

STORY JULIA NEWBOULD

In the company of angels

Fact file

Danielle Robertson

Former CEO of Dial an Angel, now an aged care navigator. Lives in Sydney. Divorced, re-partnered and mother of two adult children, Zoe and Zack.

She says she sometimes feels like a clown trying to juggle a lot of balls in the air. Hobbies include reading biographies, bushwalking, spending time with family and friends and house-hunting for her children to try and get them into the property market.

Danielle Robertson was born at a time when Australian women had to manage their homes, children and entertaining pretty much on their own.

Robertson's mother, Dena Blackman, was very sick after giving birth to Danielle, her third child, in 1966.

Danielle's two older sisters, then aged three and six, helped look after her, and eventually her father contacted Ku-ring-gai Council for help with managing the three children and the house.

The council told him he should have called to book help nine months ago.

Robertson says her mother recovered from her illness but kept thinking "I wish I could have dialled an angel" to help with the new baby, shopping, meals preparation and taking the kids to school. She continued

to ruminate over it and talked about it so much that eventually her husband told her to do it herself or shut up.

Danielle's mother wrote her ideas down on a sheet of butcher's paper and with that rudimentary presentation of a business plan she went to see the local bank manager. She had established how the agency would work by finding out what shop assistants were earning, checking wage schedules and interviewing would-be clients. Calculating that she would need \$200 to get started, she asked the bank manager for a loan.

He told her he couldn't lend to a woman – either her father or husband would have to guarantee it. Her father was dead and her husband was disinterested, so she rolled up her plan with a pink ribbon and asked him to show it to his wife and see what she thought. The next day he called her and said his wife was refusing to sleep with him unless he loaned her the \$200.

"Mum went home and put a long ad in the *North Shore Times* asking for 100 'angels'. Basically, she said she was a pharmacist by trade and had no marketing experience. She asked for homemakers, people who had looked after kids or elderly people. Before she had managed to hire the first angel she had 22 clients. That's how the business started and how it finished. We always had an over-demand and under-supply of good-quality people," says Robertson.

"We really took our time recruiting people to make sure they were a good fit. Since we were paying above-award wages, we were looking for someone special – an angel. We were clear on values, even back then."

In 1968, Blackman had her fourth child. Robertson says she was the only one who said she'd never go into the family business. "I was in that office after school and on holidays and thought it was the most boring thing, sitting at a desk and talking to people."

Her eldest sister, Nadine, worked in Sydney and eventually transferred to Queensland to run the Brisbane office until she retired 20 years later. Her other sister, Nicki, also briefly worked in the company.

Eventually, Nadine hired Danielle as a casual after she left school. She did cleaning, party help and babysitting. At the same time Danielle was studying hospitality and found she was good at it – she became night manager at a Sydney hotel at 18.

However, after 15 months she decided that, while she had finished her studies and was doing well, she didn't think it was what she wanted to keep doing.

She decided to quit work and take some time off. Her mother persuaded her to work with her for three months while she considered her future. She stayed for 17 years.

Robertson started working full-time in 1986 and when her mum stepped aside in 2003 to hand over the reins, she told

Change of tune ... a school-aged Robertson reckoned she'd never go into the family business. "I thought it was the most boring thing, sitting at a desk and talking to people."

her "only Prince Charles has had a longer apprenticeship than you".

"The staff were grateful, they knew it would happen, but I never anticipated going into the business, let alone running it," says Robertson.

By the time she took over, the company had 10 offices Australia-wide, three of them franchisees (Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth), with 10,000 angels registered on the books.

"We gave so many women jobs, and so many women I've met since that time say things like 'I was a uni student studying nursing, teaching and wanted to be a nanny, and you gave us the opportunity to trial it'. We chose our own hours. Other women I've met used our services."



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A major challenge the business continued to face was recruiting. “From 100 interviews we’d take on 10,” says Robertson. “People stayed with us for 20 years as angels – they loved it, the flexibility, popping into the office, the sense of community. But we were always recruiting.”

On the other side, the business was constantly being contacted by private equity firms and aged care businesses that wanted to buy it.

In addition, working with family meant different generations had different expectations, says Robertson.

Generally, she and her mother were simpatico and had a strong connection. “Mum could start a sentence and I could finish it – I could follow her thought processes,” says Robertson. But when it came to updating the business there were challenges.

“When I first started we had a card-based system. I said we’d need to put in a technology-based system. She didn’t want to spend the money, but I knew we had to. I drew out a plan of how I saw the database working and how a booking system could work.”

It was the late 1990s and though they tried to find an off-the-shelf solution there wasn’t one that fitted their work and so they ended up funding their own program, Angel Base.

“This was the only time Mum and I disagreed. She couldn’t see the purpose: why fix what ain’t broke?”

