



2001
ALUMNI
STORY

MSc STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP



Fay Selvan

CEO, The Big Life group

Since graduating with an MSc in Strategic Leadership from the University of Salford in 2001, Fay Selvan has been giving opportunities to those with the least, through her social enterprise The Big Life Group. The group offers primary healthcare, self-help, childcare, family support, employment and training to ordinary people from Liverpool to Grimsby, and resulted in Fay winning the Social Enterprise Leader Award in 2011.

FAY'S STORY

I started with a small health and wellbeing centre, but my course at Salford was the turning point that helped me to see the direction for the group more clearly. I wanted to think about how we could really use the social enterprise model so we weren't reliant on that constant grind of going after a national lottery bid, getting it, delivering the project for three years, then funding coming to an end and having to find new funding, it's awful.

We chose when we were forming the group to say that our mission was 'to change the world'. That was pre-Barak Obama saying it, so I think he stole it off us!

Now, the group employs around 500 staff, and is driven by the notion to empower people to help themselves. My proudest moments are seeing service users thrive. One of our staff started as a venter of the Big Issue, and now they're delivering our services in one of the towns. He is suffering quite serious physical health problems, but now has a sustainable family and a home and a job, and has just completely turned his life around.

I would advise graduates entering the social enterprise sector to use their own personal experiences to empathise with others and help break down barriers. You have to be quite brave and courageous to talk about the issues you've dealt with yourself, but for an organisation like ours that's something that has great value. Having a thick skin is also vital, because people do behave badly, they kick off... and you have to be able to go 'that's not about me, that's about where they're at in their lives'.

If you're looking for something exciting, something to be passionate about and that you can say you've made a difference, then this is the world to come into.

My line of work can be a great place for women in leadership roles, because the social sector is very female dominated, it's slightly different to if you were in a traditional business area. Being able to tailor my work around my needs as a single parent was fantastic.

Staff satisfaction at the group is high, with an impressive 98% recommending us as an employer. I've created an organisation that can be more flexible, particularly to women or carers. It used to be about children but now it's also about ageing parents.

When looking back at my time at Salford, I recall the diverse backgrounds of my peers and their shared experiences that helped them to form a tight-knit group. We always used to think three days sat in a room with professors would be multifying as there were only 8 of us, but it was great. There was a very mixed, varied group but it was great to see the connections.