

The entrepreneurial gene

DOES THE ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT SPRING FROM NATURE OR NURTURE? IF THE NUMBER AND RANGE OF COMPANIES RUN BY MEMBERS OF THE VAN DER VOORT FAMILY IS ANY INDICATION, NATURE DEFINITELY PLAYS A MAJOR ROLE.

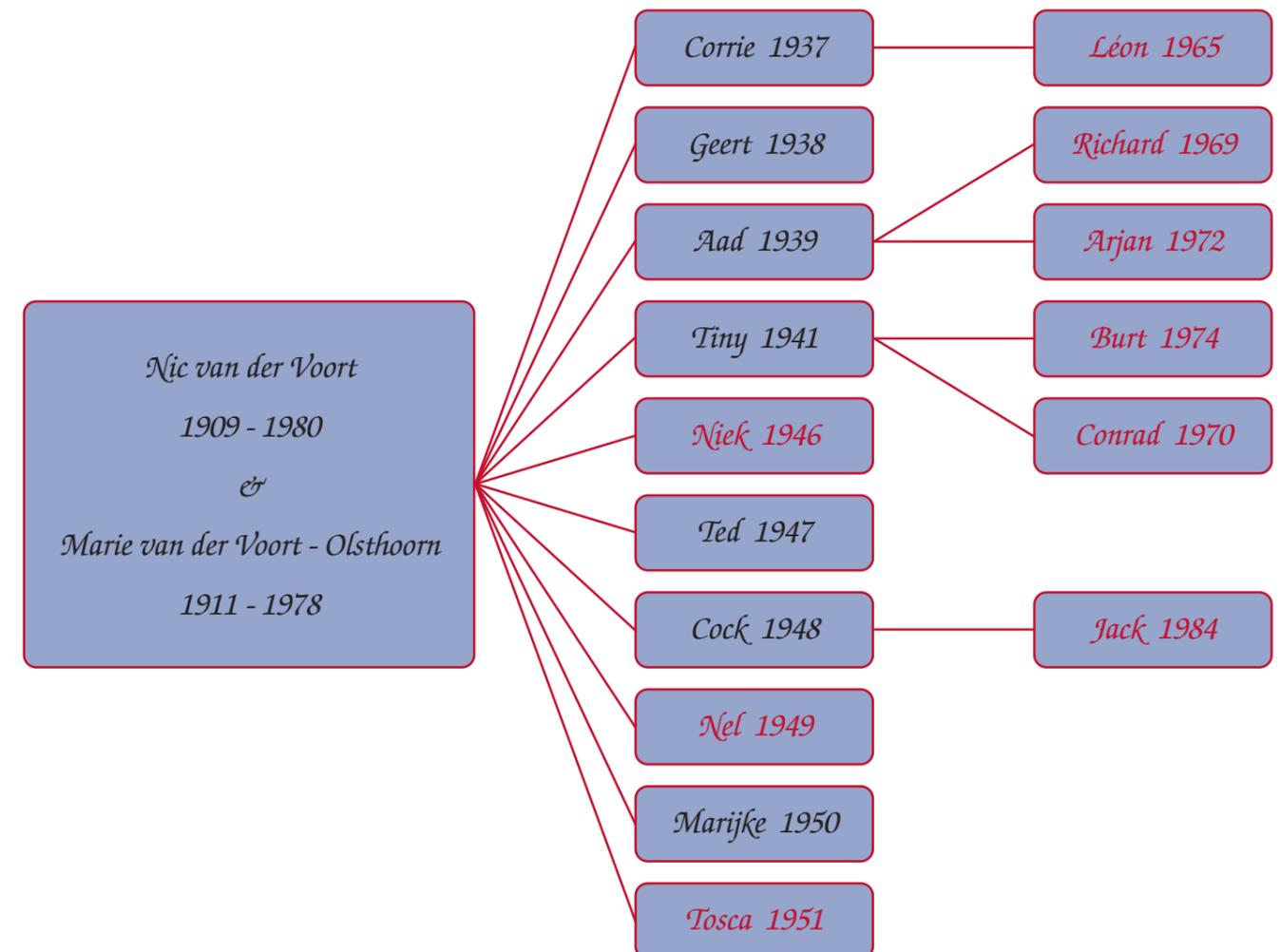
BY TERRI J. KESTER

When Nic van der Voort and Marie Olsthoorn got married in the village of Honselersdijk in 1936, they could not have guessed that every one of their ten children would at some time run his or her own business. Like many families in the Westland region, Nic grew plants and flowers for a living, a tradition carried on by several

of his sons and grandsons. The other companies in the family cover an impressive range of business sectors. For all their differences, all members of this tightly knit family are blessed with high energy levels and a keen sense of freedom. They are also not afraid to invest, are open to innovation and know how to cope with competition. We profile nine family members who are passionate about what they do.



Nic and Marie van der Voort with their ten children in 1961. Clockwise from left: Ted, Geert, Corrie, Aad, Tiny, Niek, Cock, Marijke, Marie, Tosca, Nic, Nel



LÉON AMMERLAAN (43)

SON OF LEO AMMERLAAN AND CORRIE AMMERLAAN-VAN DER VOORT

SECTOR: HORTICULTURE (POT PLANTS)

COMPANY NAME: AMMERLAAN GROND & HYDROCULTUUR

NUMBER OF STAFF: 43

Two sons of the eldest Van der Voort daughter, Léon and Menno, run a horticultural business. Unlike their cousins Richard and Arjan, who manage their chrysanthemum operation in parallel, Léon and Menno run a tight, fully integrated ship and have divided the responsibilities to suit their talents and preferences. Five years ago they took over the business from their father. From growing vegetables, the company has evolved to an operation dedicated to non-flowering tropical plants. The range includes some 300 varieties, grown both in soil and expanded clay pallets. **Most of the plants are imported from Central America. After three months to a year of professional care, they are sold around the world.**

