

Co-founder of growing Oxfordshire firm PlayDNA, Dr Samantha Decombel, has just enjoyed a highly successful week exhibiting the company's beautiful portraits at the Grand Designs Live exhibition in London, where they caused quite a stir.

The past month has also seen PlayDNA partner with Taylor Wimpey to display artwork in homes at Bicester and attract a twitter 'WOW' award from Ann Summers chief executive, Jacqueline Gold.

What is all the fuss about? The answer is that these are not your average family portraits. PlayDNA creates beautiful, bespoke artwork with the most personal touch of all — they provide a glimpse inside your DNA.

Each unique print portrays the DNA of the 'sitter' revealing something interesting that the person did not know, or at least only suspected.

Dr Decombel explained: "We like to think of it as a novel take on portraiture for those with an interest in science. It requires just a simple cheek swab from the customer, done in the comfort of their own home and posted back to our labs.

"Each piece of artwork comes with a certificate detailing customers DNA results and an easy to read guide explaining the background science for each trait.

"We look at five different genetic traits in each portrait we create, chosen to represent an entertaining selection of characteristics that make great talking points. You can, for example, find out whether you are more likely to be an early bird or a night owl, have a biological hatred of vegetables or whether you have the sporting genes to be the next Usain Bolt!"

The innovative company was founded by Dr Decombel, who has a PhD in genetics, and handles operations, sales and marketing, and her partner Dr Stuart Grice, a researcher at Oxford University with a doctorate in genetics and neuroscience, who focuses on the business planning and financial aspects having gained experience with management accountants Accenture.

They had the idea for the business when they recognised the potential opportunity for new products and services based around the emerging market of personalised genetics.

Having come across other DNA art companies by chance and realising the lack of information provided with their offerings, the pair thought they could apply their skills in molecular biology and take a different approach.

"We have a love of both science and art and a genuine enthusiasm for sharing this. We wanted to help people learn a little about genetics, a subject that will be increasingly important over the next ten years with the advent of personalised medicine, in a way that would appeal to a wide range of people.

"We thought they could learn something fascinating about themselves and their family," said Dr Decombel.

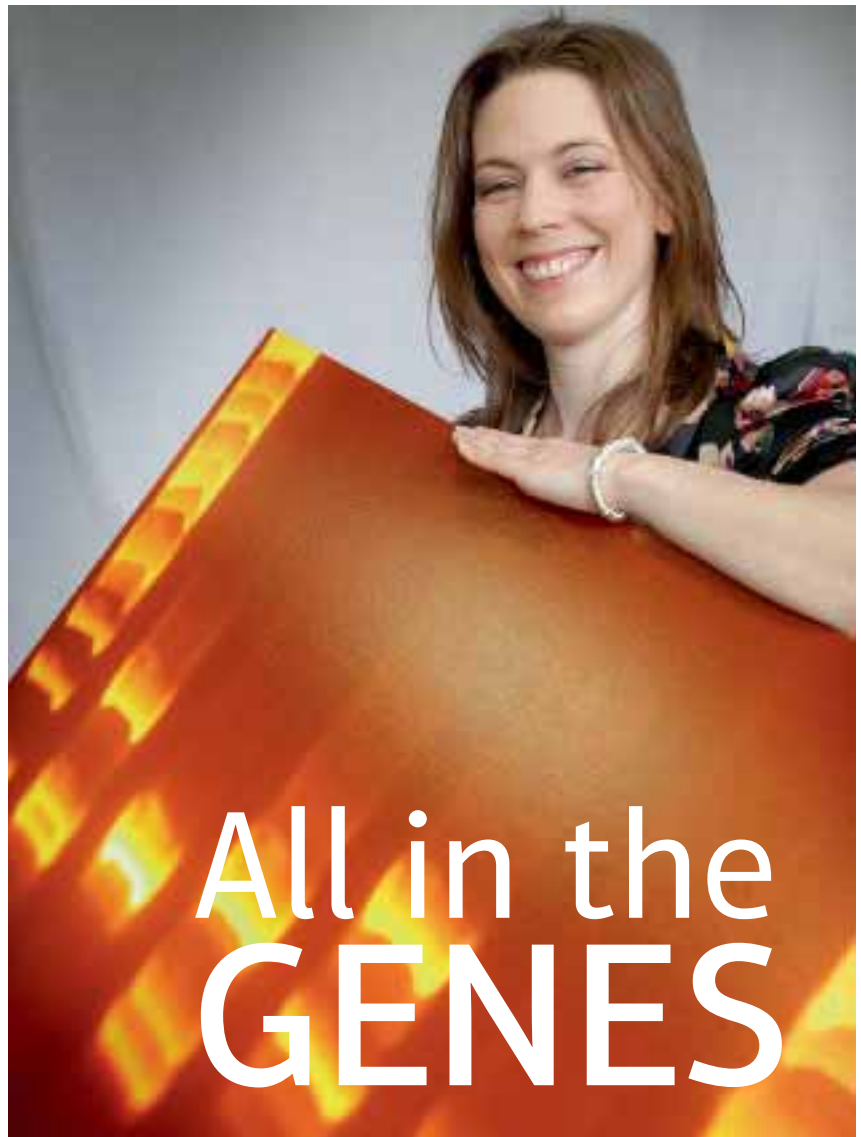
During its first 18 months, the company has been self-funded and is based at the DiagnOx laboratory at Cherwell Innovation Centre, Upper Heyford.

And PlayDNA is thriving and growing fast. The team which also includes graphic designer Callie Bowyer, recently added another staff member with the arrival of Oxford University researcher Dr James Sleight, recruited to extend its online presence with blogs on scientific topics aimed at a general audience.

As with all emerging businesses, lessons were learned along the way. Initially, the founders

Samantha Decombel who has launched a company combining fine art media with modern molecular genetic techniques to create piece of art based on the subject own DNA

Photograph: Damian Halliwell



Margaret Henry meets Dr Samantha Decombel, co-founder of PlayDNA, a company which creates unique portraits that provide a glimpse inside your DNA

thought that the novel artwork would appeal most to young professional city workers with an interest in the arts and a relatively high disposable income.

In fact, experience has shown that their product is very popular with families, particularly families with small children, due to the exciting prospect of seeing familial relationships displayed in a completely unique and 'geeky' way.

PlayDNA has responded by introducing smaller framed prints in combination with family photos to make the products more accessible to this particular market.

Dr Decombel said: "We showcase family relationships artistically. You can see from your PlayDNA portrait what genetic traits you share in common with a loved one, what traits your children might inherit, and in family portraits which genes you inherited from mum and dad.

"We have also solved a mystery for one couple who were told during their pregnancy scan that their twin boys were non-identical, but 18 months after they were born, the family struggled to tell them apart.

"Their parents had always held onto a little doubt that the twins might be identical and

contacted PlayDNA to request our help. We took DNA samples from all family members, processed their DNA portraits for all ten genes we offer, and on photographing the final images the results were emphatic — the twins' portraits were identical."

The establishment of the website has also been a major turning point and enabled PlayDNA to build a reputation through customer testimonials.

Since going online, sales have grown month on month. The company has also established collaborations with local wedding photographer, Rug-Maker, and Big Boy Beanbags to provide additional outlets for products.

Looking to the future, Dr Decombel said: "We will continue to create new products and services. We are currently developing a 'DNA art ancestry' product to launch this winter.

We are also working with several fitness industry professionals with a view to developing a spin-out company that provides training and nutritional advice based on a range of physical fitness-related genes."

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