

PROFILE

SUSIE COLLEY

Susie believes in telling it like it is – from the Krays to Richard Burton

The new woman at the helm of Torquay Chamber of Commerce is a familiar face in the Bay. Hannah Finch talks to Susie Colley about her no-nonsense approach first forged on the hospital wards of London's East End

Susie Colley says she has her nursing career in London's East End gangland to thank for her straight-talking approach to business.

There is no time, she says, for talking shop. Just get on with the job.

Torbay residents know that Susie, who is a passionate community advocate alongside running her own business, is a force to be reckoned with.

They won't be surprised to hear, for example, that as a young nurse, she gave Hollywood heartthrob Richard Burton what for when he turned up late in the night, drunk, and looking for Elizabeth Taylor who was being treated by Susie at Wellington Hospital.

Susie recalled: "He arrived late from New York out of the blue and said that if we didn't let him in he would leave his suitcase in reception which had a bomb in it."

"I was very officious then and I suppose I still am, so I opened the suitcase and all I found was two bottles of Scotch and some brown shoes."

"I had to ask him to leave, he was drunk anyway," she said.

Over the years, Susie has often cut a controversial figure, vociferous in her defence of community services and frequently at the frontline of any cause that she believes is justified.

She has rallied against the closure of residential services for disabled adults, fought against development and has even offered to roll up her own sleeves up to save seaside public loos.

All this while running her insurance brokerage business, Westcountry Health Care Ltd, from her garden office.

Susie, 69, said: "People are often far too scared to say boo, but I just say it".

Fortright, she may be, but those who get through the armour know she has a heart of gold.

Susie built up her business from scratch 24 years ago.

Now, she has 30,000 clients on her books and competes with the big boys like Axa and Bupa for contracts. She has won many industry accolades, including for the best insurance intermediary in the country in 2004.



Susie Colley, above, out and about in Torbay and offering to clean the toilets at Torre Abbey, left



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working. I thought, it is not going to do either me or my daughter any good to give up. I needed the money so I had to get out there and get on with it."

She set up her offices at the back of her home, where she still works today.

"This place was disgusting, everything was filthy, I had to take a razor blade to the door handles because of the layers of muck."

"I worked my bum off, creating the first website, admittedly not a very good one, in the evenings after Becky was in bed."

"I remember one night working in the conservatory when the winds were really howling outside and one of the ceiling panes just blew off. I remember getting up, finding a ladder and fixing it back in again before getting on with my work."

"To get ahead you have got to work hard, it is as simple as that."

Susie knows a lot about putting the hours in. She gets up at 5.30am and has a to-do list that would send most running a mile. She still heads the business with the help of one member of staff and is very involved in community organisations. She is chairman of the Torre and Upton Community Partnership, Abbey Park Friends and Friends of Upton Park. Until recently, she headed Torquay's neighbourhood plan and stood for

She says her unique selling point is to go the extra mile for long-standing clients, particularly when they find themselves in the midst of a medical crisis.

"I have been doing this job for a long time and I know who the best consultants are for this or that. I want to get things sorted out for people and make it easier, I guess that's the nurse in me."

It is also the old fashioned work ethic that helped Susie in 1998, when she suddenly found herself alone with a 14-year old daughter after the death of her GP husband Peter.

"Six months after, I packed up out of our home in Abbotskerswell and moved to Torquay. I don't really remember a lot about it, I was just



Mayor for a second time in May's elections, losing to returning Mayor Gordon Oliver.

She said: "The business took a bit of a hit during the mayoral campaign because I couldn't keep on top of it all but I am recruiting again now because you can never have enough business."

Now, she is at the helm of the Torquay Chamber of Commerce and has big plans for the future.

She is calling for affiliation with Plymouth Chamber of Commerce to boost the resources available to Bay businesses.

A decision on whether or not to go ahead has been postponed until the autumn.

If successful, it follows Brixham Chamber's move to join with Plymouth and Devon Chamber of Commerce.

She said: "We need to be the voice of business, to really get to grips with what is going on in the country and to ensure that we get the support we deserve. We need to look after our existing businesses and attract new ones to improve the outlook for all of our services and retailers."

"By affiliating, we can have a louder voice. With the new link road, we need to harness the opportunities that will come and the best way to do that is to work together."

Susie is a passionate advocate for the Bay. Her father was a Paignton GP and she followed him into medicine by becoming a nurse, working at the London Hospital in the 1960s, treating some notorious characters.

She was in theatre when they brought the Kray twins in, one with a



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stab wound and the other with a gunshot wound.

She recalled: "I must have been quite haughty because I remember saying to a policeman who was loitering 'You shouldn't be on the corridor, this is supposed to be a sterile area'."

"I didn't know who they were at first but everyone else seemed to know they were notorious."

"It was so much fun and so exhilarating but it was bloody hard work."

Susie was every inch the model nurse, wearing the archetypal uniform of bustle and cape.

Tiring of city life and in search of adventure, Susie hopped on a £10 passage to Australia.

The Fair Star immigration ship set sail from Southampton in 1967.

Three months in, she was running half the hospital at the Royal North-

shore in Sydney as night duty supervisor.

She returned to nurse her sick mother – as the only unmarried sibling in her large family, the duty fell to her.

It was an episode that brought her back to the big city and a spell working as a midwife.

Then she met her future husband, 24 years her senior, when he took over from her GP father William Blackmore at Bishops Place surgery in Paignton.

The couple married and Becky was born in 1983.

Becky was just 14 when Peter died, during heart surgery for an aortic aneurysm.

As a lone parent, Susie worked to send Becky, now a solicitor, through university education.

The experience galvanised Susie's fighting spirit. She says the loss has made her even stronger, ever conscious that life is too short to waste on broken promises and endless meetings with no results.

That's why she prefers to take the direct approach.

"It's not that I don't care, I don't get up in the morning wanting to upset people but if people stand in my way or are obstructive, I am not scared to tell them that they are wrong."

"I will always put my hand up if I make a mistake and I expect other people to do the same."

Outside of work, Susie seeks peace and quite walking with her Scottie dogs or pottering in the garden.

"It is my escape," she says. "It's important to set time aside to clear your mind."

