

An education

If you haven't already heard her name, meet Carol Evelegh, the lady behind an ever-expanding group of nurseries, The Kindergartens

Carol Evelegh



You're the owner of 12 nurseries; did you always know that you wanted to work in childcare?

I originally wanted to become a speech therapist. However, when I was a child, I played schools; that says a lot! In my twenties, I moved from Scotland to join Thomas's London Day Schools as a reception teacher before going on to become deputy head of Thomas's Kensington, then director of Thomas's Kindergartens,

before becoming the inaugural head of Thomas's Clapham. I was with the Thomas family for 35 years – it was, and still is, very exciting to see it grow.

Why did you leave this role and start out on your own?

I left in 2012 to concentrate on The Kindergartens, which was founded by my late husband Philip in 1991. We took over our first nursery, Crescent 1, in Balham from the previous owners; they closed at Christmas and we opened in the New Year; it was a very busy time for us. From there, our business grew pretty quickly. We either bought existing businesses and made the nurseries our own or founded new ones. I originally liked the idea of having a group of five nurseries, then I thought seven and then my husband said ten. I now have 12 with a new one opening in Fulham and I don't think I can stop at 13 as it's an unlucky number!

Some of the names are very creative such as Pooh Corner or Bumble Bee – how did you come up with them?

More often than not, it is because we bought the



nursery and decided to keep their names.

Do you approach people to buy their nursery or is it the other way round?

It's usually the owner of the nursery who comes to us and then we either buy or rent the existing buildings from them. I've been lucky in that I've never quite started two nurseries at the same time.

What's a typical day like?

I tend to say that my office is my car! I drop into the nurseries at different times and don't usually have a set diary. However, since taking over the Mallinson Road building 18 months ago next door, we've turned it into offices, so I frequently work from there, and I also have a home office.

My day varies; I do everything from interviewing prospective staff to talking to parents to purchasing all the fruit for the nurseries. In fact, I used to live in Kent, and every Sunday I'd bring back 1,200 apples with me! However, since I've moved, it's brought up by someone else. I do as much as I can and, at Christmas, I like to go to every nativity play, so I schedule my diary around them.

How do the nurseries operate?

Very much like a school. I like to try innovative education methods to enhance the children's educational experience; new techniques keep teaching



the children learn music and Spanish together.

What else do the kids do?

We take them to galleries and museums such as the Tate and we have artists who come in to do talks, as well as musicians and even orchestras! There are also before and after nursery clubs – for example, construction clubs, science club, multi sports, teddy tennis, yoga and art.

You take children from the age of two for either morning or afternoon places. When should parents register?

We actually encourage parents to have a look round as soon as their baby is born as places can be competitive, and mornings are the most popular. Some mums even register when they first get pregnant. However, having said that, last-minute places do come up; it's just at the moment there never seems to be enough.

How do you prepare the parents for the next step of their child's education?

We give a talk about future schools. I have worked in the education sector for more than 35 years so I know an awful lot. There are many factors that come into question – for example, do the parents want to put their children into single-sex or co-ed school? I can also advise on the best way to get into different schools and give guidance on tested and non-tested entry. It can be a minefield.

What do you like most about your job?

I absolutely adore the children – they're the best and always make me smile. I'm amazed by their interests and what they know and the fact that they don't have barriers or preconceived ideas about what things should be like.

What's next in the pipeline?

We're opening a nursery in Fulham – watch this space! ■

01622 833 331 (thekindergartens.com)



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and learning interesting. We've recently introduced Forest Schooling which we do on Wimbledon Common. It's a holistic outdoor activity and has proven great results in building children's self-confidence. There's also another new activity called mud kitchens, which is exactly what is says on the tin – mud in a kitchen! We also have bilingual beats where