



power of one

‘Let’s start with the sob story. My father left home when I was three; my mum died when I was 11. Orphaned, my brother, sister and I were dumped on the wicked witch of the east, the woman my dad had run off with. My mum had remarried an un-discharged bankrupt who came after my mum’s home. It killed her.’

his story has to get better, hasn’t it? This piece could be titled ‘The Making of a Self-Made Man’, because in terms of dragging yourself up, facing adversity and just making it happen, it’s a lesson to everybody. This is the story of David Gilbert of Powerdesk, told to us with a twinkle in the eye, not a glimmer of self pity about the bad times, not a hint of self-satisfaction about the good times; all told with a glass of something invigorating in his hand.

‘The day after mum died, my evil stepfather chucked us out, all our stuff in the garden, aged 11, 13 and 16. Dad made us welcome, but he didn’t know us. We were now in Edenbridge, and I went to a new school aged 12, weeks behind everyone. For five years my journey to school involved a two hour cycle ride, then a two hour commute on a stopping train. Leaving school at 4.10, I had to run to get the 4.20 – with the cycling and running I sure was fit!

‘At 18 I met a girl, and before I knew it she was pregnant – so there we were, living in a caravan by the railway line, mid-’60’s, bringing up a family – dreaming of having a wooden front door just like everyone else.





▶▶▶▶▶‘So I got a job: as a statistician at Nestlé’s in Croydon, on £47 a month. That wasn’t enough money for us, so I had two other jobs: paying-out on the Tote at Brighton greyhounds three nights a week, and digging ditches at the weekend. The farmer paid me £4 for every chain I dug – that’s 22 yards by 4ft by 3ft. All this money meant we were able to move into a cottage on the outskirts of Tunbridge Wells, £5 a week rent. It had no internal sanitation and a tin bath – but it had a wooden front door and a garden and we loved it.

‘Nestlé reckoned I had the gift of the gab and put me on an ‘executive training course’. I got a company car, an Austin A40, and I was in heaven. Even better, when my evil stepfather died, his children felt sorry for my brother, sister and me and gave us the old family home to be sold off. With my third share of £4,000 I was able to buy a house in East Sussex and life was looking good.

‘With the wisdom of youth I left Nestlé to join an old school friend in his dad’s business – selling aerosols out of a van, to garages. I thought that because I could sell Nescafé and Cross & Blackwell to grocers, I could sell. So I went to garages, asked them how many cases they wanted to buy, and they told me to get lost.

‘So I told the guy at the Labour Exchange I was a red hot salesman – and the only job they had for me was as a project manager for Exquisite Lingerie in Oxford Circus.

‘My boss and mentor was Jim Songhurst, an ex fighter pilot just like Biggles. Jim asked me ‘What do you know about women’s underwear?’ ‘Only what I’ve taken off other people,’ I replied. It was a huge jump in salary to £1,700 a year in a sensational job. Apart from making the underwear for the likes of Dorothy Perkins, GUS and Biba (our factory employed 600), there was the bonus of the photo shoots when a dozen girls would come in and take their clothes off.

My eyes were on stalks! But after a couple of years I realised the commute was too long, and I got a job as factory manager for an antique furniture restoration company in Sussex, doubling my salary to £3,500.

‘I knew zip about running a factory but blagged the job by implying I had a lot to do with managing those 600 lingerie machinists. We restored furniture, put it in 20ft containers and shipped it to the States. It was a great job, great fun, great money, although the owner was really too hard to cope with and upset most of the workforce.

‘It was here I started to learn what I do now. I became fascinated with wood, and was amazed by the skills of the cabinet makers. The microchip just started to enter my consciousness. I had bought a pocket calculator – it was an extraordinary thing with red LED display and it could calculate a square root without the need for log tables. Brilliant! I wanted to computerise the antiques company, learned everything about programming...this was four years before Bill Gates started Microsoft. I wrote the programmes that replaced hundreds of bits of paper for all the unique pieces – and in two minutes we could now do the work that took the statistics department a week. This was the birth of my love of computers and furniture.

‘By now I was also Sales Director, travelling all over the world, and effectively running the business. In 1984 I decided to go it alone, my new company was doing exactly the same thing – buying, restoring and exporting furniture. Most of my customers followed me – and my old boss hated me with a passion.

‘We were really successful through the ‘80’s, making profits, and even opened a store in Florida. One day I was visited by the buyer for a major US retailer with over 70,000 employees, and thousands of ▶▶▶▶



»»stores – one in every mall in the USA. We got the order to make their English retro-style furniture for the next few years. I got the order and big cheques up front.

‘Then one day I had my ‘eureka’ moment. I was sitting in my office at my twin-ped desk working on my Gateway computer. I got up to get something from the filing cabinet and tripped over the wires. I sat for a moment and realised that in every desk in the world there is a void in the back of the pedestal. I sent my desk to the workshop, took the top off, built the computer into the void, and put the floppy drive behind the pedestal front. That was the birth of Powerdesk.

‘I’d heard NEC had made TFT motherglass – glass with embedded transistors to form a display. I bought one, made the world’s first flat screen monitor for a PC in 1994, and we exhibited the Powerdesk at the Windows 95 Show.

‘We caused a sensation. A little furniture company from Lewes got £60 million worth of enquiries in three days. We were swamped with requests from the likes of Reuters and British Gas for our £3,500 desk. But the first desk we actually sold was to David Young, the Cabinet Minister and Chairman of Cable and Wireless. One thing led to another, and before long I was working with patent lawyers, Barclays Asset Management, Peel Hunt stockbrokers; we set out to raise £10 million, Lord Young became chairman and we took a 42,000 sq ft factory. We got involved in serious conversations with Holiday Inn about putting a Powerdesk in every one of their rooms in Europe – which started with a £2.5 million order for 600 Powerdesks. Our in-room technology partners went to Cazenove to raise monster millions based on projected orders from the likes of Hilton, Marriott and the rest. We beefed up the board with heavy hitters from Cadbury and Parker Pen. Powerdesk plc was ready to rock...and I’m thinking bingo!

‘Then at that precise moment in 2000, NASDAQ fell through the floor, the dotcom bubble burst – and we as a ‘technology’ stock couldn’t raise the money. What did the experience teach me? Never to do it based on bank finance again! What I knew though was that my product and concept were good. It’s absurd that in the 21st century people are still going to two different stores (a furniture store and a computer store) and putting the PC metal box on or under a desk. There are about 1.5 billion computers used daily, with the technology and the furniture fighting each other for space. Until now nobody has cracked the nut as to why, but it’s mostly to do with the computer companies’ obsession with what’s inside the PC, and their lack of interest (until recently) with how it’s presented. My concept transforms a PC into a perfect PC, by making it invisible, unbreakable, unstealable, takes no user-space, is aesthetically pleasing and ergonomically sound – the world’s first full remote control for a PC – and my ambition is to change the way the world goes computing!

‘It took two years and a lot of money to develop, and we now have the world’s first PC remote control. Right now I’m busy working with Graeme Horne of Katang to develop Intelligent Furniture – a tailored upmarket home workstation range targeted at a major High Street retailer. In fact, we’re concentrating on two markets – the other being the education sector, in which we are currently in discussion with five UK partners. We’re also looking to partner with a major US company in the education sector, with the aim being to market Intelligent Furniture products across the States. It’s an exciting time!’

What started with what David Gilbert called his ‘sob story’, ends with anything but. For sheer enthusiasm, creativity and entrepreneurial drive David takes some beating...don’t put it past him to achieve that ambition of ‘changing the face of computing’ ●