

YOU'VE HEARD OF TIGER MOTHERS – *I had a Tiger Father!*

Maleka Dattu talks to Victoria Young about fulfilling her dream of running a beauty business – and having her first child at 48



Maleka Dattu lives in London with her husband, Mike, and their one-year-old daughter, Yasmin.

I have wanted my own company ever since I was in my teens. But it took me until I was 46 to have a clear picture of what it was going to be.

You've heard of the Tiger Mother – well I had a Tiger Father. Coming from an Asian background, it's all about academic achievement and professions like doctor, dentist, lawyer. When I decided I wanted to do hairdressing, my father was absolutely horrified – it was just the worst thing for him.

We came to a deal. I'd do my A levels and if after doing them

I really didn't want to go to university, he would concede. But I really wasn't engaged with my studies and after a year my dad said to me, "I think I've wasted a year of your life, go and do hairdressing."

My mum is from Zanzibar and my dad is from Dar es Salaam. He came to the UK in 1959 and was an electrical engineer, working in the Control Tower at Heathrow Airport. He used to go on courses to keep up with the radar equipment, and if he got 99 per cent, he'd torture himself over that one per cent – and he very much had that attitude towards his children. I think some of that DNA has rubbed off on me. I'm very persistent and tenacious.

I spent three years at hairdressing college. But I knew I didn't want to go and work in a hairdressing salon. It wasn't going to be big enough.

A lady from Sothys skincare came to the college to do a demonstration and I said, "That's what I want to do." I called her the very next day, asking to be her assistant. Straight after college, I went to work in her showroom near London's King's Road. My dad was very disappointed. He said, "Well, you're just a shop girl."

I went to work for Clinique when I was 23. I'd go into its stores and train people, and I'd also run training schools for new products. I was there for ten years. We took the brand to No 1 and it was a fantastic time.

Over the years I worked in every area of the beauty business, from training to field sales to marketing and management. I was general manager of Origins for ten

years, and worked on Lancôme too. At 42, I went to the US to be a senior vice-president at Estée Lauder.

Eventually, I had this epiphany that if I wanted my own business, it wasn't going to fall into my lap. I came back from America four years later having left the Lauder group, just as the recession started. I knew it was now or never, so in May 2010, I started to plan.

By this time, I was married to my third husband, Mike. I first got married very young at the age of 23 but that didn't last long. I married again in 2002, when I was 39. That lasted for three years and I had several miscarriages. After that, I tried to get pregnant on my own with donor sperm. I tried five times but it didn't work.

Dr Shehata told me that I had a one per cent chance of getting pregnant

It wasn't until I was 46 that I met Mike. We met on the Internet yet he lived less than a mile away! Despite my age, we still hoped for a family. I saw a show

featuring Dr Hassan Shehata, who helped a woman to conceive after she'd had 18 consecutive miscarriages. I went to see him and he told me that I had a one per cent chance of getting pregnant – and each month the chances were even less.

Still, he said he would try to help. I took the follicle-stimulating hormone, and he treated me with a combination of progesterone therapy and steroids. And then – at 48 – I got pregnant naturally and stayed that way! Dr Shehata said he'd never come across anyone else who'd done it.

I was over the moon. But, somehow, I'd always had faith that I'd be blessed with

a child. Yasmin was ten weeks premature. She weighed less than a kilo and was in intensive and special care at St. Mary's, Paddington, for nine weeks.

When she was born – in May 2011 – I was absolutely elated. It was just incredible. Even though she was so premature, I don't remember feeling stressed. I just had complete faith that all would be well. She got stronger and stronger, and now she is great – completely amazing. She truly is a miracle baby.

My skincare range was being born at the same time. The first bit had involved sticking Post-it notes all over a flip chart on the wall. They were headed with everything from "packaging" and "distribution", to "tagline", "brand names", "philosophy" and "USPs". There were times when I'd wake up at 2.30am with a thought then get up to write on the wall.

Then I pulled it all together. I went to conferences where cosmetic scientists were talking to each other. I went to packaging exhibitions and trade shows. I researched competitors, and looked at retail environments. I researched formulators and manufacturing facilities. I knew I wanted it to be a British brand. Even though I'd got to the heights of senior vice president in an office on Fifth Avenue overlooking Central

inspirational women

Park, when I came to do it on my own, I suddenly realised how much I didn't know.

Merumaya, my company's name, is an amalgamation of my name and the names of my mother, father and sister. It's partly a tribute to my father as it's what he'd have called a business had he started one. But he used to say to be an entrepreneur, you need to be able to take some risks and he didn't want to risk our future.

We launched the product last October. I'm particularly proud of my Iconic Youth Serum, which is an incredible formula for the prevention of skin ageing. In January, it launched in John Lewis – I didn't tell people about that for ages in case I jinxed it! One of the joys of having my own brand is that I can also see my miracle child several times a day. She also spends Fridays with my mother and father. There's a love you get from your grandparents you don't get from anywhere else – full of wisdom and patience. I want her to spend as much time as possible with them.

I'm on a mission to help other women who want to start businesses. I have a blog and do speaking events, and my message to all women in their forties who are wondering if their "happy ever after" is coming is: please believe, and don't give up! **w&h**

MALEKA'S BUSINESS TIPS

- + **Do it! Don't wait as long as I did!**
- + **Experience counts. Pick a category that you know well.**
- + **Work with the 80/20 rule. When 80 per cent is right, just get on and do it, and you'll fix the 20 per cent as you go along.**
- + **If you can, keep the day job while you plan, to help finances. See the range at merumaya.com.**



PHOTOGRAPH LIZ McAULAY HAIR LAURENCE CLOSE AT H&M'S CREATIVE MAKE-UP JO BULL AT H&M'S CREATIVE AND SARAH JANE GREEN AT TFA STYLING JILLIE MURPHY JACKET FRENCH CONNECTION AT JOHN LEWIS T-SHIRT SANDWICH EARRINGS VAN PETERSON BANGLE MAXMARA