

# Pots of gold

David Wright, co-owner of 2018 Nursery Group of the Year winner Paint Pots, tells **Annette Rawstrone** about the chain's ethos, both in Southampton and beyond

**A**fter the euphoria of Paint Pots Nurseries winning *Nursery World's* Nursery Group of the Year 2018, director David Wright was brought back down to earth on the following Monday when he was 'summoned to unblock a particularly unsavoury nursery toilet'.

The family-run nursery group was started in their Southampton family home by David's wife Anna in 1993 with a small pre-school. Despite the group having expanded to six nurseries, three pre-schools and two after-school clubs, the couple and their son Joseph remain very much hands-on directors. All three are Early Years Teachers, have spent time as nursery practitioners and managers and still work in their settings if needed. Their company's ethos is based on the underlying values in the Paint Pots Pyramid: Love, Laughter and Learning.

'We feel we have something special to share. Expansion enables us to do more of what we believe we're good at but we've never had a business or strategic plan focused on growth. Anna is the more entrepreneurial of us and I'm happy to go along with her. We look at each opportunity as it presents itself. We have to see potential and for it to feel right,' explains Mr Wright.

'Our overriding strategy to date has been to stay local to our area. We recognise that expansion beyond Southampton brings with it a new paradigm of logistics. We're very much involved day-to-day in the nurseries, we're visible to parents and supportive of our staff team – it's not easy to know every staff member when there are 160 of them but we try to do so.

'We feel that our presence matters. If we had distant settings it would be much more difficult to physically be there. We like to use the services of local businesses who we know, trust



and have built a relationship with. It's what works for us.'

Mr Wright adds that working with the local authority and other agencies in Southampton helps with the efficient running of the group. 'It can be a challenge when you're dealing with different funding rules and methods of engagement, whereas we have people and systems that we know in our relatively smaller unitary authority,' he says.

Paint Pots is now the largest childcare provider in the city. Mr Wright muses that there may be a time when there are too many Paint Pots settings in the area, but he obviously doesn't feel that limit has been reached – it opened a second out-of-school club in September.

'We've built a reputation in the area and much of our repeat business is through word of mouth,' he says. 'You can pay for lots of marketing but can't beat someone saying that their child attended Paint Pots and loved it.'

## SAME BUT DIFFERENT

The group's name was chosen to symbolise the unique potential within every child to paint their own 'picture'. Paint Pots operates settings

**Paint Pots' co-founder Anna Wright (left), who started the business in 1993**

in both affluent and disadvantaged areas of the city. Individual managers are entrusted to operate their setting in the best way that meets the needs of each community, meaning that while what each Paint Pots setting offers may differ according to the demographics of their cohort, building, team and location, they all have the same underpinning values and ethos.

'We adapt to meet the needs of each community. What happens each day and how each setting is organised reflects its context rather than being constrained to a "one size fits all" corporate model. Paint Pots' unique selling point is homeliness, and that means ensuring all children feel comfortable in their own space,' says Mr Wright.

'All of our settings have the same underpinning values and ethos, practice and procedures and expectations. But what they look like and the day-to-day activities and routines offered depend on the community they serve, the children and the team there. Settings will do things differently depending on the cohort. We want to empower our managers to run the settings to meet the context and needs of the

**Paint Pots director Joseph Wright**





The group's David Wright

community. For example, one of our pre-schools has 17 different languages spoken so we try to recruit teams that relate to its children and their families.'

Some of Paint Pots' team have been with the company for 18 years, others may have joined as apprentices, left to try somewhere new and then returned to the group. Recently the group has experienced an increased turnover in staff, which Mr Wright recognises as 'symptomatic of the industry as a whole. It is difficult right now for early years providers to compete with the wages offered by other sectors and employers, including local schools.'

While this is a challenge, it does still provide opportunities. 'We see the benefits of taking on new people. Focusing exclusively on the Paint Pots way can make us insular,' he explains. 'We need cross-fertilisation of ideas and challenge. We are open to people saying there's a better way of doing things. We need to keep ourselves fresh in order to develop.'

