

BRITAIN'S EVERYDAY HEROES

THE MAKING OF THE GOOD SOCIETY

GORDON BROWN

WITH



EDINBURGH AND LONDON

Copyright © Gordon Brown, 2007
All rights reserved
The moral right of the author has been asserted

First published in Great Britain in 2007 by
MAINSTREAM PUBLISHING COMPANY
(EDINBURGH) LTD
7 Albany Street
Edinburgh EH1 3UG

ISBN 9781845963071

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted
in any form or by any other means without permission
in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer
who wishes to quote brief passages in connection with
a review written for insertion in a magazine,
newspaper or broadcast

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

Typeset in Helvetica and Sabon

Printed in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc



SUSAN LANGFORD

Both young and older people are generally underestimated by society . . . not listened to or noticed enough. I think the strength of intergenerational work is that it looks at what people can do rather than what they can't do.

All round the country I hear the same concern: worries from older people that young people never talk to them and questions from young people about why older people don't understand them.

Susan Langford has an explanation – and a solution. 'The reason is that all those informal places where young and old used to meet and interact no longer exist. You're unlikely to see old people with young people, and yet put them in a room together and they realise they're fundamentally the same and they understand what they have in common.'

So, to bridge the generation gap, Susan Langford founded Magic Me, an organisation based in London's East End that has the aim of bringing young and older people together in joint arts projects. And such has been her success that she has even seen pensioners and young students studying and then passing citizenship GCSEs together, including two pensioners who had never sat an exam in their lives.

It was after her training and early work in graphic design that Susan became interested in community arts: a broad term that means finding ways to use the visual arts to bring people

together in the community – to build relationships at the same time as creating artwork. ‘I met a women called Kathy Levin, who was in England talking about her work in America, which she called “intergenerational”. She had set up Magic Me in Baltimore. It just sounded intriguing – it was taking young people, children at risk, into nursing homes with the aim of setting up a structure where the two groups could work together to create something. I was very intrigued and tried running some pilot projects in London.’

These attempts to bring young and older people together for shared learning and creativity encouraged Susan to set up Magic Me in London in 1989. And while Levin’s model inspired her, she was particularly driven by what she had seen in her work in care homes for older people. ‘I was shocked by the grimness of these places and the sense of isolation, despair and sadness experienced by the residents. A sense of injustice drove my desire to change that environment. I wanted to bring the real world into those spaces and to help the people there to continue their life experiences. It felt like people went into care and then really quickly went downhill; they just didn’t have anything going on in their life.’

Susan remembers one individual in particular who confirmed her belief in the importance of this work and whose memory continues to inspire her. ‘Very early on, through a project with a local junior school, I met a woman called Rose who has always been an inspiration for me. She was Jewish; she grew up in Whitechapel, in the East End of London. She told me about her life as a child, roaming around and being a trouble to the people who ran the market stalls. She wanted to talk about her Jewish background: recognising she was at the end of her life, it was important for her to know who she was. I only knew her for about three months before she died. I found out when her funeral was and decided to go along. I was the only person who was there. She’d lived for eighty-seven years, and I’d only known her for three months. I thought there was

something completely wrong there. When I arrived, the care home had messed up and booked a Christian burial for Rose. I witnessed what I thought was total hypocrisy and just said goodbye to Rose in my own way. The sense of how wrong that was stayed with me. Somebody's whole identity was negated. It seemed like she'd been eradicated, that people had forgotten who she'd been for all those years. They'd lost sight of how a community is woven together, and if we lose sight of how a community works – and the place of both young and old people within it – then we all lose out, really.'

Susan has spent twenty years working to bring young and older people together, finding ways for each to share, learn from and build upon each other's experiences, beliefs and identities. In a multicultural society, and a society of rapid social change, the forces that divide young and old, that divide those of different cultures and religions, must be overcome by those working to build bridges and bring people together. Susan's work is so profound because it is driven not by a fear of division or polarisation but by a wonder and curiosity about people, a desire to celebrate the uniqueness of individual experience, and a belief in the huge amount every individual has to give and to gain from sharing their uniqueness with those who are different from them.

She explains the Magic Me model: 'Magic Me is an arts organisation, it's also a community development organisation and a charity. We run arts projects that get young people and older people working together. It might be learning photography and putting on an exhibition; it might be writing poetry together and publishing a small book; it might be drama, music . . . anything. A mixed group of young and older people come together with a shared purpose and in the process find out something about one another. I think the gap between young and older people is bigger now because the informal times and places that people used to meet, bump into each other and get to know each other have gone because

people move around so much now, communities are so mobile. So what we are trying to do is create those spaces ourselves.