They also put in a book-keeping and payroll system.

However, it was tolerance, patience and wisdom that Robertson says she really learnt from her mother. “The thing I learned was having good listening skills and empathy and that’s what I love now. To hear the stories of families, their hopes, their loves and their wishes.”

As Robertson’s mum aged, so did the clients, and the disability care arm started growing dramatically.

Around 2010, Robertson says she could see a tsunami of “greys” coming in and realised she’d have a shortage of staff.

“We had to start building home-care providers and staff or pack up and sell, as this would become a problem. We had an executive team to get the business sale ready, but we didn’t know what direction that would be. By 2014 I was working around the clock and it was killing me – it killed my marriage. I couldn’t do this anymore. I thought, let’s put this on the market, there was no third generation coming through.”

The business was placed on the market in 2014 and sold to a Melbourne-based care provider with private equity backing. It was later on sold to Zenitas.

After the sale, Robertson had had enough. While she was still contracted to work for the new company, she felt it no longer fit with her values.

PHILIP CASTLETON

So, in 2015, she changed her LinkedIn profile, describing herself as an expert in home care provision. The first client to approach her was a financial adviser who had a client who needed to move from the family home into residential care.

“I was asked to come and speak to the family about the different options. I helped two families find the right home care provider and provided a life plan to another client. I didn’t charge the adviser for five clients!”

Robertson then realised she was undervaluing her worth. She had experience in aged care and disability care and knew home services inside out. She started DR Care Solutions as an aged care navigator, helping people work out the best solutions for themselves or loved ones as they became less able.

“I work with families to work out care, support and accommodation solutions for their aged or disabled loved ones. I meet the family to do a care needs assessment. They might not have any government funding or know what they are entitled to. We try and tailor the care to suit the client care needs and wants and wishes. It’s important, even if there’s dementia, to listen to what they need.”

Generally, Robertson tries to keep the clients at home with good-quality care in place. She has clients around Australia. Before Covid she regularly travelled to Queensland.

“I’ve helped clients in WA, Cairns, Melbourne, Northern Territory, Coffs Harbour. The only thing I can’t do remotely is smell an aged care facility!”

In the past two years she has scaled her business, working with financial services company Mercer to build a do-it-yourself portal for clients to plan their end-of-life care. Built by IBM, the program was launched in April this year.

She has also developed a lead-care concierge package and is training others to do what she does for clients.

“I didn’t know how to scale my business and Mercer has given me an opportunity to run my business on the side. I consult 2 ½ days a week and train up concierges. I’m giving up my intellectual property but I’m being paid and helping more Australians than I could do on my own,” she says. “It’s a wonderful opportunity for me to scale the business without having to scale the business.”

“My goal is to help as many Australians as I can to find the right care, support and accommodation for their ageing or disabled loved ones in the quickest possible time. That’s been my big goal.”

Robertson regards her work as hugely important today as she’s seen people floundering through the aged care system. “The system is complex. People don’t want to go into care. It’s essential that we have people like myself to simplify the system and processes to take the stress and pressure out of an already emotional time. To bring care into the home and consider downsizing retirees and a move into residential aged care is a massive decision.”

DR Care Solutions is independent and transparent in the fees it charges. “I work for the family and they pay me. I’ve handpicked around 30 home care providers around Australia and I always introduce around three options to clients. I enable the clients to do as much as possible on their own, but I guide them through the maze.”

However, there are limits to what Robertson will recommend. When it comes to the money side of aged care, she will make sure there is an aged care adviser. “Most referrals come from planners, accountants or lawyers and if they’re not aged care accredited I will align them with someone who is,” she says.

The problems that the aged care sector faces include the lack of nurses, carers and qualified staffers, says Robertson.

“If you’ve got money you have options. Many clients don’t want to access government-funded care if they can afford it – they just want the best outcomes for their family. Sometimes family would prefer to pay fee-for-service and tailor the care they need. For example, they may take 10 hours of care from the government but top it up with 30 self-funded hours.”

Robertson sees the future as coming from the findings of the royal commission into aged care. “Those who can afford to pay will have to pay – from home care to residential home care. If people have a \$3 million home and a pension, they will have to sell the home. [The government] will assess everything.”

She also foresees more innovations in the sector. “Traditionally big residential care facilities are huge with more than 100 beds, but I believe we’ll see are smaller homes with 10 to 15 people, so the concentration of care is higher. And there will also be monitoring systems for people to remain at home.”

Meanwhile, Robertson says she will continue to focus on helping clients achieve the right outcome.

“I’ve helped over 300 families in six years, the majority with home care. I’ll definitely stay in this space – it feels very natural for me. It doesn’t feel like work. Every day is different.”

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