An historic Reunion

On 11th October 2024 we brought together a dozen people who had been involved in community development work in Ely and Caerau in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s for a fascinating discussion on the work they did before ACE existed. DAVE HORTON describes some of the revealing issues they explored.

Organising the Ely community development Reunion in October 2024 felt a bit like summoning the Avengers - an all-star ensemble cast of superheroes from our neighbourhood's shared community development history (variously active in the area from the 1970s through to the 2020s).

As we gathered together in ACE's CAER Community Heritage Centre I realised, not for the first time, that those of us active today really are standing on the shoulders of giants. I knew a few of the characters who joined us that day already and I was excited to supply caffeine and listen to them reminisce with each other about their glory days. What would stand out in their memories? How did their experiences compare to ours? What could we learn that might help us continue to build our community and ACE's role within it?

"You won't want to leave"

Despite Ely's rather fearsome reputation, when I started working in the area in 2006 I remember professionals talking about the community in rather reverential tones. 'You'll find you get attached to the place and won't want to leave,' they promised. Just over a year later I moved into the neighbourhood with my partner. We have brought two daughters up here and continue to be active locally. This place has become home. This sense of loyalty to, and love for, the community and people of Ely suffused the whole day. In sharing their recollections, people didn't seem to be describing a 'job' at all at times. Instead, vivid pictures were painted of friendship, adventure, solidarity, sorrow and laughter. Sacrifice and commitment were key, and 'going the extra mile for those who require it' (Lee Patterson).

'And I know that for many years during that time some of us didn't get paid…because we didn't have any money!' - Gloria Yates

Despite this, the day's participants held professional roles in Ely of various kinds and they demonstrated the key role that 'outsiders' with particular skills and experience can play in supporting community aspirations and initiatives. Importantly, most were trained in and made use of community development principles and approaches. These skills, along with the values of love and loyalty highlighted above, allowed them to describe in vivid detail the unique strengths and characteristics of local individuals and the community as a whole. They understood their role as 'coming into' this space to help identify, organise and resource action that meaningfully involved local people and that built on their strengths. Professionally trained and experienced Community

Development Workers are crucial and yet access to good quality training and development opportunities is currently very limited and many independent organisations struggle to prioritise resources for training from very tight budgets.

“Hey man, take us to Africa!”

‘When I first started in the youth club the young people said, “Hey man, take us to Africa!” I said, “Come on let’s go.” We got a minibus, and we drove from Ely to Morocco, into the Sahara desert. We had a 15-seater minibus but we took 16.’ - Barry Doughty.

‘Ely was about doing things. Not risk averse. Ely was about challenging the norm, if you like.’ - John Rose.

The key role of risk taking emerged from a number of the stories told throughout the day. It was clear that participants saw this as a unique aspect of their approach and one that resulted naturally from the desire to ‘do the best’ for local people and to really change people’s lives for the better. In particular, a willingness to step out of comfort zones and take risks was a crucial factor in enabling activities that took community members beyond the limited horizons of Ely to new places, people and adventures. These often impromptu journeys led to the formation of longer term projects like North Ely Expeditions and the Over 50s Travel Club. Even today local people will recollect their experiences travelling in Europe, Africa and North America, and the role these trips played in widening their perspective and expanding their sense of what’s possible in life.

A certain rebelliousness

Interestingly, most of our Reunion participants were employed by the local authority in various community roles (or by other public service organisations or large charities). These potentially rather bureaucratic and restrictive settings were where risks were taken, boundaries stretched and new ground broken. In actual fact, these structures provided opportunities for constantly evolving networks of like-minded individuals exploring how they could connect in new ways to achieve new outcomes. Nevertheless, a certain rebelliousness was required to push back against the more restrictive aspects of these institutions, to cross boundaries and to carve out space for innovative partnerships and approaches.

Nigel Billlingham described the nervousness within his employing organisation that their role and identity was being ‘lost’ within a wider partnership with the Council. Barry Doughty talked of the need to ‘know the rules of the game so you can get around them’ and Lee Patterson described balancing risk taking with political astuteness. Indeed, all the Reunion participants seemed to agree that one person in particular, Alun Michael, was central in ‘opening up space’ within these settings, giving permission for them to try new approaches and seek new directions.

‘I see some of the benefits of structure. But actually, somewhere in the middle there is a sweet spot around those values and principles which are you, and what you are living and breathing, and what you are aiming to achieve.’ - Lee Patterson

It's our turn to carry the flame

I recognise many of these tensions and challenges from my own experiences in Ely and Caerau. ACE builds on the strong foundations laid by these heroes by providing a dynamic and sustainable organisation that is owned by local people and that will hopefully be here for many years to come. We have built skills to save and run buildings, to employ local people and to attract and manage significant income. Post-austerity local authorities and other public sector bodies have fewer resources than ever to engage in meaningful ways in communities. It falls to ACE now, and those cut from the same cloth, to build and hold a dynamic, constantly evolving network of relationships that provides fertile ground for new ideas and action. Like those before us we walk a tightrope between risk and safety, between creative experimentalism and structure, and between fierce independence and a desire to work with government and others to improve life for our people. We have received the flame. It is our turn to carry it and our responsibility to hand it safely to those who will follow us.

Participants at the Ely , October 2024: Barry Doughty, Dave Wyatt, Nigel Billingham, Howard Williamson, Mark Drakeford, John Rose, Iona Gordon, Gloria Yates, John Winslade, Lee Patterson, Dave Horton, Mel Witherden and Eva Elliott.