

## Business PEOPLE

## PROFILE: Lawrence Jones

## Eye for the main chance

**F**ATE has taken more than a passing interest in Lawrence's life so far. On a holiday five years ago, one of his friends playfully shoved him off his snowboard.

Moments later, as he walked rather than boarded across a mountain side, he was swept off the mountain by an avalanche and nearly died.

Fate was also present as he walked out of Manchester's Midland Hotel one afternoon with the intention of "not doing very much", and bumped into a "stunning girl" who became his wife.

The gods also decided that he would make his way in life in business rather than in sport.

"If I had stayed at school there was a good chance I would have got a low offer to go to Oxford or Cambridge. I loved rugby and was part of a great team at school," he relates.

His boyhood sporting passion has continued into adulthood and his business life.

His internet hosting company Ukfast.net is a major supporter and sponsor of Sale Sharks, Greater Manchester's leading rugby union club.

Lawrence's parents decided they could no longer afford to pay the fees at Ruthin. So, armed with £100 from his mum, Lawrence moved from Denbigh, in north Wales, to Manchester to "seek fame and fortune."

As a result of another of his childhood skills, leaving home at 17 was no big deal.

He had lived away from home since the age of seven after winning a choral scholarship to Durham.

"It was odd because we would never come home at Christmas and Easter, because these were the busiest times at the Cathedral, so the relationships with your family were not very strong. Friends became family," he says.

Music led Lawrence into his first major business. As a hard-up A-level student, he earned extra cash playing the piano at hotels.

His willingness to chat to people, including well-heeled regulars at the Midland hotel gave him a huge determination to succeed.

"I would meet loads of people when I was playing the piano. Many were regular diners there and I thought: 'One day I would like to be able to afford to come here every day'."

From chatting to hotel managers Lawrence found there was no formal arrangement for the supply of musicians and entertainers to hotels and corporate events so he set up a company to meet this demand.

The lure of business came at the expense of his academic studies at Salford's De La Salle College: "I failed my A-levels dismally," he smiles ruefully.

"I was far more interested in making money and doing other things," he recounts.

Well-spoken and articulate, Lawrence admits he did not exactly blend in during his days



**Lawrence Jones is one of a new breed of successful Manchester entrepreneurs. CHRIS BARRY caught up with the music-loving, rugby-mad internet company boss and discovered his unconventional and dramatic route to the top.**

living in Salford in the mid 1980s.

"There were a few scrapes, I have to say, but I was a rugby player and I knew how to handle myself most of the time," he laughs.

His success with his business, called The Music Design Company, grew, and enabled Lawrence to buy his first property at the age of 19.

He says modestly: "I was probably the worst pianist in the company. The only criteria I had for new people was that they could play better than me. At its height I had about 90 musicians on my books."

During the early 1990s MDC became the largest supplier of corporate entertainments in the city. It was trading well, so much so that in 1998, the Granada Group, which was still involved in the leisure sector at that time, came calling.

"I went to work for them as director of corporate hospitality. It was a fantastic experience, working with some corporate heavyweights.

"In hindsight, I think I probably sold the business at too early a stage, I was just developing a reputation in town as a

fixer. I will not do the same with UKfast."

Lawrence says he has already had a number of offers for his city centre-based company but he has "no plans" to sell out.

"I love what I do, I have a real passion for the business and the people in it. We are so rigorous when we recruit, we want absolutely people with the same vision, passion and commitment that we have."

**H**E set the business up in 1999 after leaving Granada after a trip to the US.

Lawrence's love of music had fostered an interest in technology, which helped with his new venture.

"I always had a passion for recording, and I was never afraid of taking computers to pieces, though not always being able to put them back together.

"During my trip to the US I became fascinated with the Internet, and I knew I had to try and do something web-related."

Back home, he was inspired to set up his own business after

experiencing poor customer service on the Internet.

From an office in Fountain Street, he and his then girlfriend Gail, worked tirelessly to get the business going.

He used the equity he had amassed from several properties he owned to help him launch the company.

It was in these early days that he encountered his mortality, in an event which has clearly changed his outlook on life.

Recalling that day in 2001 on Alpe d'Huez, is clearly painful for the normally articulate businessman.

He says: "The mountain just came down on me, it was incredibly quick. I found myself buried alive. I was welded almost upside down, with snow pressing into my eye sockets.

"I was actually quite calm, I said goodbye to God, to my family and friends. I also thought to myself: 'You've really done it this time'."

As his life ebbed away, his snowboarding companions began a desperate search for Lawrence.

Among the party were a heart surgeon and a casualty doctor. Lawrence had been wearing an

avalanche detector on the back of his jacket, so his friends had a rough idea where to dig.

When they found him, he had just a faint pulse and he was given the kiss of life.

Despite being in shock and having a "hell of a headache" Lawrence was well enough to walk to the rescue helicopter which flew him to hospital in Grenoble.

"It was all very surreal. I can remember thinking a couple of times that day: 'Am I really alive?'"

He feels he has been a changed man as a result of the avalanche.

"It was obviously terrifying, but it allowed me to take stock of my life and my priorities. I decided too that if you really want something, to go and get it.

"Nothing is as strong as a belief, and I believe I was put on this place to make a difference, and that is what I try and do."

This and fatherhood – Lawrence and Gail have a little girl called Tegan, and are expecting a second baby in July – have put paid to his daredevil activities.

"I still love sport and I enjoy keeping fit, but I won't push the barriers again, life is too short."

## FACTFILE:

**Name:** Lawrence Jones

**Age:** 37

**First job:** Pianist at the Odeon Cinema, Oxford Road and Midland hotel

**How long is your working day?** 11 hours

**Worst mistake ever made?** Not continuing my rugby when I moved to Manchester at 17

**Where is your favourite restaurant, and why?** The French Restaurant at the Midland. We eat there every week – 15 years ago I was playing piano outside it. The team inside are still the same.

They also cater for my allergies as I am allergic to milk and wheat.

**Last book read:** The Leadership Challenge by Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner

**What is parked in your driveway?** Two black beauties – a Bentley Continental GT and Porsche Cayenne

**What celebrity would you most like to be stranded on a desert island with, and why?** Tony Robbins the life coach. Why? Because there are no two more determined people on the planet and we'd have a terrific time and probably turn the place into a happening resort.

**Where do you holiday?** The Hilton, Rangali Island Maldives. We have a three-week retreat.

**Best achievement:** Creating a company with my wife Gail where seven years on we are still inspired and raring to go on a Monday morning.