

HOPE – DREAM – BUILD

My story in three short blogs.

By Susanna Shotter –
Aspire: Creating Communities Project Lead.

The room is buzzing. I look around and wonder how I got to this point. Living my dream job – creating community amongst people who ordinarily wouldn't spend time together. Making a welcoming space for those bereaved or isolated, or those just wanting to get to know their neighbours better.

Memories may sometimes be a little sketchy and joints might just be creaking a little more, but as one lady aptly said, "We may be down, but we're not out yet!". They might drink a cuppa (or three), chat and create something arty with their hands, but really what we're doing is nurturing something much deeper – friendship and a sense of belonging.

My name is Susanna, a 34-year-old Lancashire lass with two kids, a patient husband and two rabbits, teetering on the verge of launching a new charity. This is how I got here:



1. HOPE

I've always felt comfortable with people who were maybe four...five...six decades older than me. As the eldest daughter of a pastor and a teacher, a huge extended family, church, two sisters and eventually foster siblings I was used to being around a lot of people. I always accompanied my dad on visits to "the elderly" whenever I could. As a teenager I would visit folk from church who were retired, widowed, ill or lonely, on my bike. Maybe I was a little unusual... I didn't know anyone else my age who did this!

In 2006 as a young, newly graduated Occupational Therapist (OT) fresh out of Oxford Brookes University, I sauntered into my new job. My very first job, which I had won before I'd even qualified. I was confident, excited and passionate about making a difference in the lives of older people. But within weeks, reality hit home. I was struggling - I felt out of my depth, swamped with paperwork and like a square peg in a round hole. I loved the patients in the "mental-health-services-for-older-people-day-hospital", but on a professional level I was drowning. I was way out of my comfort zone. Although I was bright, outgoing - and on the surface of it *very* confident - I quickly discovered that I had A LOT to learn and a long way to go.

My first professional role was a rollercoaster. For my first two years I felt overwhelmed; and my last two years, combined with my own mental health issues, were a struggle that I would rather forget. However, thankfully, these tough times bookended 3 years where I thrived as an OT.

From 2008 to 2010 I worked on a psychiatric ward for older people with severe mental health conditions. I had autonomy; and enjoyed supervising OT assistants, newly qualified staff, and mentoring OT students through their placements. I loved the creative aspect: teaching, being part of a multi-disciplinary team, and most of all getting to know the individual in-patients, many of whom have made an impact on me to this day.

I encountered severely unwell people, some of whom, devastatingly, ended their own lives when they felt they had no hope left. Barbara*, in her 80s, really seemed like she was ready to go home and make a fresh start. Yet within days of her discharge, she felt so alone, having been bereaved of her husband and her son, that she lost all hope and took her own life. This was devastating for those of us who had worked so closely with her and took me a long time to reflect on as I had played a part in sending her home. We had worked together to find good social groups and a choir she seemed keen to go to, but in the end, the grief of losing her husband was too much to bear.

But there were definitely success stories too. It was real privilege to be allowed into people's lives and make a small difference to those heading home from hospital, facing the outside world and finding their feet in day to day life.

Like Mary* in her 60s, who I worked with for 6 months, as an in-patient. It was brilliant to see her transform and become open to new friendships. She had been an artist in her twenties, but a series of tragedies saw her mental health deteriorate to the point of severe depression, social anxiety and psychosis. She hadn't dared touch her art for years for fear of "failure", but through occupational therapy groups on the ward she built up her confidence. When she was finally discharged, she was happily volunteering in a local studio, expressing her mental health journey through stunning art – she had found a little of her lost identity.

When I looked back, I used to view that entire time as being a wash out. As a sign that I wasn't good enough at what I do. But that's not the whole truth. I am competent, capable and experienced. I love the core of Occupational Therapy – using meaningful activity to promote and support independence. Occupational Therapy focusses on the whole person, on day to day, real life activity, and on enabling and empowering people to be able to achieve their goals, within the context of their disability or circumstance.

But things couldn't go on as they were. The strains of the job, balancing a new family, and my own fragile mental health, led to a breakdown in 2013. I simply couldn't cope with everything at once - the demands of being a new mum, wife to a newly qualified teacher, and all the constraints of my stressful work environment - where staff were overstretched, and I couldn't cope with my growing caseload. My priorities had changed. And the knocks kept coming – our youngest son was hospitalised the same month we moved to Huddersfield. On my return to work after his illness I realised I couldn't cope and hadn't been coping for over a year. I had to choose to put me and my family first.