Rather than focus solely on qualification levels, Paint Pots puts great emphasis on an applicant's character. 'The men and women working with our children need to have "it". They need to love children, find them fascinating and want to be involved in their lives,' says Mr Wright. 'Children have an instinct for knowing those who have a genuine interest and those who just regard it as a job. A prerequisite for our team members is that they all have to have a heart for children – and that they are lovely people.'

## THE EXTRA MILE

The directors see their remit as going beyond their settings. 'Paint Pots is a business. It provides a living for us and our team but we also see what

we do as a vocation and believe that all children are equally deserving of high-quality care and to be valued; this applies as much to the children we have encountered in the Kibera slum in Nairobi as to those living here,' says Mr Wright.

Both David and Anna are trustees of New Life Home Trust UK, which rescues abandoned babies in Kenya. Next year they are taking a team from Paint Pots to volunteer in baby rescue centres there. They have also researched and connected with early years organisations worldwide and have taken staff members to experience early years practice in Austria, Belgium, Spain and Sweden.

David is England's national representative to the World Forum Foundation on Early Care and Education, while Anna sits on the local schools forum.

'There is a temptation to stay inward-looking, to consider only our context. Our experience of being part of the World Forum has broadened our perspective,' Mr Wright says. 'It has been humbling to hear from people who have pulled orphans from earthquake-stricken buildings in Nepal or who talk about their work in refugee camps in Syria. It is important to understand our connection to the world and to build our network. Hearing from colleagues across the world, working in different contexts, is enriching. It makes us realise we have a lot to learn, adds to our experience and informs our practice.'

David and Anna help children and families in their local area through their own charity Families First Southampton, which employs an outreach worker to support dads, kinship carers and children across the city. Families First is working with city leaders to discuss how to make Southampton an ACE (Adverse Childhood Experiences) aware city. They also support local families by offering short-term respite care in their role as volunteers for Safe Families for Children.

'When running an early years group, some days are wonderful, others more challenging, but it's our opportunity to make a difference in children's lives that motivates us,' says Mr Wright. 'We would probably assess ourselves as more people-than business-minded – parental feedback often recognises that we put the children first before profit – but we're trying to build a legacy.' ■

# Interview



## Danielle Butler

of Tommies Childcare was named Nursery Operations/Regional Manager of the Year at the 2018 Nursery World Awards

### ■ WHAT ATTRACTED YOU TO THE EARLY YEARS?

I always wanted to work with children and completed a degree with the intention of doing a PGCE. However, a summer job in a local pre-school made me realise that I wanted to work with early years children. I've worked in a number of day nurseries and started working for Tommies Childcare in 2015 as an area manager. I was promoted to operations director the following year.

### ■ WHAT DOES YOUR ROLE INVOLVE?

My role covers operational aspects, HR, marketing and finance. It's a hands-on job and I still complete regular visits of each of our seven nursery settings. I feel this is important because it's helped me to build strong relationships with our managers and our employees. I continue to be a line manager to some of our nursery managers. I also lead our monthly managers' meetings and training programme. I work closely with our head office team, including with our finance director.

### ■ WHAT DO YOU LIKE BEST ABOUT YOUR JOB?

It's the relationships with the team that I enjoy most about my role. It's very rewarding to see those I work with develop in their own careers.

### ■ ARE THERE ANY CHALLENGES?

For Tommies Childcare, and the early years sector as a whole, recruitment and retention remains a concern. Gaining individuals who are passionate about their job is always difficult. We've seen a vast reduction in quality candidates wishing to enter the sector over the past two years in particular and this has placed incredible pressures on our business both operationally and financially. However, we continue to try new things to attract employees and subsequently retain them.

### ■ HOW DO YOU ENCOURAGE STAFF ENGAGEMENT?

When I joined, there had been little focus on employee engagement. We've listened to our employees and truly invested in them through a benefits package. One thing we found out was that the head office was feared rather than seen as a supportive function so we've worked hard to ensure our team are now approachable and personable. Last year we introduced our own internal training programme and this has enabled our employees to feel valued and inspired.

### ■ WHAT ARE YOUR FUTURE AIMS?

I've celebrated three years at Tommies Childcare this year but we're still at the beginning of our journey. We'll continue to develop our benefits for our employees and support their careers within Tommies Childcare through opportunities. We also aim to acquire two further settings outside Coventry and Warwickshire by 2020, which will be the next step in our journey.