

THE BIG QUESTIONS

Ever wondered what Northern Ireland business figures did before reaching the top, or what has been their greatest act of financial extravagance? This week, Ross Gunning, joint Managing Director of overseas property investment experts, Property Finders NI answers the Big Questions.

What is your career background?

I had a grammar school education up to the summer of 1986 and then moved on to the University of Life. Following school I spent several years in the engineering and construction industry before moving into a career of sales and marketing in 1995, eventually working as a sales manager for a company that represented Siemens in Ireland. I then spent eight years running their exterior lighting and traffic management division. In 2002 I took my first step into property investment and have worked in this industry ever since.

What was your first job and how much were you paid?

I am not sure you could call it a job, but the first work that earned me money was when I was 12 years old - I used to search for lost golf balls on the course and surrounding woodland and sell them to the members at the clubhouse. It was great fun - it was a sort of mini business but I didn't really see it like that then. I used to get anything from 20p to £1 per ball depending on the quality, it probably worked out around £20 to £30 a day - I was delighted. It was a great way of earning pocket money.

Have you ever had a job you hated?

Looking back over the years I must say I've enjoyed most jobs that I've undertaken. However, I remember during the summer of 1994 when I needed some extra cash to pay for my car insurance, I volunteered for a one-off industrial kitchen cleaning job which paid £300 for a weekend's work. This was the hardest I have ever had to work and certainly not that enjoyable.

What was your first success in business?

When starting out in property my first goal was to build a million pound property portfolio, with property prices starting at around 60k at this time it was difficult and a hard slog but I managed to achieve this through careful planning and sticking to my own investment strategy.

What business figure(s) do you most admire?

Warren Buffet, one of the world's top investors. He is also the world's second richest man, he amassed \$52 billion over 52 years. Very impressive. I am not sure if he began his career by collecting golf balls but he certainly set the standards for people working the financial markets.

Have you ever made a big mistake in business and if so what did you learn from it?

Earlier in my career I personally invested in property and made important decisions without carrying enough research on the projects. Due to my own experiences I have been able to implement some strict due diligence procedures within Property Finders NI that offer a level of protection and security for our clients on our chosen investments.

What is the most valuable piece of business advice you have ever been given?

When I started in property investing six years ago a local businessman told me that it wasn't larger brains or a stronger work ethic that separated those that had made significant sums from property but those who clearly defined their goals and implement strategy to reach them.

What one item would you take with you to a desert island and why?

Castaway starring Tom Hanks and directed by

Robert Zemeckis is probably in my top 10 favourite all time films so I would have to take with me to a tropical island a photo of my wife and two girls, this would give me the courage and determination to survive and would keep my hopes of rescue alive.

What has been your biggest financial extravagance?

Travelling is a big passion of mine and is one of the reasons why I love my job. Over the last few years I travelled frequently (for business and pleasure) to the South of France. It is one of the most desirable places to live, work and holiday in Europe. With the lifestyle that comes with owning a holiday home in the Cote d'Azur, there is also a significant cost.

Do you have a business mantra?

If you want to be successful in property investment you have to become a long term player and forget about short term strategies. If you look at Warren Buffet as the perfect example, he has been through eight recessions since 1957 and still managed to amass a small fortune through investing over decades.

What items do you always carry with you?

My Blackberry mobile phone, car keys, wallet and photograph of my two little girls Natalie aged 8 and Alex aged 5.

When will you retire?

I believe that good health, long life and happiness for me and my family are paramount when it comes to considering retirement. I have set myself a target of retiring at around 50 to 55 years of age so that I can hopefully experience a longer quality of life.

