

Spotlight on...

Bianca Robinson, CEO of CEO SleepOut



In July Bianca Robinson kindly talked to us about her journey to becoming CEO of the brilliant charity CEO SleepOut.

Tell us about CEO SleepOut

CEO Sleepout is an incredible charity initiative that brings business leaders together for one night sleeping under the stars, unlocking understanding and compassion while raising big money to fight homelessness in each of our host cities.

To date we've raised £3.2 million from over 5000 participants, and donated to over 100 frontline charities - changing countless lives.

The real beauty of what we do is that our business leaders recognise their power and role in reducing some of the stark inequalities in our society, and are often moved to make changes to policy, procedures and actions that really move them towards the triple-bottom-line measure of success - putting people and planet alongside

profit as a motive for doing business. We call these "Leaders With Purpose".

Your journey so far and the reason behind you joining CEO SleepOut

I'm a New Zealander who has spent the last 20 years living on a cliff top overlooking the North Sea, washing up on the beach there after stints snowboarding in Colorado, building sales teams in London and Edinburgh and having twin daughters in New Zealand before returning to the UK in 2002.

During my time in the North East, I've been a business-developer, media-sales manager, agency account manager, Managing Director of a growing digital and creative agency, a freelance digital marketing and brand consultant, and part time university lecturer.

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I had never understood homelessness. And had never really seen rough sleepers until I got to America, and then London. It was shocking to my young eyes to see people making their life on the streets on the strand, and at Charing Cross. In Edinburgh, I would see rough sleepers lined up on Lothian Road, where temperatures would drop to -15°C some nights. I would wonder how they would make it through. It seemed wrong to me that in the UK, the 6th wealthiest nation in the world, we have homelessness. I started to sense that business could make a difference.

CEO Sleepout was set up by Andy Preston, who is now the elected Mayor of Middlesbrough. Andy had been successful in the banking industry and returned to his hometown where he enacted his own version of "levelling up", recognising the stark levels of poverty in the area. To encourage businesses to support local community initiatives, Andy set up The Middlesbrough and Teesside Philanthropic Foundation and it was via this that the first CEO Sleepout was held. He managed to twist my arm to participate and it was really tough - cold, uncomfortable - and it snowed! The first event raised £37,000 and the charity CEO SLEEPOUT UK was created thereafter.

Fast-forward three years, Andy and his PA, Dianne, had grown the concept to cover cities like Manchester, London, Birmingham, Cardiff and Liverpool, in their spare time and purely voluntarily. I got a call from Andy inviting me to help the Charity to grow throughout the UK. I offered 2 days a week, but soon realised that the charity used the best of my skill set. I became CEO in January 2019 and was the only paid employee until 2021.

What does a typical day look like for you and what are you currently working on?

I am still largely hands-on, running the operations of the charity day to day. That's because CEO Sleepout is a bit like the Wizard of Oz; when you pull back the green curtain there's only me - with the help of Joanna 2 days/week. There is a never-ending task list, and I am always thinking strategically about how to grow the Charity, the products we offer, what comes next for people that have participated and how we can do more good.

I build connections in cities across the UK, to create a network of advocates and cheer-leaders who will encourage their peers to get involved. For each event, I source a venue that offers a secure place to sleep as we have a duty of care to our participants to keep them safe. I engage with credible frontline charities who will become beneficiaries of funds raised. I then build a steering committee with community and business leaders - looking for support from the local Chamber, the University, various business networks, the

Clergy (occasionally the Bishop might get involved and sleep out as in Nottingham and Worcester)! Then we recruit participants, which involves a mixture of networking, PR and marketing. Once we have them signed up, we communicate and encourage a high fundraising target or a direct donation before holding, hosting and managing the event itself. To date I have slept out over 65 times.

Your biggest success to date and what it meant to you and CEO SleepOut

My biggest success is not numbers, I think it's ongoing - moving CEO Sleepout from a business fundraiser around the concept of homelessness



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to a business fundraiser that brings people in business closer to those who have fallen through cracks that we as a society have allowed to open. Because we bring people with lived experience to our events to give their testimony, our business leaders can look upon people who have found themselves homeless as mirrors to themselves, with hopes, dreams, talents, and a desire for care and love just as we all have. I think moving business leaders to act within their own business is my greatest success. For example, numerous businesses have told me that they've signed up to the Living Wage, re-written policies to include and measure social value, or committed to taking on more apprentices from hard to reach groups - and the list goes on.

What do you look for when recruiting?

Reliability. Work on events starts at 24 weeks out, and all milestones need to be hit to ensure a successful event. So we are always working backwards, with up to 20 different events on the go, and numerous plates spinning. So I need someone who I can rely on to just get stuff done! Other qualities I look for are humour, great under pressure, people-oriented, and teamwork!

If you could switch jobs with someone, who would it be?

My friend Nicole works at the New Zealand Space Agency and I won't deny I was green with envy when she got that role!! I love anything to do with space and even took an astrophysics paper at university!

"Thank you Bianca for talking to us and giving us an insight into your incredible charity and your inspiring journey. Bexley Beaumont is proud to have supported the CEO SleepOut; a thought-provoking night where we saw first-hand the difference you make and learnt about how we can play our part to support."

KAREN BEXLEY, BEXLEY BEAUMONT CEO



If you could choose anyone, who would you pick as your mentor?

Melinda French-Gates. Her work with women is significant and far-reaching and will impact humanity positively for decades to come.

What is your motto or personal mantra?

Live and let live. It reminds me not to judge and not to try to be anyone's saviour either.

Given a chance, who would you like to be for a day?

The people I admire don't need me to step into their shoes and stuff things up for them!! But I am 100% sure I could do a better job than our incumbent but outgoing PM right now.

The part of your day you most look forward to is...

That first cup of tea, sitting in my tiny but lush garden with the sun* coming through the foliage.
*only happens in summer

One piece of advice you would tell your younger self

Don't be afraid to fail. You are here for all of it!

Life away from work involves...

Reading, walking on the beach, travelling (I am in Bali as I write this), painting, playing guitar badly and spending time with my daughters and friends.