



## *the* RICH LIST

SHANNON DENNY stumbles upon a Secret Millionaire, internet entrepreneur Dominic List



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As a star of Channel 4's *The Secret Millionaire*, Dominic List went undercover in south London to help local young people overcome difficulty. As MD of his own multi-million pound tech start-up and winner of the IAB's Business Entrepreneur of the Year, the philanthropist says overcoming difficulty early in life was a factor in his own eventual success.

"There's a theory that a lot of entrepreneurs have had a period of their life where they've had adversity." Dominic grew up with chronic asthma, spending huge amounts of time at home in bed. The situation continued into his teens, but he says it helped develop his drive and focus, not to mention practical skills. "When I was a kid I would always just fix things. Anything that would ever break down I would have a good shot at fixing it. There was always something inside that made me like the whole mechanical world."

When he finally got to university he put his mechanical experience to good use by studying engineering and developing inventions ranging from a heated bathtub to a curved tape measure. He was also drawn to business, which might have had something to do with his father, himself a successful entrepreneur who'd also managed to turn adversity into opportunity.

The elder List's dramatic turning point from company man to self-starter came when he was working for a well-known staffing company. "In those days everything was done in cash," Dominic explains, "and two guys burst in with balaclavas and a gun and made off with the cash box. My dad had a struggle, managed to tackle a guy, but he turned around and shot my dad! He was hospitalised and thought, 'If I'm going to get shot I might as well get shot for myself rather than someone else.' He went on

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to become a serial entrepreneur.”

As a consequence, Dominic developed a head for business from a young age. “It was great growing up with a father like that because you’d go on holiday with him and he was always like, ‘See that coffee seller over there? If they get five customers per hour and they make £1.70 per cup...’”

With business sense, a technical mind and an entrepreneurial spirit, Dominic was perfectly placed to get aboard the dot-com gravy train. “I left sleepy little Shropshire and came to London,” he recalls. He worked first for others and then for himself, launching Comtact in 2005. An IT services business, it provides voice, data and networking solutions to corporate customers; year-on-year it has doubled in size with a turnover of £5.5 million in 2009.

The venture displayed a philanthropic streak from the start; within a few weeks of opening Dominic started a brand that offers cost-price telecoms for charities. “We’ve done a number of initiatives, so I’ve always been quite mindful to do quite a bit of community stuff.”

The makers of *The Secret Millionaire* got wind of Dominic’s work and filmed him as he said goodbye to his high-flying lifestyle to go incognito in deprived pockets of the capital, sharing his time, money and help. He first got involved with a youth club in Peckham, helping to build a study room with PCs. “It was low cost but



Dominic mentoring a young man in the City

high touch – it affected a lot of kids and the upkeep was small.”

The second project was Deptford’s Ilderton Motor Project. Dominic explains, “They take kids who have bombed really badly in school or they’ve been in car-related crime. They do motoring-based education around car mechanics to give the kids at least some kind of foothold into a career.”

In addition to training, the charity seeks to foster personal development. “When I was first down there, they were sort of acting out this whole gang thing,” Dominic says, “But when we went away on a day on motorbike scramblers they became real kids again.

That for me was a real moment.”

“One of the things I like about doing that programme was it gave me access right into the heart of those kinds of community projects I never would have seen otherwise.”

He also likes the fact that the initiatives dovetail into his own interests of technology and motoring. To feed his addiction to motors, he also sponsors F2 driver Jolyon Palmer.

So when he says he commutes to his St Katherine’s Dock office on foot, I’m surprised. “I hate driving slowly!” he laughs by way of explanation. Judging from his booming business, top gear is the only pace this man knows. ●

## Give & let live

- 1 The top 20 charities take 80% of all the donations; that’s why I choose smaller, leaner charities.
- 2 What do you feel passionate about? Animals, the environment, people? Find a group of charities that meet your interest best.
- 3 Do some research. Look at a charity’s website and the Charity Commission’s site, but best of all call them up.

Secret Millionaire Dominic List on how to enter the world of philanthropy

- How do they deal with you? Do you feel like they are interested in your support or just your money?
- 4 Do you have time or a useful skill? This might be more valuable than money itself.
- 5 What is the impact of the charity? Will your help make any difference? Ask them how much of your investment will go to the cause.