

Catherine's QUEST for her own business

She began as a part time receptionist working through university.
Now she owns and runs two serviced apartment businesses.
Quest franchisee Catherine Mapperson has come a long way. By EVAN HARDING.

The choice was simple: Move out of town as a manager or stay close to family and friends by buying your own business. Home won. And just like that, Catherine Mapperson dived head-first into the world of franchising.

She bought the business at Quest South Melbourne, a decision which has led her to now, at only 31 years old, owning and running two franchises and being responsible for the management of 60 serviced apartments.

"I never would have expected to purchase a business; it was more the circumstances being as they were that it just made sense," says Catherine. The year was 2000, and Catherine had been working as the manager of Quest on Flinders Lane.

Catherine felt comfortable she was doing the right thing. "Buying a business seems like such a big deal, whereas I had eased into it gradually."

"When the director of that property sold, I was out canvassing for another role, and that was the point at which this Quest South Melbourne business came up," Catherine says. "So it was an option to go and manage one of the other Quest properties or actually purchase the franchise of Quest South Melbourne."

But her journey doesn't begin there. Rewind to 1997 – Catherine had just returned from London, where she had lived for the past two years. While she was studying at

university, completing her honours in politics and criminology, she started working on the weekends as a casual receptionist at Quest South Yarra Mews.

After a year, opportunity knocked. Her manager was going on holidays and needed someone to fill in for four weeks. "I was a bit scared, but it went really well," she says. "When she came back, the director who owned that business was opening up a new property on Flinders Lane, and he asked if I would be prepared to go in as the resident manager."

At Flinders Lane, Catherine developed the experience that enabled her to confidently make the jump into franchising two years later.

"A number of the other Quest opportunities for me at that time were to move interstate or into regional Victoria and manage some of those properties," she explains. "I really wanted to have something based in Melbourne, close to my family and friends."

"I thought I'd done that whole 'living away from my hometown' thing," she continues. "So purchasing a franchise was in some way just to get some job security and stay in Melbourne rather than move."

And by speaking with the Quest head office, the idea started to become a reality. "Initially when the opportunity came up, I didn't think I was ready but through speaking with them and understanding a bit more about how it worked and the support I could derive from the Quest network, that was one of the things that brought me around."

Her friends were "pretty astounded" that she had bought the business. But Catherine felt comfortable that she was doing the right thing. "Buying a business seems like such a big deal, whereas I had eased into it gradually," she says. "I'd lived on site at Quest on Flinders Lane for two years, so it was just more of the same, except now I owned it."

Four years later, Quest on Dorcas opened with 45 apartments to add to the 15 at Quest South Melbourne. "The intention had always been that with such a small property it would be good to get a second property,"

