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in association with



ISSUE 14

FEBRUARY/MARCH 2015

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We talk to the boss of Blackpool entertainment company

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There's no place like HOME

Saatchi and Saatchi is one of the world's most recognisable names. So how did a former Lancashire lad end up as its global chief? DAVID NOWELL reports

IN the wings of Blackpool Tower Circus, a performer is waiting to emerge. The packed audience is waiting, the lights go up, and the stage is set as he strides into the spotlight trained on the legendary arena. But this is no entertainer – although many may argue his words and delivery do precisely that. This is Kevin Roberts, the Lancashire lad who went on to become Global Chief Executive of one of the world's biggest business brands, creative agency Saatchi and Saatchi. The former Lancaster Royal Grammar School pupil now finds himself jetting around the world from his New York base. Last year, he flew to England to host the Be Inspired Business Awards in front of an audience at Blackpool Tower packed with the cream of Lancashire's business community. Said Kevin: "As a kid, going to the Tower Circus was always the highlight of my holiday. So appearing there in what was, when I was a kid, the biggest gladiatorial amphitheatre I

have ever seen, was a kid's dream come true. "I've spoken in lots of big venues around the world, but nothing could compare with Blackpool Tower. "I loved the ambition, belief, enthusiasm and energy of the BIBAs nominees and, of course, the winners. "The warmth and spirit all wrapped in Lancashire humour made me feel I was amongst my tribe." He might be more than familiar with the world's biggest cities, from where he runs the Saatchi and Saatchi empire, or New Zealand, where he holds dual citizenship, but Kevin Roberts is in no doubt about where he is from. "I define myself as a Lancastrian, not as an Englishman," he says, "whenever anyone asks me about my dual citizenship with New Zealand, I've always respond that I've never considered myself English, but I've always felt I was a Northerner from 'beyond the wall'. "I spend a lot of time in

Lancashire today. My aunt and uncle live in Morecambe so I'm frequently there at the Midland Hotel; I'm a life member of the Vale of Lune Rugby Club, and I'm at Powder House Lane whenever I can get there. "And, of course, I have season tickets for Manchester City, which is still Lancashire to me, the old county. "Lancashire to me means Mike Harding, The Oldham Tinkers, and, of course, The Beatles and the Mersey Beat explosion of the 1960s." On the business front, he can add being a creative advisor to the board of supermarket chain Booths and playing a major role in Lancaster University and a governor at Lancaster Royal Grammar School, which is where it all began for a young Kevin. As a pupil at the school in the 1960s, he recalls answering a question to his English teacher, Peter Sampson, about what his dream was. He says: "I told him I wanted to be a millionaire before I was 30; quite a claim for a 14-year-old. 



Kevin Roberts

“At that time I felt that capitalism was the only way out, and that being working class and poor was nothing to be ashamed of, but to change things dramatically you had to have wealth, power, resource and some big guns at your disposal.

“I thought having money was probably better than not, and with the benefit of hindsight I can look back at being poor then and rich now.”

Having graduated, his first role was as assistant brand manager at a cosmetics brand run by fashion icon, Mary Quant, in 1969, and he went on to hold roles with major blue-chip brands, including Gillette, Procter & Gamble and Pepsi, before arriving at Saatchi and Saatchi in 1997.

The brand had been launched in 1970 and was famously responsible for the aiding the Conservatives’ 1979 general election campaign, which saw Margaret Thatcher come to power. Kevin arrived at Saatchi and Saatchi with morale at an all-time low after some difficult years, and led it back to becoming one of the world’s best advertising agencies.

Self-confidence and positivity exudes from every pore of the 65-year-old, attributes without which he would not have achieved what he has.

Kevin explains: “I have never looked back, because there is nothing as painful as regret. “I’m focused on looking forward, for me, life happens through the windshield, not through the rear view mirror.

“I have been lucky I have been mentored by a bunch of top people throughout my career, and several who have gone out of their way to back me and provide opportunities.

“I have never forgotten that and have tried, in my own way, to do the same for young people, particularly in Lancashire.”



MENTOR: Saatchi & Saatchi executive chairman Kevin Roberts (front, centre) with winners from the BIBAs 2014. Left, Kevin giving a lecture to students at Lancaster University



“ I get a buzz from teaching and helping others be the best they can be

This philosophy is working for a man who clearly loves his life at the helm of a business with more than 6,500 employees in 140 offices in 76 countries across the globe.

“Saatchi and Saatchi is an ideas company full of young, fresh, vital, optimistic people and I get a charge out of them every day,” he beams.

“I also get a buzz from teaching and helping others be the best they can be. “Nothing excites me more than helping young people achieve their dreams.”

This year he takes over as executive chairman of Saatchi and Saatchi Worldwide, where he will work alongside the newly-appointed chief executive, Robert Senior. The lifelong Manchester City fan smiles: “We will avoid the Ferguson-Moyes syndrome of Manchester United, I promise you.

“Saatchi and Saatchi has only had two leaders in almost 50 years, and sustaining this wonderful company has been my highest priority.

“Robert has been with the company since 2005, and the two of us will form a very tight team in 2015.”

He will also become head coach at the Publicis Group, the French-based global marketing brand which owns

Saatchi and Saatchi, and take responsibility for inspiring and motivating its top 100 leaders. Closer to home, Kevin has also taken up a role as life patron of the BIBAs, where he is to play a leading role in developing the awards brand, which is renowned as a hallmark of excellence among Lancashire’s biggest community.

In 2014, the awards founded the BIBAs Academy, a programme of workshops and support offered to the 17 winners of its prizes handed out last September, led by LUMS with Kevin being a leading light.

He explains: “I think BIBAs are the best thing that has happened to Lancashire business, to entrepreneurs and to local enterprise both big and small.

“I hope to add some advice, experience and tips to these entrepreneurs, so they could grow their businesses even more quickly and more successfully.”