

# ‘The true definition of success is maintaining a balance between work and spending quality time with family and friends’

He spends most of his working life helping very wealthy people get the most out of their money – but Stefan Wissenbach is also keen to help those much less fortunate. He is presently funding the building of an eye hospital that will help thousands of people in Nepal keep or regain their sight. Words: Colin Clark. Pictures: Graham Bedingfield

**H**IS clients all have millions of pounds and it is fair to say that he himself is a wealthy man, but Stefan Wissenbach knows that money isn't everything and jokes that he has no intention of becoming the richest man in the graveyard. His leisure time is every bit as important to him as his work and he insists on a four day week and 12 weeks a year holiday so he can spend quality time with his family. Stefan takes having fun very seriously!

“The true definition of success is maintaining a balance between work and spending quality time with family and friends. It's all about working smarter rather than working harder.

“I think a person's success in work is directly proportionate to how they use their leisure time, so I work four days a week and take lots of holidays – it works, you really do need time to ‘sharpen your saw’. Good leisure time gives you a real edge when you get back to business,” he explains.

And business for Stefan is money. The Wissenbach Group, of which he is chairman, has offices in Berkswell, Warwickshire, as well as Berkeley Square in the heart of London's Mayfair. They specialise in wealth management and investment consultancy and, typically, their clients have a net worth of at least £3million.

But the man who deals with millions of pounds almost daily was certainly not born with a silver spoon in his mouth and was jokingly called ‘lentil boy’ by school friends.

“We didn't have much money and my mum had to bring myself, and my sister Kate, up in a two-bedroom flat, so we used to eat a lot of porridge and lentils – cheap food that would fill you up.

“We never had a television, mum always said it was better to read books. When Kate and I reached the age when we needed separate bedrooms mum simply upped and moved into the living room. It was a frugal sort of upbringing but it was a very happy one,” he recalls.

His mum Jilly was working as a waitress in Switzerland when she met and married his father but, as Stefan explains, it was “not a marriage made in heaven” and the couple divorced when he was young. His mum returned to England with Stefan and Kate and worked at various jobs while studying an Open University degree and finally moving into teaching, going on to become a head teacher.

So, when after achieving nine ‘O’ levels at Aylesbury Grammar School, Stefan told his mum he was wanted to end his ‘A’ level studies and leave school, she didn't take the news lying down.



Stefan with wife Diana and three children Oliver, Alex and Max.

Stefan smiles as he recalls his mum giving him a stern talking to. “She sat me down and told me I could leave school but I had to promise that by the time my friends had graduated from university I would be ahead of them at the point where they would join the career ladder.

“I accepted ‘the challenge’ and joined a financial services company called Target Life in Aylesbury. I became their youngest manager and, by the time my friends had got their degrees, I was in a position high enough to keep mum happy,” he jokes.

He moved to Birmingham to help set up a Target Life branch in the city but it wasn't long before he was branching out and in 1994 set up his own business in the front room of his terraced home in Harborne

“I remember my first day on my own. I had given up a salary and a company car and crashed and wrote off the clapped out old jeep that I had managed to buy. My wife, Diana, thought I was mad!”

Well maybe she did, but Diana has stood by and supported the ‘mad man’ she had met just after her 18th birthday and the couple now have three children, Oliver, Alex and Max.

The family live in a superbly renovated Georgian vicarage in Meriden where Stefan and Diana work hard to ensure their children grown up with their feet

firmly on the ground.

“They do enjoy many of the benefits that money can provide but we are determined that they won't take things for granted. When we travel abroad Diana and I go up near the front of the plane – but not the kids. They have to learn that anything other than economy travel has to be earned the same as many other things in life. Yes they do enjoy many of the finer things in life, but making things too easy for them won't do them any good in the future.

The main advantage they have is that they are part of a loving family, that's something much more important than money, as my mum proved to me,” he says.

Another of Stefan's passions is self development, both for himself and his staff, and every 90 days he flies to Chicago where, with a group of successful American business people, he attends sessions with an entrepreneurial coach.

“Maybe it's because I didn't have a father figure when I was growing up,” he reflects, “but I have always sought the input of a mentor or coach to help me make decisions in life. I had some great mentors when I first started work and I have sought out others as I developed. In Chicago we meet as a group and, under the coach's guidance, we discuss strategies and ideas ►

## WARWICKSHIRE CHARACTER



Stefan Wissenbach.



Above: A factory in Ethiopia producing concrete stoves.

that we then take back to our own workplaces. The benefits have been enormous and it is something I intend to continue doing. In a way it becomes addictive – you can see it working so you want to keep on doing it.

“We actually use less than 10 per cent of our mental capacity – the scope for improvement is enormous. We are only here once so we might as well make the best of things while we can.”

It is this sort of attitude behind Stefan’s moves to help those less fortunate and The Wissenbach Group was recently behind providing hundreds of villagers in Ethiopia with concrete stoves in an attempt to help prevent blindness and respiratory problems.

The Wissenbach Ethiopian Development Project is being undertaken in partnership with the Fred Hollows Foundation (UK), one of the leading blindness prevention organisations in the world. Since its inception 15 years ago the Foundation has helped to restore the sight of more than one million people worldwide.

In the Simien Mountain region of Ethiopia, many village huts have primitive cooking conditions where smoke from fires causes widespread eye and lung problems as well as blindness. The concrete stoves substantially reduce the amount of firewood and

burning time required to cook and cut smoke by up to 80 per cent thus alleviating associated health problems.

Stefan’s latest project with the Foundation is the building of the Wissenbach Eye Hospital in Nepal where many people are left blind through easily treated problems such as cataracts.

He explains: “There is much unnecessary blindness simply because the treatment facilities are not in place. We want to establish this hospital which will then run ‘eye camps’ with doctors going out into the villages and treating more than 100 people every day.

“Doing something like this introduces some balance to our lives, it means we can give something back, something that can really make a difference to people’s lives.

“Early next year I will be taking my children and some colleagues to see the sort of work that is being done out there, let them see how some people live and how we can help them enjoy better lives. I don’t want to force these issues down people’s throats but I do want to raise the profile of what is being done and how we can all help make things better.” ■

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