

ENTREPRENEURS 50+

BRIAN
O'CONNOR

Dear Brian, it is a big pleasure to interview you today. As we discussed, you were always a business man and had a very busy life, but it was already late in your life that you decided to found the ECHalliance. So, I suppose a good question is where and how did it all start?

Well, you could start at any point in my life but it all goes back literally to where I was born and the people I lived with, so let's start from the beginning.

I was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, at a time when things were quite difficult. I was born into a family of six brothers and six sisters, we were 13 in total, and I would say this: I had the best mother and father anyone could ever have. And this was in an area that was designated at one stage as the most deprived area of Western Europe and that was because male unemployment was about 66%, so when you looked, you would find lots of men in the street, because there were no jobs.

So, it must have been difficult times?

We lived in a three bedrooms house, that was better than most, who lived in a two-bedroom, but we were 13 children, plus mother and father. My mother didn't work because she was too busy having children but my father, thank God had a job, because otherwise I don't know how we would have survived. But what was fascinating for me was that we lived in a house which had three bedrooms: one for the boys, one for the girls, and one for the mother and father and whichever latest baby was. There was always a baby, I never remember my mother not being pregnant. I can honestly say I had a wonderful happy childhood.

I know you work with innovation Carina, but I can tell you that the biggest and most welcome innovation in my life was when my father managed to source second hand bunk beds and we could all have our own beds!

Oh, love that! I fully empathize with your ranking (laughs)

We were apparently very poor and I say apparently because I didn't know that at that time. When I think of this, I am always amazed how my mother always managed to bring us up and feed us. We were lucky that my father started working when 11 years of age and he was the first person from the Catholic faith to be employed in this company. He was told he was getting the job because this was a terrible job that they wouldn't give to a Protestant boy, but he accepted it and did the job brilliantly. So 20 years later he was appointed managing director of that entire company, which was a real tribute to him and his persistence. This was very inspiring to me.

Wow, that is amazing!

Yes, indeed. What was really inspiring was the way my mother and father treated all of us and they were willing to talk to us as if we were an adult even if we were still quite young. They were just telling us their life experiences and difficulties but not complaining at all. And it struck me that you don't have to be rich to be happy! When I look at what my siblings have achieved in their lives, I admire them. To some extent I am the black sheep of the family because I was the one who left Belfast and focused on business but my brothers and sisters achieved beautiful things in the community – they are real community leaders, doing all sorts of things in charities and so on. So, we were lucky my mother and father were determined we got a good education!

That is really the basis or everything, right?

Indeed. So, at that time, we had what was called the 11 plus, that told you at 11 years of age whether you could go to secondary school or to a different school. It is quite frightening, if you think about it, that at 11 years of age you have to do this exam and it may determine your entire life. I failed the 11 plus and was sent to what was called a Secondary Technical Intermediate School - I thought what does that mean?? - and I still don't know but, basically, I have been lucky all my life and that was a good school although I remember I had to get two buses every day to school which was a big effort on our family finances, but I got to finish it and did my GCSE levels exams.

I was a prefect, sort of a teacher's assistant, which usually means that you are disliked by every student but liked by all the teachers. My deal with the students was enabling them to leave school during lunch break to get a drink in the pub nearby. But I managed to agree a system where they were allowed to go as long as they were back in time for school and not drunk and it was fascinating that 3-4 years later, after I left school, I became a waiter in that pub and the owner said: "I remember you."

I believe that as you go through life you recognise there are lessons to be learnt and this is something I recognised quite early. This story taught me that every contact you make is a potential ally in the future. And this was very valuable for me.

Indeed, that is very true! So, you started working in a bar once you finished school?

Well, only the older boy in the family was able to go to University. So, my father told me "I'm sorry but we have no money for you to go to university". So, I left school when I was 16 and I applied for 33 jobs. I got two job offers: one was for an assistant clerical officer in the civil service and the second one was for a delivery boy.

That was very good, so what was your choice?

