

# When business turns to gold

Not being able to find herself a suitable PA was all the motivation Katy Etherington needed to found her own company, as Marianne Sweet discovers



GRAPHIC designer Katy Etherington has joined the ranks of inventor Trevor Baylis, Sainsbury's CEO Justin King and professional boxer Amir Khan for a special award.

Katy, who is based in Berkhamsted, has won an Association of Colleges gold award for founding an online co-operative which helps disabled people find suitable personal assistants and personal carers.

She was nominated by her former college, the National Star College in Gloucestershire.

Katy, who has spinal muscular atrophy and uses a wheelchair, set up PA Pool in 2006 when she was struggling to find a suitable PA.

'I was going through a bad patch of

trying to find PAs and for me PAs are crucial to my independence,' said Katy. 'I thought I couldn't be the only person in the country going through the same problems.

'I first advertised on Gumtree but that wasn't the solution as there was no way to vet the applications. I decided to set up a niche service, to build a community of trusted people.

'It's important that people are given the choice and freedom of their own. Finding a PA is about personalities and compatibilities.'

The service is free and members pay a small subscription charge to join the pool either as a client or a provider. Members can recommend each other which makes a huge difference to those searching for

trustworthy and competent PAs.

PA Pool now has more than 12,000 members across the UK. Katy has tried to juggle managing PA Pool with working full-time as a freelance designer.

'I knew there was something in the idea but I didn't have the confidence or the business acumen to develop it at first. Now I don't have the time to focus solely on it.

'I'd love for someone to take on PA Pool and realise its full potential. I have only scratched the surface so far, especially now as more and more people have control of their personal care allowance.'

Katy worked for 13 years as a senior designer for a large company before setting out on her own. She has worked for clients such as the BBC, Status Quo, Nestle Waters and BaxterStorey.

'I've done my high-flying stuff. I loved it but the hours were long and I didn't have any energy left to do anything for myself. I decided I needed to readdress my work-life balance and set up on my own.'

In June she attended the House of Commons to collect her award. 'I was staggered when I found out. I don't feel worthy, especially against some of the other winners.

'I've just got on with my life. It doesn't feel like I have done anything special.'

She certainly doesn't feel her disability has been a disadvantage in her working life. After studying at the National Star College, which supports disabled young people aged 16-21, Katy went on to Amersham College to study design.

'Everyone has their problems in varying degrees. I believe we are all put on this planet for a reason. When I was first diagnosed I was told I'll be lucky to make it to my early 20s.

'But medical opinions change and here I am at 39. You simply have to make the most of life and get on with it.'