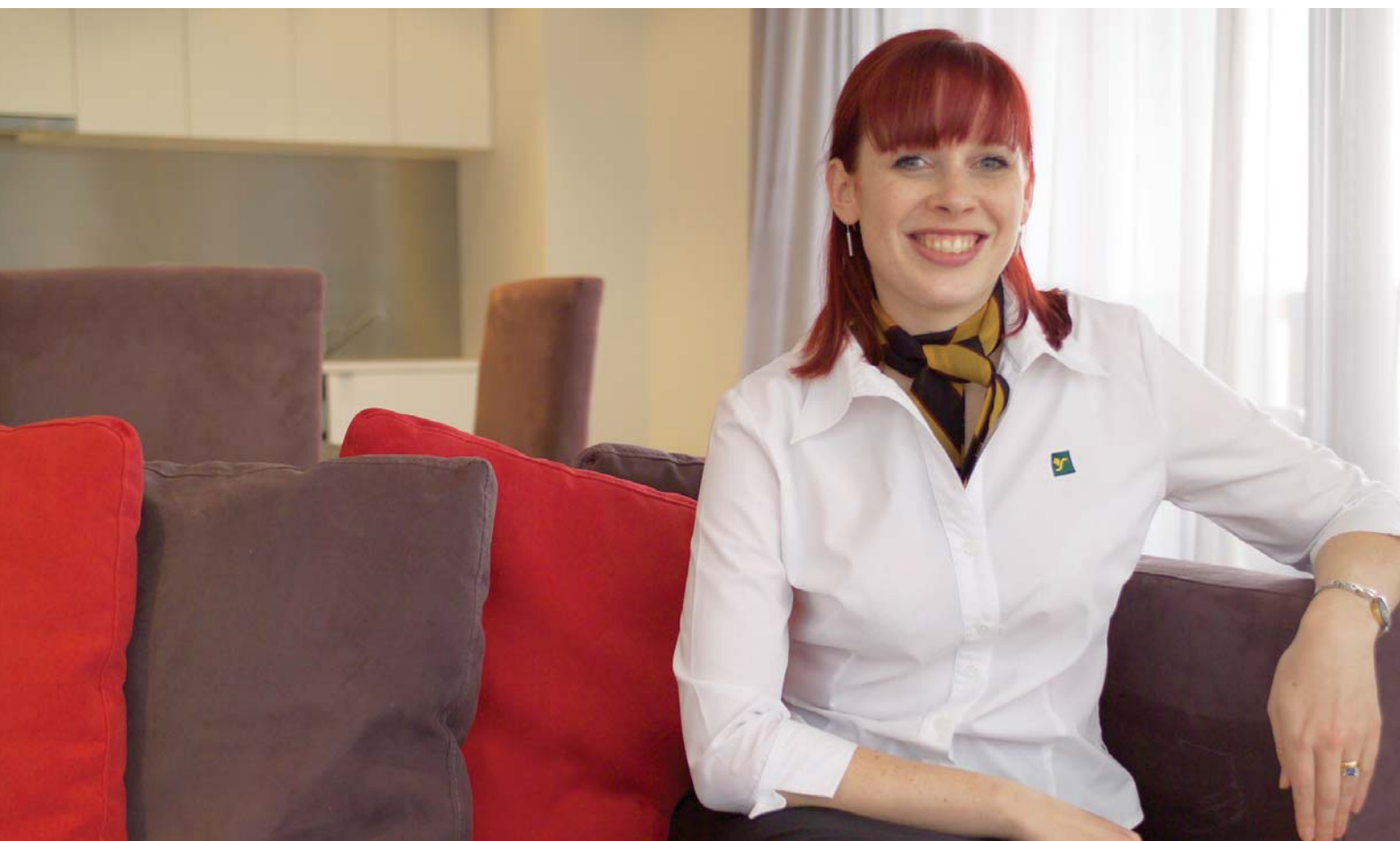
Catherine explains. "I'd always kept in communication with Quest, making sure that they knew they could approach me if something came up and fortunately for us, a site did come up in Dorcas St."

"What made that perfect was that the two properties were only 250m apart, so it meant that I could close reception down at Quest South Melbourne and have everything running centrally out of Quest on Dorcas."

Living on-site with her husband David and managing the apartments can be busy – Catherine will work up to 12 hours a day and is on call 24 hours – but it certainly has its advantages.

The decision to stay in her home town has worked brilliantly for Catherine Mapperson, pictured at Quest on Dorcas.





On call 24 hours a day ... but Catherine loves owning her own business.

"It's convenient being so close to work and not having to commute in peak-hour traffic," she says. "A lot of the staff is really experienced and there's less and less call-out issues when reception's open and I'm not there, because they're able to handle it. Or they might just call me to clarify something but it doesn't require me to hotfoot it back to the property."

It gives her a bit more time to do what she enjoys. "My main passions in life are my friends and family, so often in my spare time I'm catching up with them. Eating, going out for dinner and food in general is a huge passion of mine."

"As the Quest group has expanded, you're bringing in more people from diverse backgrounds with different areas of expertise."

What she likes most about her job is the people. "It's an instant gratification profession. You know whether guests are happy in your hotel. If somebody doesn't like something, you find out about it and have an opportunity to fix it.

"I love dealing with people and I like the personal interaction. If we've got problems or issues that need to be dealt with, I quite enjoy getting my teeth into it."

As for the future, Catherine is keeping her options open, but won't dismiss the idea of expanding.

"We do have the opportunity to take on more apartments at Quest on Dorcas and grow the business from 45 apartments to more, if and when we want them," she says. "If opportunities come up for another property I won't rule it out, but I think I've got my hands full at the moment!"

"I think one of the benefits I saw in the Quest system was that I can live in and manage for as long as I want, but even if I get to a point where I say 'I don't want to live on site, I don't want to be on call and I don't want to be in there doing the day-to-day', I can still own the business and employ someone to manage it."

It has been, and continues to be, a successful and interesting pathway for Catherine Mapperson. Hers is just one of many stories of Quest franchisees and she believes that therein lies the strength of the program.

"As the Quest group has expanded, you're bringing in more people from diverse backgrounds with different areas of expertise. They all have different things to bring into the franchise system and suggestions to make to Quest as the franchisor and that's one of the benefits of a large group." ■