While Menno takes care of office-based tasks like finance and administration, Léon is in charge of personnel and sales – tasks that involve a lot of contact with workers and customers. It was a conscious decision for the brothers to share the burden of responsibility. “A production company like this is too complex to run on your own,” says Léon. “I think it’s essential that we share the hands-on work while at the same time managing the business and innovating. We have just invested in an energy-efficient, high-output generator to keep pace with our heating requirements.”



The annual turnover of Ammerlaan already runs into millions of euros, but there are ambitious plans for further growth. The brothers are planning to expand their ground area to 5.5 hectares and their workforce to more than 50 in 2009. Léon is adamant, however, that they are not growing the business for growth’s sake: “Our plans are dictated by our markets. We sell to exporters; most of our plants end up in offices abroad. At the moment, England and Germany are our main growth markets.”

NIEK VAN DER VOORT (62)

SON OF NIC AND MARIE VAN DER VOORT

SECTOR: ARCHITECTURE

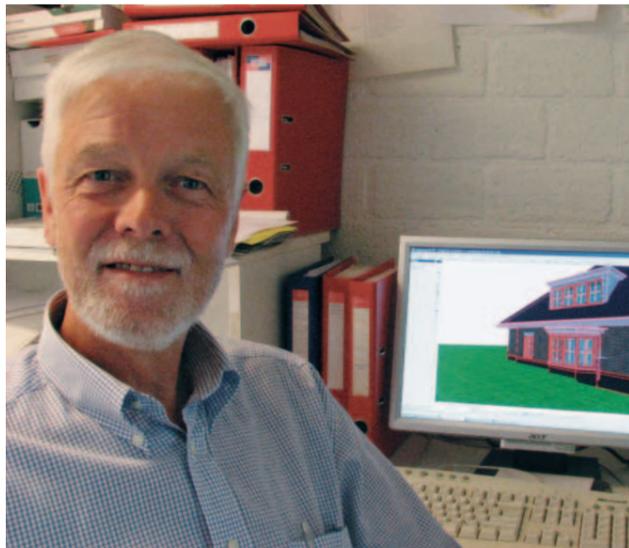
COMPANY NAME: ARCHITECTENBURO V/D VOORT EN BAKKER

NUMBER OF STAFF: 3

The third son, Niek, was named after his father. The reason, he assumes, is that they were born on the same day. As a boy he had his own small glasshouse, where he grew flowers for pocket money. But to everyone’s surprise he wanted to be a carpenter, and when he’d finished school he joined a building firm.

