

HELPING HAND Lucy Bruce reveals her plans for Harmony House

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By Beatrix Thomas

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# HOPE AND CHARITY

BY BEATRICE THOMAS

LUCY BRUCE HAS ALWAYS BEEN ONE TO TAKE UP A CAUSE. The savvy businesswoman and co-founder of leading Dubai luxury brand marketing company, Insignia, readily admits that while her classmates were busy being kids she was already thinking of those less fortunate than herself. "As a child I was always drawn to kind of the weaker child in the class, the one that was being bullied," the 35-year-old explains.

"If there was any charity campaigns going on I was always getting involved. I was always doing bake sales and whatever to try and raise money for various different causes.

"I don't know why I did that but I just always felt that if there was something that I could do then it was my job to do it and I had to do something." And do something she has.

Two decades after baking cakes for those in need, the UK-born Bruce now runs Harmony House, a day centre for disadvantaged youth in India, and is one half of the team behind the UAE's first and only ecological and socially responsible children's nursery, Home Grown Children's Eco Nursery.

Her efforts ensure she is collectively helping some 500 children better their lives—in the process earning wide praise for her charitable work.

After graduating with a degree in education from Middlesex University fourteen years ago, Bruce, who describes her upbringing as middle class — "we never went without" — headed to the UAE and a primary school teaching job in Abu Dhabi.

"It was literally a village fourteen years ago," she recalls of the UAE capital back then. "And Dubai was maybe half the size it is now."

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Lucy Bruce with her three children - Jade (standing), Amelia and India Rose.



Harmony House provides a safe, fun, educational and a loving environment for children in India.

**"To do something in India was just very natural to us because my husband was Indian and we wanted to do something there"**

obviously, children," she explains. "I've got a child inside of me, what is the life of my child going to be like versus all the other children that are out there in the world and I wondered what I could do to make a difference to other children."

Initially, Bruce collected money from friends, which she would send to a charity in her husband's native India.

However, she discovered, much to her disappointment, that the money was not being spent as intended.

"After a lot of thought and a discussion with Gaurav we realised that the only way that we could completely control where money went to was if we started up our own charity," she says. "To do something in India was just very natural to us because my husband was Indian and we wanted to do something there."

However, much like her original fundraising idea, the reality initially fell slightly short of expectations.

She had wanted to start an orphanage for ten underprivileged girls, who she would educate and create opportunities for via a global network.

"But, then, quite rightly, the Indian Government said to me: 'do you think we're just going to give you ten children?'," she says.

"There was a lot of naivety that I had and I hadn't really thought things through properly. They said to me: 'you need to prove for three years that you can run a sustain-

Bruce, who grew up near Cambridge, north of London, intended to stay a year, before moving on to her next adventure in Hong Kong or Japan. However, opportunities ensured she stayed in the UAE.

After three years of teaching, Bruce says it was at her father's urging that she started to look at what else she could do.

"My father owns an alternative media agency in the UK and there were a number of products that he had, which obviously, I've grown up with," she says.

"I used to come down to Dubai on the weekends and say to my Dad, 'oh God, there's so many events going on, you should just come and see what you can do'.

"Of course, he wasn't going to leave the UK, so he said, 'why don't you see if you can do some stuff?'"

So, after finishing her work day Bruce would drive to Dubai, a sample box in hand, and knock on the doors of various agencies in town.

Behind one door was an upcoming marketing executive by the name of

Gaurav Sinha, who would later become her husband.

But, initially, Sinha convinced her after a couple of meetings to leave teaching and in 2003 the pair formed Insignia.

"When we started it was just Gaurav and I working off one little desk in Media City," Bruce recalls of their early days as a professional team (it would be about three years later that they would marry).

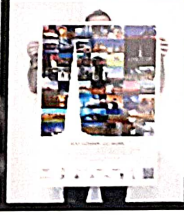
"I was doing all the below-the-line work and he'd be doing all the above-the-line work. When we started there was a huge boom in events and Dubai was taking off in terms of social events, media, corporate events."

