



Birthing a business

FRUSTRATED WITH THE LACK OF CHOICE FOR REGIONAL PARENTS-TO-BE AROUND THEIR BIRTHING OPTIONS AND PRENATAL EDUCATION, TAMWORTH MIDWIFE EDWINA SHARROCK CREATED BIRTH BEAT, OFFERING ONLINE COURSES ACROSS AUSTRALIA.

The conception of her company was a classic story, says Edwina Sharrock, founder of Birth Beat — working out of friends' living rooms and on dining tables in the New South Wales town of Tamworth.

Sharrock, who grew up in Tamworth, studied nursing at the University of Sydney and began working at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. She had planned to study midwifery there when her father became ill and she returned home. With her plans changed, Sharrock enrolled in studies in Tamworth.

"It was the best way to study midwifery, because I was able to go to Armidale, Inverell and Moree and spend time in those hospitals. When you're learning in country hospitals it's often a very small team, so the student gets to do so much more," says Sharrock.

Settling down in Tamworth and starting her own family, Sharrock, who has daughter Polly (aged six) and son Theo (aged three), was disappointed when the local maternity unit closed down at the private hospital.

"Just because we live in the bush doesn't mean we shouldn't have access to and choice around our healthcare," says Sharrock. "Our choices were taken away and that made me cranky. I was complaining about it one afternoon and my husband said to me, 'Well, why don't you do something about it?' I couldn't build a maternity wing, but what I could do was provide the very best antenatal classes — and that's how we started Birth Beat."

Initially offering courses in Tamworth only, Sharrock had customers travel great distances to attend. One pair came from Cobar, travelling 500 kilometres each way. Sharrock began researching maternity and healthcare options in regional and remote parts of Australia.

"I found out that 41 per cent of maternity units have closed in the last 15 years in Australia, mainly in rural, regional and remote areas. So we've taken away this access for women in the country to get educated, and it's so important to be educated for birth because then you're not fearful. It's all

about removing the fear," says Sharrock.

It was then, in 2017, that she decided to take her courses online, signalling the beginning of her start-up journey. Birth Beat was soon recognised by Commonwealth Bank with an Innovation Award, then as a Google Regional Online Hero. From here, Sharrock heard about the HCF Catalyst program, in which HCF helps businesses that are taking innovations in healthcare which align with the company's values.

"I was really lucky to get a place on that program," says Sharrock, although hard work and grit clearly played major roles in ensuring Birth Beat became one of just 10 companies selected from 300 applicants to take part.

"I literally had to pull an all-nighter and build a pitch deck — I had no idea what a pitch deck was — and then get it to them within 48 hours. The presentation was like *Shark Tank* — it was the most nerve-wracking thing, and I'd got up at 4.30 in the morning and driven from Tamworth to Sydney."

The 12-week accelerator course has an assigned expert in residence for each business. Sharrock feels privileged to be "hanging out with some pretty smart people doing incredible things in business and the health industry."

Though the pace has been gruelling, the mum-of-two acknowledges the support of her community. "All my friends and family have rallied around me," says Sharrock, who advises anyone considering a start-up to just do something.

"That's the thing in start-ups — people worry that they don't have it perfect or that the website isn't 100 per cent. Just get it out there, because you're never going to have it perfect," says Sharrock. "Also: talk to your market."

Looking to the future, Sharrock says she has a greater understanding of her potential customers and is now looking at B2B opportunities with big companies to provide antenatal education to its staff members, many of whom are scattered all over the country. She has also registered birthbeat.com.

"So we're ready to go global — but I'm not in any mad rush to do that!" **AusBiz.**



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