

Debbie with son Jackson outside The Library Café, which she set up to help other parents of children with serious allergies.



doesn't even cover it. As a young mum back in New Zealand, she never quite fitted in and grew bored. In London she'd helped plan a huge wedding and loved it, so she started a wedding planning business here. Four years later she had planned more than 80 weddings and even had a slot on *Good Morning*. As if this wasn't enough, she and her friend Teresa also launched www.venuesearch.co.nz, to help couples find the perfect wedding venue.

Sadly, despite her career success, her marriage had fallen apart. Being a broke single mum she asked her friend Richard to move in to help with bills. He was a financial analyst and together they launched www.gobble.co.nz at the end of that summer, specialising in healthy delivered food options. Within the first year they turned over the first million dollars, received media exposure and Sarah was a finalist in the Young Entrepreneur of

the Year awards. Then her whole world fell apart when the police walked in and arrested Richard for defrauding the finance company he worked for. He was sentenced to three-and-a-half years in prison. "It was a nightmare," says Sarah. Since Richard was responsible for Gobble's books, the business was in far more trouble than she thought. To pay debtors, she re-launched Gobble as a catering company. But friends couldn't disappear fast enough and her name was trashed on primetime TV. "I moved into my parents' basement. A guy called Mitch came to work for me as a kitchen hand and became my right-hand man in every way."

Despite their efforts, one of the debts became unrealistic and Sarah was bankrupt.

"Dad acquired the business and I worked unpaid for the next three years." Mitch and Sarah got married and slogged through 60-

Women We Love

to 70-hour weeks but Sarah's health suffered. The only way to manage her systemic candidiasis (a fungal infection of the bloodstream) was a sugar- and gluten-free diet. Worse still, both children were diagnosed with a gluten intolerance. "It was a nightmare. We just couldn't afford gluten-free food, so I started baking."

At the same time, they were receiving enquiries at Gobble for gluten-free food and had started working on a range of recipes that encompassed allergies. In 2009 they tested their food at the Takapuna Markets and for six months baked every Saturday (the whole family would help pack and label), often sleeping only a couple of hours and rising at 3.30am to sell their goods. The next logical step was a store. There were so many great Kiwi-made gluten-free products but they had to travel everywhere to get them.

In November 2009 they opened The Gluten Free Grocer in Auckland's Eden Terrace, as well as an online shop.

"I still have photos of Mitch on our first day looking so proud in the shop. It's hilarious because we could afford only limited stock so we had to block off half the shop to make it look less empty!" says Sarah.

The gamble has paid off and slowly they have climbed out of debt. It's been hell but Sarah still smiles. "We found humour in dark places and the only way we could do this was with the whole family on board. No matter how grim, we made packing up biscuits with the kids or going to the markets fun. It just shows that even in the hardest of times, you really are well-off and can succeed if you have love."

Debbie Leaver

When Aucklander Debbie Leaver, 36, found herself pregnant after a previous miscarriage she felt like she'd gone from eating whatever she wanted to constantly having to enquire about ingredients to see if food was pregnancy-friendly or not. What surprised her was the reactions to her requests - she was met by a lot of blank faces and often made to feel fussy.

It made her realise how hard eating out must be for people with allergies. It was there that the seed of the idea that is now the Library Café was germinated. The idea became reality when baby Jackson arrived. He developed chronic eczema when he went on solids. It turned out he had some serious intolerances and for a while

couldn't eat gluten, egg, dairy or tomatoes. The idea for an allergy-friendly café suddenly gained personal impetus for Debbie and husband Ross. With backgrounds in marketing, the wheels were turning fast and a plan was formulating.

When Jackson was 18 months old they took a trip to the UK. They remembered the abundant organic market in England and had half an eye on looking for a franchise or ideas to bring back that would incorporate allergy-friendly organic food. But as they probed deeper, they were disappointed to find the industry wasn't what it seemed. They stopped over in Malaysia and, while Debbie's family slept, she spent 12 jet-lagged hours planning her future.

"I couldn't sleep," said Debbie. "So I planned my dream café right there, in a little notebook, from the menu to the layout and decor. I just knew there was nothing like this and we had to make it happen."

And they did. They searched for the perfect building and ended up finding one right on their doorstep. Debbie had been in love with the Carnegie Library Building in Onehunga, which originally opened in 1912. There had been restaurants there before but none had succeeded.

As if Debbie needed any more signs that what she was doing was right, Jackson had a serious anaphylactic reaction to a cashew four months before the café opened. "It was one of the worst moments of our lives watching him struggle to breathe, and swell up. We realised what we were doing was crucial for parents of children with serious allergies. As terrifying as it was, it gave us the understanding to make this place truly compassionate."

The Library Café has been a huge success. Its 100% gluten-free kitchen ensures no airborne contamination - and everything is marked for allergies. There's a large kids' play area in the corner and the café is filled with happy customers every day.

Debbie's advice to anyone starting a business? "Do what you love and are passionate about. I experience joy every day. Be it a kids' party where everyone can eat everything - no matter what allergies they have - or watching a child's face light up when they're told they can eat anything in the cabinet. How many people can say they genuinely make people happy every day? I couldn't in my former corporate life but I certainly can now." ▶

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