# 2003

Year when Lucy Bruce and Gaurav Sinha established marketing firm Insignia.

**"When we started there was a huge boom in events and Dubai was taking off in terms of social events, media, corporate events"**

Insignia currently provides marketing and creative support for 60 five-star hotels across nineteen countries.







▲ Bruce is the co-founder of the Home Grown Children's Eco Nursery, the first of its kind in the UAE.

to make them realise that there are other children out there who have real, sincere needs not just mummy, please, please, I want an iPad', but have actual daily struggles," Bruce, who has three children with Sinha — Amelia, five, Jude, four and India Rose, nine months — says.

The nursery taught basic pre-school education but also "some values and morals to become sort of unique little individuals who care about the planet". Under its "green" curriculum, which she and Jarwani developed alongside the UK

Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum, topics included the earth, culture and society, as well as gardening, green transport and endangered animals.

The school building itself was also environmentally friendly with bamboo flooring, fans instead of air-conditioning and chemical-free cleaning products used. "It is a business and obviously there is a profit, but as a social business we do give back," she says, adding that it was at capacity with 160 children and long waiting lists.

While the nursery operates under a business model, Harmony House is registered as a charity, operating via a trust, in both India and the UK.

Bruce says each Harmony House centre costs \$108,000 (AED400,000) annually to run and most of the charity's donations come from individual contri-

**\$108,000**  
Annual cost to run each Harmony House in India.



"What we're doing is small in terms of numbers and how many children need help but we have to get something — anything — going. I always say 'small is beautiful'"

**335**

Number of children under the care of Harmony House in India.

working in labour camps. "But, if you are an independent charity registered outside the UAE then it is slightly more difficult for you to do normal fundraising," she says. "But, like I say, it's there for a reason."

Bruce says she believes there is genuine support in the business community towards charitable causes and is constantly amazed by acts of generosity.

The World Giving Index last year ranked the UAE 24th for donating money with 47 percent of people giving funds. Qatar was ranked seventeenth (and first in the GCC), with Oman ranked 32nd, Bahrain 40th and Saudi Arabia 65th. Ireland topped the list, followed by Australia, the Netherlands and the UK.

Bruce also believes Dubai is gradually becoming more "green" in its approach to development and living as the UAE became more environmentally conscious.

"There is a group here called eco schools, which actually came from the UK, and there are a number of schools which have achieved their green flag status through the eco schools," she says.

"We're really trying to push for them to do nurseries here, so we're trying to get involved with that and make it so that all nurseries can achieve the green flag."

With Sinha running Insignia (Bruce remains on the board of directors and still owns 50 percent of the company) Bruce says her days are happily spent at the nursery and working on Harmony House.

With plans to hopefully soon open a second nursery, Bruce also talks of growing to 1,000 children at Harmony House next year and, possibly, new projects in places such as Africa and the Middle East.

So, does that young girl from the UK with a penchant for causes still have much to achieve?

"In terms of Harmony House, there is so much more that we can do," she says.

"I mean, we haven't even touched the tip of the iceberg. What we're doing is small in terms of numbers and how many children need help. But you have to start somewhere — that's what I always tell myself."

"It's better to do something and help one person than not do anything at all." ■

▲ Bruce also talks of growing to 1,000 children at Harmony House next year.

butions to its UK account.

Many of the donations are from the UAE, but under Dubai law an organisation can only fundraise in the emirate if it is licensed through the Department of Islamic Affairs and Charitable Activities.

The department has 20 licensed charitable associations and foundations listed on its website with extensive guidelines on how they must operate.

Bruce says the licences are difficult to obtain, though she understood the intention was to protect the public from unscrupulous operators.

"There's some amazing charities in Dubai that don't necessarily collect money," she says.

She points out, as examples, Lola Lopez's Volunteer in Dubai, and Adopt-a-Camp where people can donate supplies to people