



# Hatch a big idea and your success could reach the summit of Everest

WHEN **Stuart Steele** took the call telling him how his **Silver Hill** duck down had helped to save the life of a man stranded on Everest, the first thing he did was share the news with about 200 people.

The managing director of **Silver Hill Feathers** and **Silver Hill Foods** told his parents, Ronnie and Lyla, and the staff who work at the family business collecting duck eggs, nurturing hatchlings, producing new cooked products, devising recipes, processing duck down, producing duvets or researching biofuel products. One way or another, he figured, they had all been instrumental in the Everest rescue.

"I had received a call to say that when the guy got stranded our clothing had kept him cosy until he could be saved," said Steele. It was further confirmation that the business started by Ronnie and Lyla in 1962 has reached unimagined heights across the globe.

Steele's parents, who met working in a hatchery in Co Cavan in the late 1950s, opened their duck farm on 27 acres in Emyvale, Co Monaghan, two years after they married in 1960. "We got a loan for IR£5,000 (€6,400) from the local bank, though we had to go to their Belfast office to ask for it," said Lyla. "The manager thought it was very novel idea and liked the fact that we knew a bit about poultry." By then, Ronnie, who had grown up in Britain, had been in the poultry business in Ireland since 1950.

"He was the driving force," said Lyla. "Our idea was to run a hatchery and sell day-olds to farmers and co-operatives. They needed a weekly supply so we quickly got a return on investment."

That worked well until about 1967, when the co-operatives realised they could do the job more cheaply themselves. So **Silver Hill** farm took a different tack by entering the food business, getting ducks plucked and ready for the table. Staff numbers began to grow as the job was done manually then.

While Ronnie ran the farm, Lyla handled the business side of operations, visiting wholesalers around the country. "I would drive up to Dublin and knock on doors," she said. "They thought this operation would not last, so they ordered weekly, but it has."

As with any farm, the couple put in long hours seven days a week. Over the years, Ronnie bred his own **Silver Hill** hybrid duckling to produce a flavour-some bird.

In 1973, **Silver Hill** became the first poultry brand in Ireland and Britain to receive a licence to export to Europe. Now it exports 80% of its ducks to Europe and Asia. It has cornered the market for ducks that are sold with their



Stuart, right, started out collecting eggs at his parents' company



heads still attached in Chinese restaurants across Europe.

The farm was producing 40,000 ducks a week by the 1980s, and that figure has doubled since then. As land came available in Co Monaghan and Co Tyrone, they bought it up. One of their biggest purchases was 175 acres near the village of Aughnacloy 13 years ago.

Today they have about 600 acres and turnover at all operations tops €25m. Although Ronnie and Lyla don't hold the reins any more, they visit the farm

every day from their home three miles away and are still very involved.

Lyla advises budding entrepreneurs to do their homework before getting started: "Research your project as much as you can and then stick with it, no matter what. There will always be little setbacks, but you carry on." Having the right partner makes all the difference, according to Ronnie. "Lyla has the best business brain," he said.

In 1987, after spending a year in Australia, Stuart, 40, the youngest of the couple's three children, joined them. "I started off at the bottom collecting eggs," he said. "I was determined not to be the typical boss's son."

Stuart went from operative to farm manager and then general manager. He became managing director in the late 1990s. "I wouldn't ask anyone else to do something unless I could do it myself or know how to do it," he said. He expects the same of his staff, and new managers are sent to work as operatives before they become executives.

Raw meat makes up 75% of the business's revenue, with cooked duck accounting for about 20% and feathers 5% to 10%. **Silver Hill** has made duvets, pillows and cushions from duck down for 20 years and Stuart is keen to expand the cooked food and feather arms.

More recently, the company has added bio-energy and organic manure to its growing product range. "No part of the duck goes to waste, not even its quack," he said, as his phone quacked loudly.

In 2006, he was on the shortlist for Ireland's Entrepreneur of the Year award, but he freely admits to having made mistakes along the way.

"The most recent was when I tried to get into the low-margin duck business a few years ago," he said. "Feed prices started to accelerate hugely in 2007 and it just wasn't worth it."

China has a grip on this market that is not likely to loosen soon, he says. "Ireland has always been a high-cost place. We produce duck as naturally as possible and we have a lot of people. If you go into the average poultry farm, it's all machines."

The Steeles decided to stick with producing premium duck and collecting ever more Great Taste awards. In 2007, Heston Blumenthal, the British chef whose Fat Duck restaurant has three Michelin stars, named **Silver Hill's** hybrid breed perfect for Peking duck.

Rising costs were still an issue, so the Steeles called in the professionals in the form of adviser David Harkin. "We thought we were doing all we could, but he has helped us save €350,000 already in one area and is now looking at another," said Stuart. "This is all with no sacrifice in quality."

Learning to listen to people is one of the most valuable lessons he has picked up. "It is a lot more important than talking," he said. One of his key pieces of advice to budding entrepreneurs is to always think big. "We have a world atlas on our kitchen wall to remind us." You never know where it might take you — even to the top of Everest.

Rose Costello