

Lessons in life and business from Margaret Hirsch

Margaret Hirsch's rise to success has not been easy. From spending some of her childhood in foster care and working in a hairdressing salon at age 12, to being fired for being pregnant and starting her first business with just R900, her resilience has been instrumental to the empire she's built.



Margaret Hirsch

In 2013, the co-founder of Hirsch's Homestores won her first Lifetime Achiever Award in the Entrepreneur of the Year competition, sponsored by Sanlam and Business Partners. Kobus Engelbrecht, long-time judge of the competition and marketing head: Sanlam Business Market, says he's in awe of Hirsch, her business acumen and work ethic. He believes she's one of many women entrepreneurs shifting the business landscape in South Africa.

"We're seeing more and more women entering the business landscape and becoming business owners, forging sustainable enterprises to foster financial independence. Nothing should hold women back from entering business; especially, business sectors historically dominated by men. The more successful business owners we have in this country, the better for our economy," says Engelbrecht.

Here, Hirsch shares her story of how she built her successful business from the ground up.

What's the story behind Hirsch's?

My father died when I was ten and I saw what happened when my mother was left in a world where she was unable to cope financially, emotionally and practically. She had two children to support, no money and no other form of support. I had to temporarily go into foster care as she was facing abject poverty, earning just R30 per month when she started her first job.

It was then that I realised there had to be another way. Why should I settle for less when I could have everything? I realised that abundance was out there and I had to find a way to get it so I started working at age 12, washing hair in a salon.

I got married at age 21 and, when five years later I became pregnant with our first child, my boss fired me and my husband decided to start his own business.

My philosophy has always been that it's not what happens to you, but how you choose to react to it is what really matters. My husband and I chose to learn and grow from what happened to us so we pooled our resources – all R900 – and started our first home appliance repair and maintenance shop. And the rest, as they say, is history. Today, Hirsch's is a multi-million rand business with 22 branches across the country and over 1,000 employees.

What are some of the biggest challenges you've faced as a businesswoman in SA?

I don't really think of myself as a woman, but more a child of the universe - I think we all have similar challenges, but our self-esteem and our sense of self-worth separate the winners from the losers.

I was fired for being pregnant, which obviously would never happen to a man. However, this was the best thing that could have happened to me as that day I decided I would never work for a boss again and I never have.

How do you stay ahead of changes in the retail space?

Retail is changing rapidly and as a business owner, you have to be ahead of the trend. Our first major change came in 1994 when we didn't know what was going to happen to the country, so we empowered all our staff and started many of them in their own businesses. It started with selling our delivery vehicles to our drivers at reduced prices with lengthy terms of payment so they could start their own businesses, then spread from there to other staff members.

It kept escalating, to the point we had this massive group of people working for themselves, but under our umbrella. The system worked so well we have continued to do this and we even have the children (who are now adults) of our employees working for us.



What are the barriers to starting a business?

There are no barriers to starting one's own business. The only stumbling block is the fact that you have to work extremely hard, 20 hours a day, 7 days a week and 363 days a year (we only take Christmas and New Year's Day off). If you really want to be successful you need to be totally driven to making your business work and only when it is completely up and running can you have the odd indulgence.

Do you think it's a myth that women cannot balance motherhood and running a business?

Women can definitely balance the two but it's not easy. When my children were small, I worked from home. Later, when they went to school, they would come and spend the afternoons in the shop, which I wasn't sure was good at the time, but in the end it was the best thing that could have happened. They learnt the business from when they were tiny and today they are both extremely successful in their own right.

My children love to tell tales of how their mother was often not there for them, forgot them at tennis lessons, etc. but at the end of the day, I was able to provide them with the best possible schooling and give them everything they wanted.

What advice do you have for other aspiring female business owners in South Africa?

Know that you are enough. You are perfect as you are. And your job is to make the best of your life.

You can work for a boss and make a living or you can work for yourself and make a fortune: the choice is yours. If you want to just eat, sleep and watch days of other people's lives on TV then you do the former, however, if you want to live the life of your dreams, change many people's lives for the better and leave a legacy, you do the latter.

Can you share some of the ways you empower other women?

I'm very passionate about the Girls With Dignity Project, which helps provide sanitary pads to girls so they don't miss

school. I also teach them about money and about how to present themselves so they have the best chance of gainful employment.

I know how much of a boost receiving two Lifetime Achievement awards in business and entrepreneurship gave me, so I set up the Margaret Hirsch Women in Business Achiever of the Year award to give that recognition to other women. I host monthly meetings in all stores and also have an annual gala dinner which all the winners attend.

I also work closely with many other women's groups including Lionesses of Africa, which empowers 600,000 women entrepreneurs across the continent. It's an honour to help these women to grow their businesses from start-up to sustainable business venture. There's a growing message of women helping women which this organisation embodies - 'our motto is empowered women empower women.'

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>