Moving to Huddersfield turned out to be the best decision we ever made. I could prioritise my health and sanity and enjoy some time with my two very energetic toddlers! The next two years was a very skint but mostly happy breath of fresh air. I held onto my Occupational Therapy registration for a little while, but at the back of my mind were some nagging questions. Could I go back? Could I cope with that overwhelming and stressful environment again? If not, what else could I do? Low confidence, low self-esteem and a traumatic end to my job plagued my thoughts, at the time giving me little hope for a future career as an Occupational Therapist.

*details changed



2. DREAM

Fast forward two years: my youngest son was about to start mornings at nursery, while my oldest son was starting infant school. I had this niggling feeling that I needed to start thinking ahead and planning what to do next. Should I do some courses? Renew my registration as an OT or take on some voluntary work? Anxiety and uncertainty started to rear their ugly faces again, as I contemplated job hunting and I felt stuck. In one sense I didn't feel any pressure from my family to immediately sort it out, but in another way, I knew I needed to consider my options.

I started slowly, attending some volunteer training with the local library service to run bibliotherapy "book chats" in local care homes. I never ended up running these sessions as my future role landed in my lap within a month of this, but I did end up getting to know the CEO for another charity. (Words for Wellbeing, a unique bibliotherapy service using the written word in many imaginative ways to connect with people with mental health and wellbeing issues.) I am now proud to be part of this charity as a trustee.

9th September 2013. Both kids start school or nursery. Yet, after I dropped them off, I sat in the car and burst into tears. What was next for me? My mum joked with me that it was a great chance to make my house immaculate for 15 hours a week – Ha! I was already twitching to find my identity again within a job. But what?

That evening I posted on a Facebook page for mums across the country, looking for reassurance and advice from anyone who was one step ahead of me! Following a long stream of comments and conversations with SO many people who understood my exact anxieties and feelings, I went to bed hopeful and dreaming that the "right" job would be out there for me somewhere. I decided to spend at least six months doing voluntary work to build my confidence. Yet life had other plans.

INBOX – a message from a friend of a friend of a friend who happened to live down the road from me and happened to read my post on Facebook the night before:

A very small and elderly congregation are desperate to have an impact in their community. They are hoping to start a small older people's outreach project, initially once a week, providing refreshments and activities. We have secured a small pot of money to pay someone sessionally to deliver this project, however as yet we haven't found the right person for the job. At first there may only be funds to pay someone for one afternoon a week. Experience is not essential, though a heart for older people and good organisational skills are a must. Thanks!

I have a clear memory of a moment I had when I was 18, standing in the middle of Oxford contemplating my future, and had a very specific idea of an organisation that I might one day run. I read the advert once. Read it again and my heart skipped a beat. I just knew that this was for me! A tiny little paid job, 'working' with my favourite demographic, with a church, delivering creative activities. My head buzzed with ideas, people I could involve, local resources I could connect with. This opportunity sent shivers down my spine; it was so close to the dream that I'd had more than ten years before. It was a no-brainer.

That day I spoke with the organisation involved, and they wanted to meet with me – I was delighted. They hadn't had any interest in the role from anyone else and before even asking me about my background or experience, they asked, "when can you start?" Never had a potential employer said to me, "You do the dreaming and the visionary stuff, and we'll find you the money for it."



Within a week I had brainstormed some ideas, met with the team and sat for an hour trying to think of a name for the project. The right language has always been important to me. To be person-centred, positive and visionary was the key. The church I would be working for had recently had their spire beautifully restored, after the previous spire had been dramatically stripped of its copper lightning conductor by vandals, causing the top 8 metres to come crashing to the ground. This gave me an idea.

The Spire? Inspire? Inspirers? Perspire (NOOOO!) ... Expire (definitely not!)

Aspire?!? What do you do when you want to give something a name? Google it!

First three words under 'Aspire' in the thesaurus: HOPE. DREAM. BUILD.

Aspire, St John's was born.



2. BUILD

The last four years have been a bit of a whirlwind. What started small has grown. We've worked hard to be bold; to connect with as many people locally as possible to source variety, diversity and fun; and to continuously find new ways of connecting with those people who really need our groups. I may on more than one occasion have been referred to as a Networking Fiend! Ha! I think I am passionate, deliberate and outgoing, and that running this thing mostly plays to my extrovert strengths.

Of course, launching a new organisation is not without its challenges. At times I've had to learn fast, dive out of my comfort zone and try something new. My biggest challenge is finding and activating my inner businesswoman. She is hidden deep...deep down inside of me. I am the kind of person who when selling something will say, "Well, it's worth £100, but make me an offer...I'd probably accept £30 if that's not too much for you!" I really wouldn't make the cut on Dragon's Den!

