

REKINDLING HOPE ON THE 3 ESTATES

Unwrapping The Sweet Project, Part 1

When gaping holes began to appear in the safety net of the British welfare state during the second decade of the 21st century, not everybody assumed that the crisis would be temporary and could be ignored until it went away. Seeing what was coming in the wake of economic mismanagement and increasing globalisation, there were some who did not dismiss the idea that the most marginalised of our neighbours would sink into destitution and despair unless a new spirit of solidarity, branded by some the *Big Society*, took root in our country and grew. They were the ones who saw the inevitability of change, the lack of an affordable alternative and the urgent need for creative action.

This is the story of two remarkable women whose vision and commitment may one day come to be seen as one of the reasons why social provision on the south side of Birmingham did not collapse completely during that difficult period. Like so many champions of the poor, they are unsung and avoid the limelight. And yet, in four short years, their passionate concern for



Jayne Hulbert & Jayne Cresswell

the people of the Three Estates of Kings Norton and beyond has given birth to a project which has brought to south Birmingham, including Pool Farm, Hawkesley and Primrose, some of the most talented future social workers now training in British universities. Despite growing recognition for their work, including an invitation to Downing Street to receive from David Cameron a *Big Society Award* in 2011, they remain relatively unknown in their local area except among those who share with them a concern for supporting vulnerable adults, families and children in one of the most socially deprived parts of the country.

In October 2009, **Jayne Cresswell** explains, *“Birmingham’s family support provision was moved to north Birmingham, leaving none in the south”*. She and her colleague **Jayne Hulbert**, who had been employed by a national charity which was well known and respected on the Three Estates, were made redundant. Long-standing and fruitful links with local schools, churches, police and health providers were severed and there seemed to be no way back.

The Two Jaynes, as they are known locally, left to seek new jobs and to wrestle with a question: how will the most vulnerable families of Kings Norton cope now that their safety net has been taken away? By December 2009, there was no funded support left in this part of Birmingham for families, children or adults at risk.

The Jaynes refused to be beaten. Though they were now working in different parts of the Midlands, they stayed in touch and continued to discuss possible solutions, acutely aware of the precarious situations in which so many families in south Birmingham were now living. They had been used to providing practical experience and training for student social workers on placement from the University of Birmingham. Could there be a way forward, they wondered, which combined their expertise in this area with the urgent need for family support on the Three Estates? Jayne Hulbert had been a tutor on the University's Social Work degree and was aware how difficult it could be for students to find good-quality practical experience. So it was to Birmingham University that they turned with a proposal to create a student training unit which, with the right level of supervision, could also offer the people of Kings Norton what they needed.

The University's response was "*Fantastic idea. We have no money*". In fact, the Jaynes will tell you, they hear this reaction so often that they plan to have it engraved on their tombstones! Nevertheless, they persevered. With a promise from the University to supply 9 students for a one year pilot scheme, they took their idea to local councillors, schools, health visitors, the police and other

agencies, all of whom knew them well already. Eventually, Birmingham City Council promised them the use of a building at the heart of the Three Estates at a peppercorn rent for a year. When this offer fell through just before they were due to start work, it was a local



**Social
Work
Experience
Education &
Training**



Students at work at the Sweet Project's offices in Ardath Road.

school which stepped in and offered them the use of a room until they could find a more permanent base. Which is why, on the 1st March 2010, nine students and their two trainers took up temporary residence in ARK Rose Primary Academy (then known as Primrose Junior & Infants School) and **The SWEET Project** took its first faltering steps. On their first day, they received 29 referrals.

Trainers and trainees were the guests of the school for 6 weeks, during which time the students had an ideal opportunity to see at first hand, through day-to-day involvement with the children, the difficulties that some of them and their teachers were facing. Though the school didn't want their guests to leave, the Jaynes were beginning to realise that this new business was going to need its own premises. By May 2010, they had found an office on the Pershore Road which was to become their new home for the next couple of years.

Half way through the students' 100-day placement, they were visited by University tutors, who conducted a review of their progress and returned to Edgbaston to report their findings. Almost immediately, the Jaynes received a request for an urgent meeting. Fearing the worst, they agreed to meet the University's Placements Manager, and were astounded to be told that the Social Work Department were so impressed with what they had achieved in just 50 days that the University would like to offer them a contract to train 50 students a year. With the students would come funding, money which would enable the Project to employ qualified Social Workers as trainers and supervisors. For the first time, the Sweet Project was starting to look financially viable.

Then, in May 2010, the Jaynes began to receive phone calls from Birmingham Local Authority who wanted to start referring child protection cases to them. Reluctantly, they had to refuse because first-placement students are not allowed to handle child protection work; but this prompted them to go back to the University and to propose a pilot scheme involving more experienced students who would have the necessary authorisation. The University leapt at the idea, the Project took on a number of final-placement students and a steady stream of referrals started to flow their way from the Local Authority, though without any funding to back them, then or now. Aware of the strain already placed on their shoe-string budget, the Jaynes were initially tempted to refuse to accept cases free of charge; but then, as



Jayne Cresswell puts it, "We looked at it and we thought, 'Actually, we're training social workers here. We're supposed to be the profession that goes out and cares. If **we** don't work with these families, who else is going to?'" The obvious answer was, "Nobody". And so they found themselves teaching both first- and final-placement students, offering them a far wider range of practical training than they had ever imagined, and needing to find space and resources for up to 70 trainees at a time with very limited resources.

Over the past 4 years, the reputation of Kings Norton's Sweet Project has grown to such an extent that it now draws students from 28 British universities. Not a penny has been spent on marketing. Its extraordinary growth has come about through word-of-mouth recommendation, as students from Birmingham have told their friends about the time they have spent here and as universities have spread the word amongst themselves.

By bringing into Kings Norton the next generation of social workers and focusing their training on the needs of South Birmingham, the Sweet Project has found itself filling the gap left by the collapse of social work in this area five years ago. Financially, it is still on very thin ice, which is why it needs our continued generosity. Next month, we will tell more of the story. We will introduce you to some of the talented students who have dedicated their careers to restoring hope to our most excluded and marginalised neighbours. We'll also try to give you a clearer idea of what you can do to help. In the mean time, you'll find more information at www.sweetproject.co.uk.

This article is based on interviews conducted at The Sweet Project in February 2014. The Project's offices are at Unit 3 Ardath Road, Kings Norton, B38 9PL, tel. 0121 458 2270. Opening times are Mon-Thurs 9.00 - 5.00 and Friday 9.00 - 4.00. Visitors are always welcome.

Michael J Gill & Daughter

Painter & Decorator

Trading locally for 30 years with over
40 years experience

Please phone 0121 458 3830 for a free estimate