I didn't know what to do and told my father that perhaps I should choose the first because it was solid and would provide a good pension in the future. But he said: "First of all you will never be a civil servant under any circumstances. And secondly, you shouldn't worry about pensions. Just do your thing and you will be very successful". This was a great confidence boost for me and so I started as a delivery boy because the company hiring owned a travel agency as well and that I found appealing. I was not warmly welcomed, as I was the first Catholic ever working in that company but I made my way through and when I was 18 I became the managing director of the travel agency.

Well done! That is impressive!

Well, at that time I was asked to create the first ever direct flights from Belfast to Spain, negotiating with Aer Lingus to fly people to New York and Toronto and I was dealing with everybody who was older than me, it was quite challenging. This is when I then realised that we can't and shouldn't do things on our own, so I've learned the need for a network and collaboration.

I created a collaborative network with the competing travel agencies across Ireland and got them to sell the seats on those flights which gave them a commission - so they were competitors but then became collaborators which is what you and I do all the time!

It is true, it is much better when people work together and everyone wins.

Well, after that I was doing very well, I was the highest paid person in the travel industry in Northern Ireland at the time and was living very nicely with my wife - and I already had my daughter. But I realised that the company I worked for was a family company and in order to make my own way I needed capital.

With my grandson on the Isle of Man.



So, you left?

I talked to the owner, explained my thinking, he understood and allowed me time to look for something else. I was offered a job in the Isle of Man, (only 20 minutes by air from Belfast) and allowed one year to set up a travel agency, and then go back home. It was the first job I ever got a chance to ask for a percentage of the profits. So I created an incoming tour operator and in the first year we broke even; over the next few years we made half a million pounds (this was 30, 40 years ago) and I was getting 15% of that.

Then, after 3-4 years building up, I decided to leave and setup my first business as a consultant to anyone who would pay me for anything. It would have been really nice to write the vision of that company (laughs)!

I was really fortunate because my first job was in Saudi Arabia where I set up travel agencies for one of the Crown Princes; then I worked in Paris where I recruited children from nurseries to bring them over back to the Isle of Man for holidays where they learned English. Then I became a consultant to a big company which was listed on the London Stock Exchange - I have to tell you I had no idea what a listed company meant!

But you still did it?

I went to London to meet one of these awfully nice merchant bankers, all from Cambridge and Oxford, and I remember sitting down with this very big group and they were discussing the PE ratio and the dividend policy. They asked me what I thought of that and I said: "No idea, I don't know what these terms mean" And they looked at me and said "Don't you read the Financial Times?" and I said "No, it is too expensive". And the shortened story is that I became the Chief Executive of three listed companies within a year, all of which they controlled, and they allocated someone to teach me how to read the Financial Times and this is no exaggeration.

So, I learned always to ask if you don't understand something!

Well, that is amazing.

I learned a lot just by doing and they obviously recognised that, so I did that for a while and it was going really well but I need to be doing a minimum of five things, all at the same time, I cannot work on only one thing. So in the next years I did several things, brought innovations from America to the UK, buying companies and growing teams etc.

Then I got the stage I was 35 and I retired.

Really, that early in life?

