

Helen O'Grady Drama Academy successful expansion across Ireland.

Lisa Semple has a winning way with words and action that helps to make her one of the most successful franchisees in the United Kingdom.

Lisa, is Principal of the Helen O'Grady Drama Academy in Northern Ireland, and is justifiably proud of its reach, with 31 studios now in the north, four in the Republic and five more planned to launch in September.

The gently-spoken 40-year-old has been expanding the Academy since she took over two years ago from the territory's founding Principal, Duncan Rice, who was returning home to set up the Academy's South African operation.

Lisa's Irish lilt grows more passionate as she talks about her success and pays tribute to those who have helped – from the franchise management to the teachers and the children who remain her focus.

“When the National Director, Nigel Le Page offered me the franchise, I couldn't raise the money fast enough – it was such a brilliant opportunity.”

“Duncan gave me such a good grounding and the back-up from Nigel and his staff is so good. I had never run a business before and so was really green about it. Nigel has been a huge support. He's very much a positive hands-on boss in that he is always there if you need help.”

Lisa is a clear example of how franchises can provide the training and support that enable people from all backgrounds to succeed in a competitive business environment. She had no extensive business knowledge, coming as she did from an arts education culture.

She explains: “I've been involved with drama on and off since primary school. There is a strong drama tradition in Northern Ireland supported in the schools and through the festivals. We had a strong drama club at my school and I also acted in amateur productions but had no real desire to make it professionally.”

Lisa studied for a degree at Rowe College in Devon in 1985 and then transferred to University of Ulster at Coleraine where she completed a degree in English and Drama in 1989.

She says: “It was a great place to study drama and a wonderful way to get onto the stage and learn the ropes, literally sometimes! The degree gave me the chance to learn stage craft from all angles – front and backstage.

“After graduating, I travelled to Morocco where I taught English in a small village school in the Atlas Mountains for six months. It was a magical time and I met many wonderful people there. I then travelled back through Europe – teaching English in Madrid, Paris and in Belgium.”

Lisa then paused for breath at home in Northern Ireland before heading to Guernsey for three and a half years.

“That was a great time! I joined the island’s amateur dramatic club and had a lot of fun there. At the same time I really wanted to teach but did not have the formal qualification so worked in restaurants, banks and as a holiday rep.

“My partner and I decided to move back to Northern Ireland to have our first child, Micha and I was a full-time mum until my daughter was six years old. We were living in a remote part of Northern Ireland and I kept active by joining MENSAs and other associations.

“When my second daughter, Shannon, started school at four years old, I became friendly with the Head Teacher who asked me to help as a classroom assistant informally.

“I did that for a couple of years as well as running an after school club and then took the Head’s advice and applied to study for my PGCE at the University of Ulster. Competition was fierce, with 160 applicants and 19 places but I think my life experience was a key part of my successful application.”

Lisa’s mum and husband Stephen helped with child care and she completed the full-time course in 2000 but it was not easy to find a teaching post in the region.

But after two years of fruitless searching, Lisa found not only her first teaching job but also the Academy.

“I found a good position as a temporary teacher and at about the same time I saw a local newspaper advert for drama teachers for the Helen O’Grady Drama Academy. I applied and met the then Principal, Duncan, who gave me a chance.”

Lisa’s passion for drama and her teaching skills were a winning combination and Duncan offered her a promotion and full-time work about a year later.

“Duncan asked me to take on the role of Deputy Vice Principal in September 2003. It was then a choice between full-time mainstream teaching and the Academy. Duncan was very persuasive and I decided to take a chance and the opportunity with Helen O’Grady.

“The main reasons why I decided to stay were that I was still getting the experience of teaching in class structure and I love teaching. Also I was having such a lovely, positive time at the Academy.

“In lots of ways, school can be a place where children are focussed on what they don’t know, rather than what they do know. Helen O’Grady is all about positive reinforcement.”

Lisa is also committed to inclusion. She has been working recently with a fostering organisation that funds children who wish to join Academy classes – and other development groups.

Lisa says: “Our teaching is all inclusive. We have children from all backgrounds and abilities.”

That is echoed by Nigel Le Page. He says: “The Academy builds a very strong sense of community among its pupils. They learn mutual respect and tolerance. Our Northern Ireland branch is a real example of this, with 1,500 students, bringing together children from all backgrounds.”

The Academy now covers 60 per cent of the UK but the desire to expand this rare social enterprise has opened opportunities for people to take on the challenge of establishing studios in the rest of the country, particularly in the Midlands, North and South West. Nigel believes strongly that there is a need in the UK for another 30 studios, offering self-development and inclusion to 20-24,000 children.

Lisa has also been building links with organisations that assist parents of home-schooled children.

“It’s very important to us that those children who may have challenges such as Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder or perhaps are somewhere on the autism scale can have somewhere to go and learn new skills.

“If, for example, we have a child who has Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and they can stand still for even two minutes while doing some speech training, then that is such an achievement! We value that so much.

“These young people are often marginalised or excluded from the mainstream so our emphasis on inclusion and positivity is really needed. These kids have so much to offer.

“It’s lovely to see a child blossoming in a warm and embracing environment, developing a strong voice and real confidence. Drama is all about making yourself heard and so our children learn that what they say is important. There’s no way that they will be put in a corner and told to be quiet!

“We have three rules at our classes: listen to what everyone else is saying; no one gets hurt physically or emotionally; and ... listen to the tambourine. That last one means the children learn to freeze when they hear it!

“If a child is confident and knows that what they say is important then they can be comfortable with themselves. I think the Academy helps to give them these life skills.”

And from time to time, the Academy can celebrate breakthroughs that border on the incredible. For example, Lisa had a six-year-old child who had Selective Mutism – she had made the choice not to communicate. Her mum

wanted her to be in a social group and had been refused access to other groups in the past.

Lisa explains: “Recently, while we were rehearsing our annual play, the teacher asked the children to use their loudest and fiercest Pirate voice to say ‘Oh Arrr!’ – and this little girl joined in with a very loud response! She then joined in a verbal game at the end of the class.

“As you can imagine, her mum was thrilled to bits and quite emotional when she came to pick her up. It’s these kinds of positive changes that I love.”

Lisa’s two elder children both go to the Academy classes and her youngest, four year old Nathan can’t wait to start next year.

Her energy, drive, imagination and determination also give her time to be a lay magistrate and be fully involved in her children school activities.

She says: “Now I just want to go on building the Academy in Ireland. I can’t see myself doing anything else. I’ve got the best job in the world!”