

DARING TO BE YOURSELF

In the 80s, cassette tapes appeared to be the end of the vinyl era until they were found to have drawbacks. Harkening the CD to come along and be the end to both its predecessors. Coincidentally, this was happening around the same time that Girish Jhunjhnuwala, an Island School alumnus and 80s music aficionado, was making a career of innovation and seeing these trends before they happened and not in hindsight.

He is the founder and CEO of the Ovolo Hotels Group. Launched in 2002, the Ovolo Group started with one building of serviced apartments on Arbutnot Road and now includes several hotels and restaurants in Hong Kong and Australia.

A simpler time

Growing up in the 80s, music was a big part of Girish's life. He has a connection to music now that was born of that time. In harkening back to simpler times, Girish recalled how he and his friends would follow the record charts and trade vinyl records they had bought. Which they would then record onto cassette tapes, creating a veritable library of music amongst his friends from the tight budgets they had to work with. "I love the beats and energy of 80s music, we have our own playlist on Spotify, called Radio Ovolo with over 100 80s songs, we play it in all our hotels and here in the office."

At Island School, he took part in many school activities but it was after 5th form that Girish took on the more serious tone he has today. He was always a motivated student but after receiving a suspension, he took a hard look at himself and became more concerned about the person he was becoming. "I went through all sorts of ups and downs at Island School but after 5th form, I realized the person I wanted to become in life, and what I wanted to be known for and remembered by."

Today, Girish's attitude toward failure is fluid. While the business world is often full of absolutes and life often thrusts absolutes upon us, Girish views mistakes as learning opportunities. From the later business decisions he would make after leaving Island School and attending university, it is also clear that he is a man of courage.

Seeing the winds of change

The Jhunjhnuwala family opened up their first factory in China in 1988 but after a decade, Girish found that there wasn't much room for innovation in the watch-making industry. By 2001, the mobile phone had accidentally replaced the watch as one's primary time piece and so with a heavy heart, Girish sold his father's company.

With the capital from the sale, he planned to help his wife open a

restaurant. Drawn back to the Arbutnot Road area, he chanced upon a "for sale" sign on the ground floor of the 27-story commercial building which stood across the road from where he used to live. He thought it the perfect location for his wife's restaurant. To his surprise, however, it was not just the ground floor that was for sale but the entire building. His instincts kicked in again and after careful study, Girish decided to buy the building in 2002 and convert it into serviced apartments.

A leap into the unknown

At the time this was a risk-filled endeavor. The market for serviced-apartments in Hong Kong was not mature yet and overhead was high. Failure would have been fast and costly. But along with immense courage, Girish drew on what he called, the three Ps, "Be patient, be positive and don't procrastinate. Any new idea needs time, you just need to be patient to make it work."

For the first three months of operation, the building was empty and operating at a loss. But rather than fret over the business decision, Girish stayed positive because he believed in his vision. "People didn't get it but when you have a good idea, you have to be patient until people get it," Girish said.

By 2009, Girish had expanded and bought other properties. After the

global financial crisis of 2008-9, Girish switched gears again and decided to get into the hotel business. By this time, he had also developed an elegant philosophy for how he would set his hotels apart from the rest. "All the things I hated about hotels, I made sure that my hotels didn't have any of those things."

His philosophy and vision have paid off. In 2016, Girish was the EY Entrepreneur of The Year, China 2016 Services Category Winner. Then in 2018, he won the HM Magazine Asia-Pacific Hotelier of Year award. In Sydney, Australia, the Ovolo Group's two hotels Ovolo Woolloomooloo and Ovolo 1888 Darling Harbour were ranked #1 and #3 in Trip Advisor's Traveller's Choice 2019 awards. Back home, their Mexican restaurant at Ovolo's Mojo Nomad Central Hotel Te Quiero Mucho, is also ranked the #1 restaurant in Hong Kong.