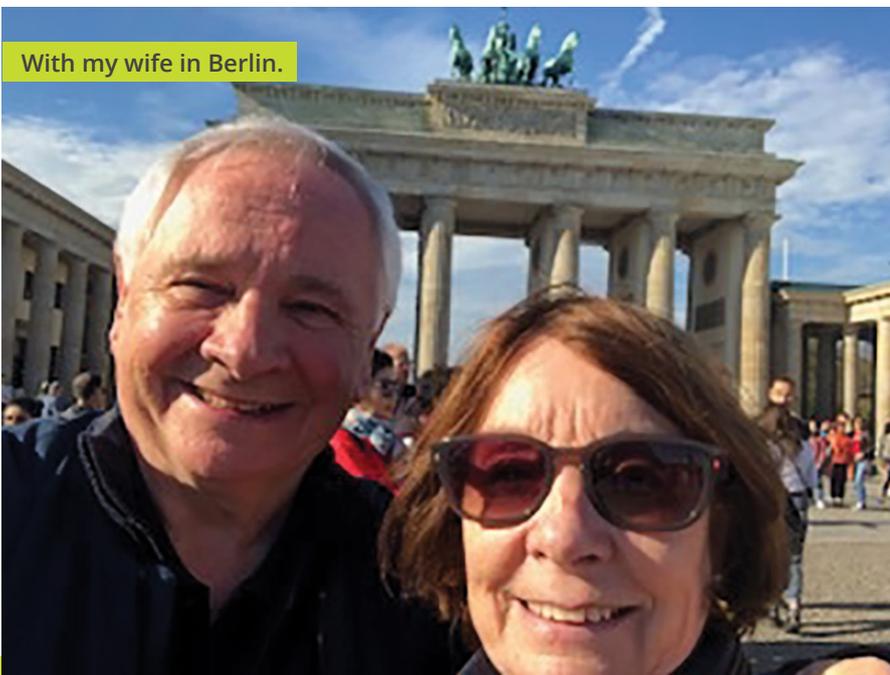
It seemed then that the height of my ambitions was having a lovely house, a great family and have everyone happy. But six weeks later my then 11-year-old daughter came to be and said: "Dad, we really enjoy having you around and have these lovely holidays and lovely house but you have to get out of the house, you're driving us mad".

Ahahah! Really?

This was my daughter, not my wife!

She encouraged me to go and so I started again and had several different businesses, and one of them took me to Hong Kong, to rescue a company that was in deep trouble. I worked really hard but I must admit it was the most exhilarating experience of my life, because I was in a new country, dealing with all sorts of nationalities, I was dealing with people I just had no clue about their culture and it was fantastic experience. What I loved above all was they did deals really quickly over lunch, that is an amazing thing. So I set up my own healthcare company in Hong Kong and it became the largest private healthcare company in Hong Kong in about four years.

With my wife in Berlin.





Where you there for long?

My daughter went back to England with her husband to be, Paul, in 1997, around the handover from the British to Chinese and my wife said: At the first sign of a grandchild I'm going back. You can you do whatever you like, but I'm going back." So inevitably, of course, I knew the clock was ticking. The first grandson appeared soon so I started the process of selling the company and left Hong Kong in 2003 I came back to the Isle of Man.

So, again, I had nothing to do, was bored - which I admit happens regularly -, so I started new businesses in Belfast and Dublin but when you have great management teams ,you should let them manage and not interfere ,after a while I wanted to create something which was more community oriented, not for profit and in a small way give something back. So, I fell back on my experiences of creating networks and collaborations All I have done revolves around collaboration and cooperation, which works when you are learning, are transparent, honest, and not arrogant.

I love talking to people, love being with people and helping them, which encourages me and helps me.

So the ECHalliance came out of that - I wanted to do something which itself does good so I called my brother Damian, who had just retired at 50 years of age from British Telecom and I said "Within six weeks you'll be bored, so come and help me" and so he did and that's how we got started in 2012.

That is really inspiring! And that is your main role now?

I'm still a consultant or a chairman of various other companies and the proudest one that I have is with my grandsons. I have two grandsons, now 19 and 21 years of age and when they were eight and ten, I set up companies with them, more to teach them how to do business.

We would need the very big book to put all of your life experiences – and businesses there!

You are right, I guess so. But at the end I really love the way you can leave and start again and be happy with it because it is not always easy to leave something you have built and this is something that I find really useful for people to understand: It is good to set it up and then to pass it on. I would never let anything go unless I was happy with the people buying it, so it is not always the price they pay. I make sure that the team that I leave behind are well looked after.

I don't really regard them as my businesses and I think you have to start with that mentality.

You can do anything, you just need to find the way to learn sufficiently and to find the right people to put it together and I think that is very helpful for people who are still often scared of doing.

I hope this can be inspiring for others.