got married or became pregnant. A job, coding and inputting data, which they could do from home, with flexible hours and on piecework, to allow for looking after children or elderly parents. A company without the top-down "Do this, jump here" attitude of male bosses, but instead working in teams, eventually with shared ownership. She called it "Freelance Programmers", and it would sell software.

That in itself caused male sniggering. No one would buy software in 1962; it was given away free with hardware. And of course no one would buy it from a woman. Try again, dear. (You could always recognise ambitious women, she said, because their heads were flat from being patted patronisingly.) Nonetheless, she started her company from her dining table with a mere £6 in capital. By the 1990s, when it was floated, it employed 8,500 people; by 2000 it was valued at $3bn. Its management-control protocols had been adopted by NATO, and it had programmed the black-box flight recorder for Concorde. As for the woman with her back against the wall, by 2017 she was a dame and a Companion of Honour, both for services to IT and for giving away the fortune she had made.

Much of that success lay in cunning. Because married female graduates were

recruited, 297 were women. She disguised the scattered, domestic character of her workforce by offering fixed prices. When male clients called, she played a tape recording of efficient typing down the line to suggest a busy office, not her kitchen. Wiliest of all, she began to sign off letters to potential clients not as "Stephanie" but as "Steve". That was her family nickname, one she liked much better, and responses shot up when she began to use it. So did her delight when, having arranged a meeting, she would walk into a room full of men who were expecting a he, not a she. When they had recovered from assuming she had come to make their tea, they increasingly agreed to do business with her.

This was not the first time she had changed her name. Before she married Derek Shirley in 1959, she was Stephanie Brook. But before that she was Vera Buchthal, who had arrived at Liverpool Street station in 1939, five years old and crying for her lost favourite doll, as one of 10,000 mostly Jewish children brought to England from Germany and Austria under the Kindertransport programme. That start in life marked her ever afterwards. Because kind people had saved her, she was going to make very sure that hers was a life worth saving. She would fritter none of it away.

That was why she snubbed the chance of university, though she was so brilliant at mathematics that she had to go to a boys' school to study it properly. Instead she took a degree in it after six years of evening classes, while she worked at Dollis Hill Research Centre. (Another personal ambition was never to be poor again.) At Dollis Hill she helped devise electronic telephone exchanges and worked on Ernie, the computer that randomly chose the winning holders of Premium Bonds. At CDL she found even more rewarding work, developing software for the ICT 1301, one of the first mass-produced transistor computers. She created and moulded "Flossie" almost as if it were a child.

Coping with a real child, though, could be much more problematic. She seemed to have perfected the brand-new idea of work-life balance (helped, in her case, by a wonderfully encouraging husband). But it rapidly became impossible. Her only child Giles, at first a contented baby, suddenly at two and a half stopped talking and became unmanageable. He was diagnosed as severely autistic. At puberty he

boomed.

The tragedy of Giles convinced her that money was no use if it simply sat there. It had to be spread about. Before she retired in 1993 she therefore gave most of her stake in the company to her staff, ultimately making 70 millionaires. With much of the rest she gradually set up centres where autistic young people like Giles could be cared for, understood, even prepared for work, in an atmosphere as loving as she had tried to give him. The first, a supported living centre called Autism at Kingwood, opened in 1994 with Giles as the first resident. He died only four years later of an epileptic seizure, but he was happy there.

Most of her money went to autism causes, including Autistica and the National Autistic Society. But she did not forget her first love, computing. In 2001 she became a founding donor of the Oxford Internet Institute, which was set up to consider its social and ethical implications. Too many people, she believed, were afraid of new tech. She embraced it wholeheartedly, AI and all; so should they. The only thing to fear was wasting time, for who knew what opportunities might open up tomorrow? One day she had been playing in Vienna, the next on a train, the next on a ship to a new land; one day the butt of a roomful of men, the next her own master, undaunted, and climbing to the top of the tree. ■

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Obituary

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