



SECRETS OF SUCCESS

Serena Star-Leonard was just 30 when she decided to retire with a sustainable income. So, she gave herself a year to make it happen, writes **Tom Fitzsimons**.

It's almost too Generation Y. Barely a decade into her working life, Serena Star-Leonard, an energetic young businesswoman earning plenty and living well, decided she wanted to retire. She was 30.

"So I set myself this challenge and went, 'OK, well, what if I could create an income, using all the skills that I have learnt, which meant that I only had to work for one day a week, from anywhere in the world.'"

To make sure it wasn't all talk, she decided to blog regularly on her progress – "having a big public declaration, there's no procrastination because you want it to succeed".

And then she got to work, with a 12-month deadline and an earnings target of \$2000 a week.

Originally from Palmerston North, now living in Melbourne, Star-Leonard dropped out of school and moved to Wellington in the late 1990s. "I never really liked school," she says while back in New Zealand visiting family.

She did like work though – or, at least, she had a willingness to do it. At one point in Wellington, she divided her day into shifts for two different telemarketing companies. "Then I'd babysit my cousin in between and I'd just run from job to job."

Five years on, she moved to Melbourne, where she landed a job in IT sales with a major US company. The

money was good (at its peak, something in the region of \$150,000 a year), and so were the perks – "all-expenses-paid holidays in Puerto Rico and Maui and Barcelona".

But she always yearned to be doing something else. She'd already been dabbling in not-for-profit work – organising a music festival promoting racial harmony, for instance. (It was a big hit, drawing 8000 punters instead of her goal of 1500).

So she quit her job and started up a promotion tool for charities and independent musicians. Sadly, that was doomed when its expensive website took so long to develop it was outdated before it was launched.

"And that's when I first started going, 'OK, websites are really important for most businesses'."

So she changed direction again, this time towards coaching small businesses in how to use the web. That's what she was doing when "retirement" beckoned.

Linking up with a friend with more technical expertise, they came up with a website that would continue the same idea – helping small companies get on the web.

Star-Leonard attracts readers to the website by offering a free blog on the subject, and then makes money through a range of tools – everything from selling e-books and web seminars to endorsing other people's products and taking a commission if her readers buy them.

When the one-year mark rolled around, she was making \$1500 a week,

It's not a get-rich-quick scheme; I've worked really hard to make this happen. But, yes, anyone can do it, that's what's so cool about it.

SERENA STAR-LEONARD

which she's happy to call a success even if it is under her initial target.

The other part of the goal has been achieved in full; she's successfully whittled her work hours down to about a day a week. To keep it that way, she and husband John are about to embark on three or four years of travel, probably combined with charity work.

The year that set up her retirement had another bonus, too: Australian publisher John Wiley & Sons got interested in her blog. Star-Leonard's book about the experience – *How to Retire in 12 Months: Turning Passion into Profit* – is out now in New Zealand.

So what's the trick? Is this early retirement thing really a possibility?

The internet has been transformative, she says. Unlike traditional businesses, which typically need large amounts of capital to get started, anyone can create something on the web.

As long as you choose something you're passionate about – "that you can talk about for hours and hours" – then you've got a chance of turning it into a moneyspinner.

The numbers don't have to be through the roof – her own website only attracts about 1500 visitors a month. It's all about building a sense of community, and, yes, finally, getting them to open their wallets.

"It's not a get-rich-quick scheme; I've worked really hard to make this happen. But, yes, anyone can do it, that's what's so cool about it."

Photo: CRAIG SIMCOX