Niek wouldn’t have been a Van der Voort if his entrepreneurial gene hadn’t got the better of him at some point. “It began to worry me that I was working virtually day and night but did not get paid for the extra hours. Over the years I picked up some freelance work. I started up my own firm in 1986 and was very busy from day one.”

When he needs help, Niek doesn’t have to look far to find it: his brother Ted is an excellent draftsman. True to family form Ted is self-employed, and he is usually around when needed. After building up the firm, Niek was ready for the next move: he joined forces with Hielke Bakker, a newly qualified architect who now owns 50 percent of the business. **V/d Voort en Bakker specializes in designing detached family homes, but its portfolio goes beyond that.** One project Niek remembers fondly is the renovation of the kitchens at the Euromast landmark tower in Rotterdam: “That was a



challenging assignment. There were no precise drawings, and we had to base our design on an oval ground plan.”

Niek’s three daughters have made their own career choices – one of them is a chartered accountant. Arrangements are currently being made for Bakker to take over the firm. For the next few years Niek intends to keep working, but he hopes that before long he will have more time for his hobbies.

CONRAD ALLEBLAS (38)

SON OF KEES ALLEBLAS AND TINY ALLEBLAS-VAN DER VOORT

SECTOR: NGO

COMPANY NAME: RIGHT TO PLAY

NUMBER OF STAFF: 10

Next to a talent for running their own show, the Van der Voorts have something else in common: almost all of them are very keen on sports. The only one who actually embarked on a career in sports, however, is Conrad Alleblas. He represented the Netherlands in several speed-skating events and spent some time in France as a semi-professional cyclist. After switching to sports management, he won a bronze medal with the Belgian Olympic skating team and coached another skating team, headed by Bart Veldkamp, for nine years.

It was Veldkamp who introduced Conrad (whose brother Burt took over the family firm) to Right to Play, an international NGO founded by Norwegian skating champion Johann Olav Koss. “In 2003 Bart and I committed ourselves to help create awareness for Right to Play in the Benelux countries. We strongly believe that sport brings people together and contributes to the development of children in poor countries, physically, mentally and socially. By playing sports they learn to cooperate and to deal with losing, respect their opponents and appreciate values like fair play.”

As director of Right to Play in the Netherlands, Conrad has plenty of scope for his entrepreneurial talent. **“There are over 30,000 charities operating in the Dutch market, so you need to be innovative and resourceful to capture a position.** It’s not enough to



just do your work. Like any other organization, we have to maximize our profits to please our stakeholders, the children. It is also my role to develop fundraising initiatives.”

Right to Play currently runs projects in 23 countries, and its growth strategy extends to the London Olympics in 2012. By that time, one million children worldwide should be taking part in organized activities on a weekly basis. Conrad: “I am driven by a commitment to help young people. I am very happy with this position, and I enjoy the responsibility.”

TOSCA VAN DER VLIET-VAN DER VOORT (56)

DAUGHTER OF NIC AND MARIE VAN DER VOORT

SECTOR: HAIRSTYLING

COMPANY NAME: KAPSALON TOSCA

NUMBER OF STAFF: 1

The two youngest children of Nic and Marie van der Voort, both of them girls, chose professions typical of their sex. For 20 years, Marijke ran a beauty salon, while her younger sister Tosca became a hairdresser as well as a beautician. Tosca was still in her early twenties when she started her own salon. Initially she installed it at home in an upstairs bedroom, and since moving house she receives her customers in her converted garage.

