

Donna Leach

Skill: Hairdressing

From: Cinderford
Competed in: WorldSkills 2007, Shizuoka
Employer: The Cutting Edge, Cinderford
Result: Medallion for Excellence

Qualifications

- 6 GCSE's



Twenty-two year old Donna Leach has always known she wanted to be a hairdresser. Then, when she joined The Cutting Edge, it was almost inevitable that she would take part in WorldSkills, as the company already had two employees who had competed at WorldSkills in the past. However, little did she know she'd be going to Japan and returning with a Medallion for Excellence for her work in the Hairdressing competition.

What does Donna enjoy about hairdressing?

Well for her it's about the love of being able to get involved with new fashion and style trends which affect the way people want their hair cut. Her job entails every part of hairdressing and she thrives on the variety the job has to offer.

Was WorldSkills something she always wanted to do when she joined the Cutting Edge?

With two past competitors as work colleagues Donna was quick to become interested and sign up. But first she had to prove herself to the judges and competed at three competitions before earning herself a place on Team UK. Although she shone through her rounds, Donna still says she was shocked when she was finally told she had won a place on the team.

How did Donna find the training?

Donna says that training was tough but worth it.

"I was lucky to have a really supportive employer who gave me a lot of salon time to train and general time off my real job to prepare for the competition. Training takes up all your spare time and you work really, really, hard but it has perks as well - one of the best parts for me was that I got to go to France and Germany to train with top hairdressers which was amazing."

So what was it like to be part of Team UK?

For Donna, being part of such a close team really helped her. "The team was made up of such amazing people. We all supported each other throughout the competition which was invaluable to us as we were so far from home. In fact I'm still in contact with them now which is great."

"I hadn't really been away from my family for that long before and had never been to somewhere like Japan, so the team became my family and were there for me when I felt down or worried."

And what about competing, what was that like?

Donna is quick to say that it was the most incredible experience but that she was very nervous to start with. Especially when she saw all the people arriving to watch the competition! However, true to form, once she got going she forgot about the crowds and got on with the job in hand.

How did Donna get on?

Well Donna's hard work paid off. She received a Medallion for Excellence for her work. Her family, boyfriend and boss - who travelled to Japan to give Donna extra support - are all extremely proud of her, and rightly so.

So what was it like getting back to the UK?

"It was great to have a rest!" quips Donna. "I felt absolutely exhausted and I just couldn't believe I'd actually done it!"

"After months and months of training, the four days at WorldSkills seemed to go so quickly. It seemed the competition was over before it began! It was just such a great thing to be part of."

Has anything changed since Donna came back?

For Donna the biggest difference is confidence.

"Since I've competed my confidence has shot up. I did a lot of media interviews for my local papers and I was in a tv documentary which has also helped. Before I started all this I was quite shy but now I'm happy to do interviews, speak in front of people and I'm sure in myself that my work is good quality. I'm a better hairdresser because of WorldSkills which helps me and my company, although I'm probably a bit too much of a perfectionist now!"

What advice would Donna give to others wanting to take part?

Donna says "definitely go for it"! For her the experience was unbeatable and she insists that taking part makes you a better person both in terms of your career skills and personal skills.

So what now for Donna?

Well the first thing on Donna's list is preparing to become a mum, as she is now happily pregnant! After that though, she is looking forward to a long career, putting what skills she has learnt into practice and becoming a very successful hairdresser.

A word with Donna's employer: Claire Winnall, owner, The Cutting Edge

Claire is not new to competitions. She has actively encouraged her staff to compete for years and first had an employee compete at WorldSkills in 2001. Last year Donna became Claire's third WorldSkills competitor! She has always believed in the benefits of competing to both her employees and her business and continues to inspire staff to take part.

Why does Claire believe competing is so important?

For Claire the answers simple.

"Competing is great to help develop skills, especially specialist 'dressing of hair', artistry and technical brilliance. It teaches time management and combines speed with excellent standards. Through UK Skills our younger employees have a chance to shine; we positively encourage our staff to compete."

But what's it like training someone for WorldSkills?

This can be tough. As Claire says, "The salon has to cope with quite a bit of absence because the competitor has to attend team building trips, training sessions, competitions and so on." On top of that Claire gives them one day off from clients per week specifically for training, and helps train them on a Sunday or Monday, when salon is closed.

"The main problems in the past is the lack of notice for when competitors are going to be away from the salon because we have to rearrange clients' appointments which can be annoying for them and the fact that you are covering your staff's wages when they aren't there working, which can be difficult for a small company – especially for me as I've currently got three employees in training!"

What does Claire think the benefits are?

Claire believes there are advantages for the business and the individuals. For the competitor the advantages are that the training and constant practice makes them a much better stylist and enables them to get through their NVQ much quicker. As a company you have better stylists to serve your customers and receive good publicity for the company. Claire has also found that her clients get interested in competitors progress which makes them more popular and in demand and consequently the salon is able to charge more for that staff members' appointments."

What would Claire's advice be to other salons thinking of getting involved?

As a woman with years of experience in this field her advice is simple. "Definitely get involved. Currently most of the competitors come through the college route, but salons need to get more involved and send their trainees or apprentices to skills competitions. This would help raise the average age (and therefore experience) of the competitors. It is much better to have 21 or 22 year olds going to WorldSkills rather than 18 or 19 year olds as the older the competitor, the more training they will have received and therefore we have a greater chance of Gold medals."



For more information, please contact the PR Team, UK Skills: 020 7612 9260