But while I may not be the savviest businesswoman, I make up for it in other ways. I put my heart and soul, along with my Occupational Therapy experience into running this exciting and innovative project. It's a given that my priority is person-centred-people-personalised-peopling. Sometimes I must choose to do the things that are NOT MY FAVOURITE THINGS. Excel spreadsheets, budgeting, policy building, evaluation... all the things that involve me and a computer screen and no other real people I find hard, but like it or not, their involvement in the story is compulsory.



Creativity and being person-centred are great, but on their own (in my case anyway) have the potential to evolve into a beautiful but chaotic approach to something that also needs focus, drive, planning and policies. When done well, these things support us to be creative and expressive. Thankfully I have had amazing support from Futurekraft, the original business that took me on to

launch this. They play to my strengths and give me freedom to dream, but are also teaching me to become business-wise, to have longer term goals and to build a strong foundation for sustainability.

From the launch, so many of the right people have landed in my path to form a strong and committed team. Aspire now has three paid sessional workers, five sessions a week in different venues, and 26 volunteers.

Always willing to try something new, our Aspire group members know they can arrive at any session and be surprised by what is booked in that day! I sniff out new local artists, storytellers, musicians and historians. We have had chocolate tasting sessions, community health and safety campaigns and a family history society. We love our inter-generational sessions with local schools and The Prince's Trust young adults. A firm



favourite is a professional wildlife photographer who comes in a few times a year to show us photos on a huge screen of his latest expedition to Antarctica, America, Asia, or his own back garden in West Yorkshire!

We have story after story of how Aspire has “turned [my] life around”, made a guest “feel worthy”, or given them a “new and exciting experience”. We are even getting creative with how we find and attract the most isolated people. Our most recent initiative is working with a local funeral director who is



both sending us her staff as volunteers once a month and promoting our sessions to some of their bereaved clients who, being recently widowed, want to find connection and purpose again in a relaxed and low-pressure environment.

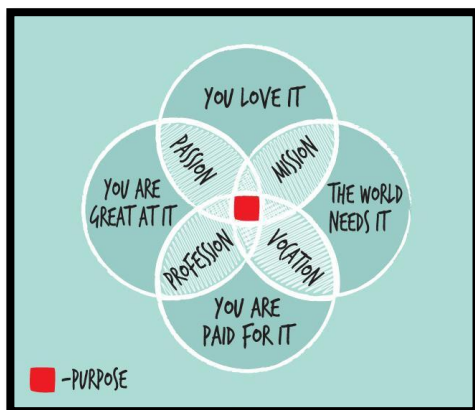


Venturing onto Twitter for the first time in March I was delighted to find a whole network of professionals, excited to work with older people in a creative way. Age of Creativity, our local Third Sector Leaders Kirklees team and Age Friendly Standards have all opened opportunities to me to further develop professionally, and to connect with others who are in the same boat.

My most exciting moment just this week came from realising there is a whole network of “OTs who don’t call themselves OTs” out there. I am thrilled that next week I get to meet up at a networking event for a niche group

of OTs who don’t quite fit any other category, for the British Association of OTs. I feel like a bit of my professional identity is being restored – I really am an Occupational Therapist at heart!

I am over the moon to find myself Here. What started out as a small opportunity to work a couple of hours a week has grown to a point where we are on the brink of launching a new charity.



Looking back over my story, it’s packed with twists and turns, false starts and more. But now, I am over the moon to be working at Aspire and so excited for the future. I am filled with hope for the future. Your story (like mine) may not be a simple one and your journey may not be a straight line, but I firmly believe that if you keep dreaming, keep focussing on what makes you happy, and stay open to wholeheartedly accepting unexpected opportunities, then you too will find your purpose. We are all building our lives one brick at a time, but we can only build stronger lives by creating communities together.



"A sense of emotional well-being"
Liz, Volunteer

"Filling a big gap in community care"
RVS Befriender

"Relief from loneliness"
Lucy, Gentle exercise practitioner

"Encourages all to try something new"
Karina, Volunteer

"Someone cares about you enough to know your likes and dislikes"
Ann, Volunteer

"I liked meeting new people"
9 y/o child coming to Intergenerational session

"The staff and volunteers offer consistency and support that goes far beyond what would typically be expected"
Luke, Community Artist



To find out more about Aspire or any of the other organisations mentioned, feel free to contact me

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Futurekraft. Their heart for community organisations, fundraising and project development skills have been invaluable.

The Aspire Team. Too many to name, but to my colleagues Stella and Rachel, our board of trustees, the thirty plus community partners, the venues and churches we work with and the 26 volunteers who make every session run smoothly! Phew!