To Tosca, who for years has concentrated on hairstyling, the advantages of running her own show are glaringly obvious. “I have the freedom of doing only the work I enjoy. I learned all about hair extensions for example, but I don’t have the patience. I have also cut down on dying hair, because those chemicals are not good for you. I now have more time to myself, so I can go to the sauna or the gym with my friends during the day.” Although she no longer works full time, Tosca still has around 200 regular customers. “I am not the office type,” she says. **“I enjoy meeting people through my work. And even when times are bad, people still need a haircut from time to time.”**



Tosca particularly likes giving brides the full hair and beauty treatment, so that they look their best on their wedding day. At the less glamorous end of the scale, she’s also happy to give an elderly neighbor a haircut at his home. Kapsalon Tosca may no longer receive customers morning, noon and night, but its owner has no intention of throwing in the towels: “I enjoy the work and the social contact too much. My family and friends can still count on me for a professional haircut.”

RICHARD (39) AND ARJAN (36) VAN DER VOORT**SONS OF AAD VAN DER VOORT AND EMMY VAN DER VOORT-GROOTSCHOLTEN**

SECTOR: HORTICULTURE (CHRYSANTHEMUMS)
COMPANY NAME: R. & A. VAN DER VOORT
NUMBER OF STAFF: 8

Aad van der Voort succeeded the paterfamilias, Nic Sr. For the last 25 years, the company has grown chrysanthemums all year round. The acquisition of an adjacent plot of land in 1998 was a good moment for Richard (right) and Arjan, two of Aad's three sons, to bite the bullet and take over the helm. At 69, their father takes a stroll around the nursery every day of the week.

While sharing the administration, systems, machinery and staff, Richard and Arjan each have their own parallel business of roughly equal size. They have taken their specialization one step further by growing only one variety of chrysanthemum each: Arjan grows only the white Zembra, while Richard is in the process of switching from Sunny Anastasia to the newly developed Matreshka, which is targeted at the Russian market. On a trip to Moscow he saw his own flowers on sale.

Aware that large-scale flower production comes in for a lot of criticism, Richard points out that it's company policy to recycle energy and offset CO₂ production whenever possible. A biological approach is taken to combating pests. "We use their natural enemies like tiny spiders to get rid of lice and other insects that damage the



crops," he says. "That means chemicals are out of the question, because they would destroy them all."

The brothers are both married with children and live next door to each other at a stone's throw from their parents. At work their paths frequently cross, and they help each other out whenever necessary. Richard likes the idea that the children may, in time, take over the company. "You have to be future-oriented. But I'm also aware that this business isn't getting any easier. Energy prices for example – a major part of our costs – continue to rise."

JACK VAN DER VOORT (24)**SON OF COCK VAN DER VOORT AND ADA VAN DER VOORT-GROOTSCHOLTEN**

SECTOR: PROTECTIVE SCREENS
COMPANY NAMES: SCHERMNED / VITRONA
NUMBER OF STAFF: 40

At 60, Cock van der Voort remains an entrepreneur to the core. Since the late 1980s he has produced and marketed screens regulating the sunlight and air allowed to enter the Westland's vast expanse of glasshouses. His company SchermNed prospered, and he soon branched out into sun screens for other kinds of real estate. When Vitrona, a competitor, came on the market a few years ago, Cock acquired it and reserved its brand name for the non-horticultural market.

Now in their early twenties, Cock's three children inherited their father's appetite for hard work, enterprise and innovation. Jack and Mark entered the company last year, while daughter Terry is taking an MBA. After finishing internships elsewhere, Jack is now learning the ropes in both businesses. "It's important for me to acquire technical knowledge, and I am also learning about markets, HR, design and public relations. I enjoy talking with people and observing what goes smoothly and what doesn't."

