

myLife

Hard work, passion and a determination to be a good role model for her daughters have fuelled Gill Nemri's dream to bring French to the masses. SAM WONFOR says 'bonjour' to her

'It's about making language fun...'



GILL Nemri is the kind of person who makes you give yourself a good kick up the derriere.

On any given day, the 41-year-old, who is a self-employed single mother-of-two, would make a Duracel Bunny feel like they just weren't putting the effort in.

In less than a year, Gill, who lives with her daughters, Leila, 17, and Jasmine, 10, in North Shields, has grown her business, Petit Poussins – which ultimately offers the gift of bilingualism to youngsters – in a manner which would have all the Dragons from the BBC1 Den declaring they were 'in'.

She has gone from holding a handful of sessions for children each week – including a mother and toddler group which welcomes students from the age of six months onwards – to a whopping 41.

"Actually it's more because I've just picked up two new jobs which will take us up to 50 or so different sessions each week," says Gill, talking on hands free on her way to Darlington where she and her puppet helper, Sebastian, will possibly don a pair of lapin ears (that's one for your French-to-English dictionary) and deliver a session entirely in French to a group of pre-schoolers at one of nine Kids 1st Nurseries

she works in across the region.

"I don't do it all myself though," laughs Gill. "I think that would be impossible. I've got an amazing lady working with me, Sylvie Hargreaves, who is a French native and married to an English guy over here. We work across lots of different venues – nurseries, schools, weekly groups, private sessions – we just don't stop."

Fuelled by an audible passion for what she does, Gill has spent the past seven years since she started her business, developing a curriculum for teaching French to children, which she believes is uniquely effective.

"I don't want to give it all away," she laughs, "but basically, it's all about making language fun... and starting as early as possible.

I'd like to revolutionise the way language is taught in this country. I'd love to show Michael Gove what we're doing up here," she adds, speaking of the current Secretary of State for Education.

"One of the most common questions I get asked is about when you can start teaching children a second language... and my answer is you can't start early enough. Under one is the optimum time, but lots of schools don't start anything until seven, which is too late. Bi-lingualism is such an



amazing gift to give children and I never get bored of hearing kids we're working with coming out with French phrases and responses.

"It's fantastic." Gill is so enthusiastic about what she does, it's almost impossible to believe she's ever done anything else. She has, though.

Born in Scotland, she moved with her family to Tynemouth when she was eight and was schooled at the Priory and John Spence Schools. Studying for a BSc in International Business and Technology with French at Northumbria University saw her move to Marseille for a year in the mid-nineties to study and gain work experience.

She gained a lot more than that though, meeting her now ex-husband, who was a Frenchman.

"We came back to the North East, I finished my degree and we got married," she says.

Not long after this, Leila was born.

"I was very conscious of bringing up my daughter in a bilingual environment and the benefits it can offer," says Gill.

Around this time, Gill became a senior buyer for Formica in North Shields, using her French-speaking skills during negotiations with suppliers.

"It was a full-on job and as a mother, I was working really long hours, so when I was made redundant in around 2000, I started thinking actually I'd like to do something where I could have the best of being a mum as well as the best of a career."

It was a suggestion from Leila's teachers which started Gill

thinking about what her next move could be.

"I used to go into Leila's school and do bits and bobs and would say the odd 'bonjour' to the kids," she laughs. "The teachers asked me to put my CV in as they were looking for someone to teach French. I wasn't sure but was always up for a challenge... and I ended up absolutely loving it."

Gill taught the children from nursery up to age 11 for three years. During this time she became pregnant with Jasmine.

"When she was born my husband was working away during the week, my parents had just moved away and my in-laws of course were in France," remembers Gill. "I found myself alone a lot with no family support, which was tough."

"I thought, if I want to go back into industry, it was going to put a huge amount of pressure on the family. Plus I'd always had this thought of setting up my own business."

It was then, in 2005, she set up Petit Poussins (little chickens, as if you didn't know).

"I started it very slowly, even though I knew there was a massive market for it. I didn't want to try and do too much too quickly. I wanted to be there for the girls. I never really advertised, it was all word of mouth, but people kept coming."

A few years later, Gill's marriage broke down.

"Being on my own with the girls and having no family around, I really felt the responsibility to bring them through the emotions of dealing with the divorce – as well as my own – and running

my own business. There were times when I thought: how am I going to manage all of this by myself? It was hard, but I want to let other single mums out there know it's possible.

"Last year I felt the time was right to really try and grow the business, and it's been amazing."

"I've now also got a very good relationship with my ex-husband and I feel incredibly lucky to have my girls and for them to be able to see their mum working in a job she's so passionate about."

So passionate in fact, she is planning to branch out into other languages. Piccoli Pulcini will be the Italian version of Petits Poussins, and has been developed with a mum who brought her child to Gill's mother and toddler sessions.

"She said she wanted to do what I did, but in Italian. It's really exciting to think that we could be bringing more and more languages to children all over the region. I can't go on enough about how much there is to gain."

All sound tres bien from here. For more information on Petits Poussins sessions, or to find out more about being a teacher for the company, visit petitspoussins.co.uk. Keep your eyes on the website for more information about Piccoli Pulcini.

Dear Clive

Can I make a claim for care home fees to be refunded by the NHS? and if so how far back can I claim?

Dorothy

Dear Dorothy

You can make an application to the local Primary Care Trust for an assessment to determine whether you are eligible for free fully funded NHS Continuing Care. It is also possible for this to be done on your behalf.

It is no longer possible to claim any refunds backdated as far as April 2004 to March 2012 as the deadline set by the Department of Health for such claims was the September 30, 2012, which has now passed.

A new deadline of March 31, 2013, has now been announced for any claims from the April 1, 2012. It is important therefore that you act immediately, if you think this might apply to you or a relative please contact us immediately. We are able to handle these claims on a no win, no fee basis.

Clive

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