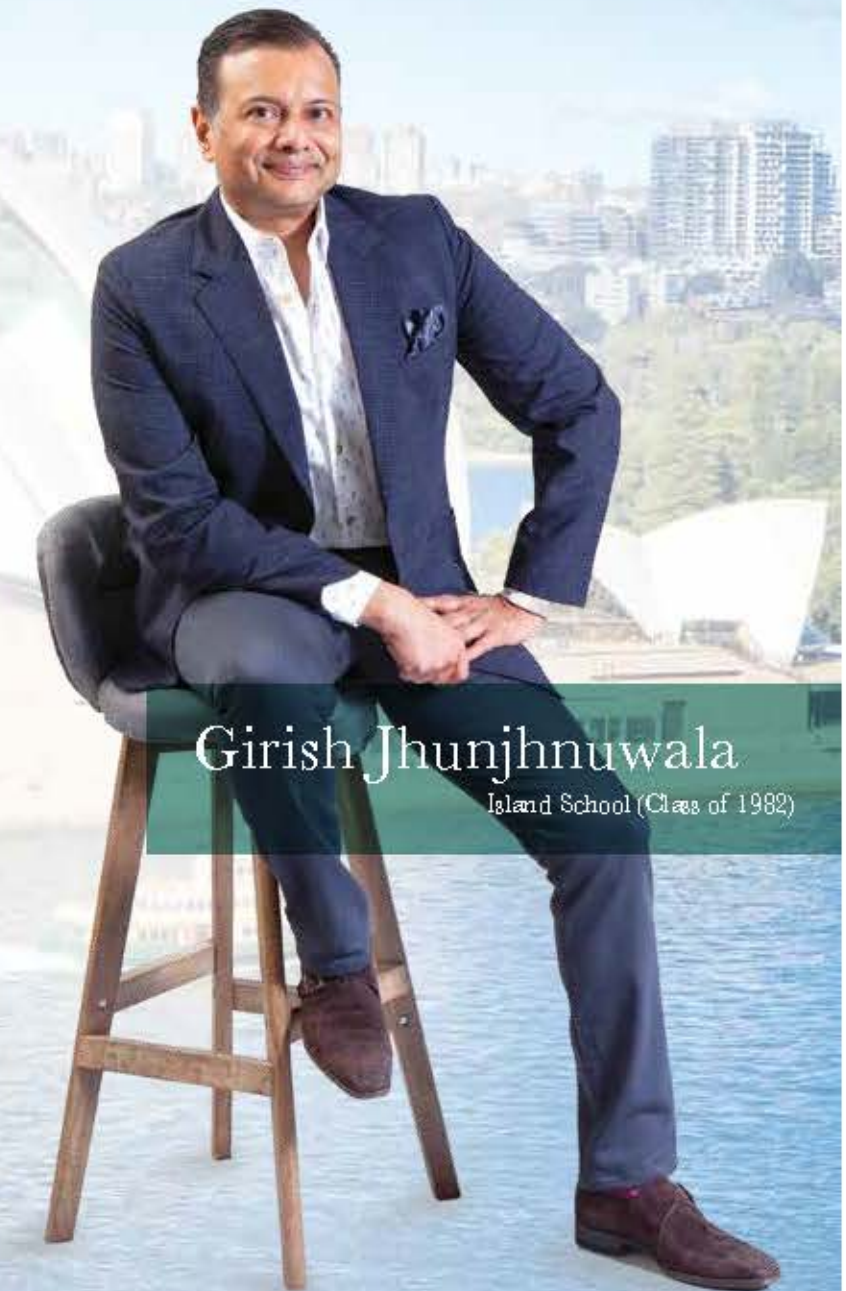
A mindset for success

Girish says he owes this success to his attitude, vision and willingness to fail. Traits he hopes future entrepreneurs graduating from the ESF will also develop in themselves. "One of the things I've noticed in the younger generation is that they tend to procrastinate and over analyze things. When you have a good idea, you just have to go for it."

Girish said he tries not to be sentimental. But judging from the attention to detail

Girish had put into the atmosphere of his hotels and head office, and his sense of nostalgia for the 80s a simpler time when there was less connectivity among people but yet deeper connections, it's clear that something other than the sterile march of business drives him.

“All the things I hated about hotels, I made sure that my hotels didn't have any of those things.”



Girish Jhunjhnuwala
Island School (Class of 1982)