Jack explains that SchermNed's extensive experience of horticultural screens gives the company a head start in the residential and office markets. "We are the only company in Holland supplying all



these markets, and our customers recognize this added value. We have moved to a better location where we are easier to find, while also fine-tuning our knowledge of materials, systems and designs."

Innovation is a key to success in the fiercely competitive horticultural market of SchermNed, whereas Vitrona's profit margins are a little less tight. Since his father remains firmly at the helm, Jack has time to consider his career options. Both he and his brother still live at home, and business decisions are discussed at the kitchen table. Perhaps this is one reason why Jack is in no hurry to move out: "I am still busy creating a place for myself in the company."

NEL DE JONG-VAN DER VOORT (59)**DAUGHTER OF NIC AND MARIE VAN DER VOORT**

SECTOR: FOOD AND CATERING
COMPANY NAMES: T&N CATERING / MEALS ON WHEELS / PAVILJOEN BAD ZANDE / FOOD & FACILITIES / THIERRY'S PLACE

NUMBER OF STAFF: APPROX. 100

Nel van der Voort's life changed drastically on her wedding day. Since then, it has become completely interwoven with that of her husband, Thierry de Jong. "We get up together, go to bed together, and in-between we work together. We complement each other in every way. If necessary, I put the brakes on Thierry's enthusiasm. But if an idea sounds good to me, I encourage him to go for it."

Through the years, the couple have acted out the Dutch equivalent of the American rags-to-riches scenario. After returning from a spell in Germany, where he worked as a technician, Thierry started on the bottom rung of the catering ladder as an ice-cream seller. In winter, the couple used to run a mobile snack bar, a business that quickly grew to 14 branches all called Thierry's Place. One of them still operates on Scheveningen boulevard today.

To cut a long story short, Nel and Thierry now manage half a dozen companies, from restaurants at schools, offices and leisure parks to a party service. Perhaps their most successful operation is T&N Catering, which specializes in *belegde broodjes*. The standard lunch of Dutch office workers, large quantities of these well-filled bread rolls are regularly ordered by government ministries, The Hague's police force and Leiden University.



Nel and Thierry keep to a traditional role pattern. Thierry tests new ideas and supervises the workforce, while Nel manages her own working day at home, keeping an eye on the details. The couple's children, who have enjoyed the fruits of their parents' labor but also witnessed punishing working days starting at 4am and finishing not long before midnight, show little interest in carrying on the business. Nel doesn't mind at all: "I prefer them to make their own choices and build their own lives."

BURT ALLEBLAS (33)**SON OF KEES ALLEBLAS AND TINY ALLEBLAS-VAN DER VOORT**

SECTOR: PLASTERING AND CONSTRUCTION
COMPANY NAMES: ALLEBLAS STUKADOORS / VEHOC AANNEMERS
NUMBER OF STAFF: 35

Tiny, the fourth of the Van der Voort children, coupled her own entrepreneurial gene with that of her husband. Kees Alleblas was only 22 when he started his own plastering firm, and Tiny took care of the administration. Hard work and inspired decisions resulted in healthy business growth from the start. The couple had three children (see p.15 for Conrad Alleblas). Burt, the youngest, initially had his heart set on a career as a pro cyclist. But one Saturday morning he surprised his dad by asking where he could find the plastering tools. The switch of focus proved a good one: "I enjoyed the work right from the start."

After just a few years Burt took over the management of the plastering business, and he recently started up Vehoc, a construction company with offices on the same premises. While he is director of both firms, Burt is leaving the running of the new company to two professionals hired for the purpose. This enables him to continue focusing his attention on the labor-intensive plastering business, where his sister Claudia helps with the administration. "I'm proud of the family, and of the people who work here," he confides.



"The special atmosphere that pervades my business goes back to the time when it was run by my father."

Burt is himself the proud father of a nine-month-old daughter, but he will not be looking for a successor for quite a few years. "My horizon is two to three years. In that time, I would like to broaden our customer base and acquire some large clients in both the private and public sectors." ✕