

A dragon with fire in his belly

For a so-called “Dragon”, Sean Gallagher is remarkably soft-spoken. And not at all scary.

“I hope people like the dragons, because we’re not a bad bunch,” he laughs, as he meets *Country Living* men route to an awards ceremony on a bright Tuesday afternoon in late March.

Still, I’m glad to be the one asking the questions today. While he might not breathe fire, those dulcet tones don’t disguise the voice of a man who means business – and not just on *Dragon’s Den*. A graduate of Ballyhaise Agricultural College, Sean Gallagher has gone from farmer to MD of multi-million company Smarthomes. And that’s not half of it.

FARMING BACKGROUND

Sean credits his Cavan upbringing for fostering his entrepreneurial spirit. The son of Department of Agriculture official John D Gallagher, he was born and bred in Ballyhaise, where life revolved around the agricultural college.

He earned his first pocket money picking strawberries and raspberries in the college grounds, spent summers making hay on his uncle’s farm in Donegal and worked for local farmers throughout his teens. It was first-hand (blistering) exposure to the brass tacks of business.

“When you look at the small farm holdings in Cavan, it was obvious to see the emergence of things like intensive poultry production, very intensive pig production and mushroom farming,” he says.

“There was a very strong work ethic and entrepreneurial spirit.”

Another influence was his teacher Tom Gawley. Born with congenital cataracts, Sean had surgery as a child to overcome near-blindness, but still struggled with reading. The wise words of his understanding teacher, however, became his life mantra.

“He said: ‘If you dream it, you can become it,’” Sean says. “I read awkwardly at school, and people presumed I was slow, and it’s

interesting that 30 years on, I did an MBA. Sometimes it’s the challenges you face that are the very things that define you.”

FARMER TO MILLIONAIRE

At 18, Sean wrote his first life plan: to become a farmer, youth leader, politician and entrepreneur. Over the last 25 years, he has achieved each goal.

After leaving ag college, Sean got his first job with Bailieborough Co-Op and started farming, often offering labour to other farmers in exchange for a calf. “It was my first wheeling and dealing,” he says.

Unfortunately, a car crash put Sean out of action, but while recovering he was asked to work with local youth groups because of his previous experience with

The son of a Department of Agriculture official who overcame near-blindness as a child, Sean Gallagher was a farmer, youth leader, politician and entrepreneur before adding *Dragon’s Den* to his impressive CV. Maria Moynihan meets the Cavan man who means business.

DRAGON’S DEN

Sean’s latest venture, of course, is RTÉ’s *Dragon’s Den*, a spin-off of the BBC programme where budding entrepreneurs pitch their ideas to five potential investors. “It’s real money and it’s our real money,” confirms Sean, when quizzed about “reality” TV.

Sean showed his agri colours in the very first episode, when he and fellow Dragon PR guru Gavin Duffy invested in www.pedigreecattle.ie, a sort of Facebook for the pedigree cattle breeders and buyers in Ireland and the UK. “I thought it was a great twist to be bringing technology to the traditional agricultural sector,” says Sean.

He believes that such entrepreneurship is absolutely vital in the current economic climate.

“I genuinely believe the future of the Irish economy is going to be based around indigenous Irish industries distributed throughout the region and, for that to happen, we need to identify and nurture budding entrepreneurs,” states Sean.

“Is it the right time? Here’s the thing: is there ever a right time to take a risk? If you have a good business idea and you’re prepared to work hard at it and you believe in yourself and if there is a market for a product or service, they’re the fundamentals. They’ll always be there.”

FOSTERING ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Sean believes that the Government needs to incentivise entrepreneurship, with measures such as VAT exemptions, a relaxation of water and building rates and access to capital for start-ups. He is spearheading a campaign by Intertrade Ireland to set up a network of “business angels” to mentor and invest in new enterprises. He has also set up a website, www.seangallagher.com, so people can contact him with business pitches for possible investment.

Having recently returned to the Fianna Fáil National Executive representing Louth, you wonder if Sean harbours political ambitions. “You never say never, but I’m absolutely focused currently on helping entrepreneurs get up and running,” he replies. If he did, he would like to take on the “vested interests” and “hidden agendas” in the Department of Enterprise or Health. “I’d be a kamikaze Minister,” he says.

With black belts in karate and judo, he could do serious damage. Most of Sean’s other past-times, however, are not so combative. He enjoys reading business and personal-growth books, listening to country music and long walks in the country or on the beach near his home in Blackrock, outside Dundalk. I ask if he has a family.

“No,” he smiles. “But it’s on my next life plan.” **CL**

FACTFILE

SEAN GALLAGHER

MY BUSINESS HEROES ARE: Denis O’Brien, Sean Quinn, Martin Naughton and the Murtaghs of Kingspan. When I look at those guys, I see business acumen, hard work, risk taking and huge success.

MY EARLY INFLUENCES WERE: Macra and Foróige.

I’M READING: *The Success Principles* by Jack Canfield and *Why Men Don’t Have a Clue & Why Women Need More Shoes: The Ultimate Guide to the Opposite Sex* by Barbara and Allan Pease.

MY ADVICE IS: Do what you love, and people will love what you do.

I WISH I THOUGHT OF: The mobile phone, iPod and *Farmers Journal*.



For further information, visit www.seangallagher.com and www.smarthomes.ie

Foróige and Macra. This led him to enrol in the first professional youth work and community development course in Maynooth in 1985.

He was actually addressing a youth affairs conference when approached by the Department of Health to write the first national education programme on alcohol. This resulted in an invitation from then Minister for Health Dr Rory O’Hanlon to become his political adviser, at just 28 years old. He loved politics, but felt the knife when Albert Reynolds cleared the cabinet in the “Valentine’s Massacre” of 1992. “It meant I was out of a job within three days,” he recalls.

It was back to business. By 1995, Sean was CEO of Louth Enterprise Board, specialising in Start Your Own Business courses while

completing his MBA. But in 2002, he took his own advice and launched Smarthomes.

SMART THINKING

Smarthomes was born when Sean and business partner Derek Roddy realised their new houses were wired with only one TV/phone point, meaning they’d have to rip out skirting boards and walls to install even a simple home office. Their solution was the “Smartbox”, a system for pre-cablings homes for the latest communication and entertainment technologies, from basic phone and TV to home cinema, CCTV and light/heating control.

They grew the business “the Cavan way”: €20,000 each and no bank borrowings. With the building boom, Smarthomes quickly became

a market leader, winning awards and contracts such as Adamstown and increasing turnover from a modest €40,000 in year one to over €7 million in 2007.

While Smarthomes has obviously been affected by the downturn, Sean and Derek have responded by changing their business model by selling to electricians and electrical wholesalers instead of developers. As they prepare to sign a distribution contract with the subsidiary of a \$36 billion US company, Sean is confident about the future.

“I’m absolutely convinced that over the next five to 10 years, a Smarthome system will become standard in every home in the country,” he states. “It will be no different from an electric fuse board.”