‘Every project we do has three aims. One is creative: “Let’s make a book, or let’s learn artistic skills by working with professional artists.” The second is about personal development, which is where the title “Magic Me” comes in. This is about giving people confidence to go into a difficult situation and learn things about themselves. And then the third is about community development: “How can I feel more comfortable about people who are different from me in my community? How can I engage with the other generations so that I don’t stand at the bus stop being afraid of young people or cursing them?”’

While Magic Me now works across London, the particular nature of the East End, its home and focus, is key to understanding what Susan is setting out to achieve. ‘The particular thing that’s going on in the whole of London, but very markedly in this borough, is that the generations are very different culturally and ethnically. The school population is about 70 per cent Bangladeshi Muslim young people, whereas the seventy-plus generation is about 70 per cent white indigenous older people. People have lots of questions: “How do I connect with my neighbours? Are they going to speak my language? Why do they wear those clothes?” These are the kinds of questions that people have, but there is nowhere to meet where they can ask the questions and start the conversations. We offer a safe place, and we invite people *because* they’re different. It makes it easier to start a conversation: “Oh, you’re different to me. Let’s talk about it.” You find the similarities as well. “We live down the same road” or “We both support Arsenal”, or whatever the shared concern is. It might be they’re both worried that there’s drug dealing on our estate, and that’s no different if you’re a Bangladeshi seventeen year old or if you’re an eighty year old. We are creating a place and structures for people to find what their commonalities are and take pride in their differences.’

The stories of Magic Me's diverse and fascinating projects speak for themselves and are the best way to understand what their unique approach is achieving. 'We did a project with Mulberry School for Girls, which has about 98 per cent Bangladeshi Muslim students although it's a state school, and local older women, none of whom were Bangladeshi or Muslim but were African, white, Jewish and Christian. Together, they looked at the story of the suffragettes and what women were prepared to die for, or to be starved for, or locked up for, and how they campaigned. Together, they thought about what issues they would go and campaign for or campaign against. By talking about those issues, they were able to explore attitudes like, "I'll stick my neck out and wear a headscarf in public even if people shout at me sometimes." One of the turning points for the young women was when they realised the older women had the same feelings as them about the Iraq War. They expected that all older white people would be in favour of the war, but they discovered that most of the older women were completely against it – and against any war, because they've lived through wars and the Jewish women had experienced prejudice. They had experienced the same feelings as the young Muslim women and found a lot of common ground.'

What Susan's stories demonstrate is the absolute power of personal experiences and encounters as an educational tool and as an unsurpassed way to make people confront their assumptions and prejudices and open their minds to new possibilities. 'We meet people and whether they're seventeen or they're seventy-three they've had a long time getting to where they are and a lot of influences on them. But it can be remarkable how the experience of working closely with another person can make someone change their mind or just open up: "I have very strong beliefs but so does the lady in front of me. And actually what we have in common is that we have very strong beliefs." So I think it's about gaining a new perspective: "Sometimes other people have a point of view that doesn't

eradicate mine.” And I suppose people take that with them after the project has finished.’

One story in particular sums up so much of what Susan’s innovative approach has been able to achieve, the way it has touched lives, and the diverse – and sometimes unexpected – range of outcomes that are evidence of its success. ‘We worked with Oaklands Secondary School and Sundial Older People’s Centre. The school had a group of students studying for a GCSE in citizenship. Part of the course was doing something in the community, and they asked Magic Me to get involved. I talked to the older people about it and asked if they would get involved in a project about what it means to be a good citizen in Bethnal Green. They bought the idea, but they said, “The young people are going to take a GCSE, so what are we going to get out of this?” I said, “You can do the GCSE as well, if you like!”

‘Four of the older people sat their GCSEs. They had to go in the school hall and sit in the rows behind 120 fifteen year olds. I think I was the most nervous parent on exam-result day. I was down at the school with them, and they all passed, and all the young people passed: it was absolutely wonderful. Two of the men had never taken an exam before. One had left school at twelve. He’d been a refugee from France at the beginning of the Second World War. He never got on at school. His school got bombed one night, and the children were told to go to another school, but he never went and nobody ever asked after him. So, aged seventy-seven, he finally got a certificate. That was really fantastic. It made a real impact on the young people, too: seeing people who didn’t have to learn but wanted to. Within the school, I think it really changed some of the teachers’ minds about what working with older people is about: they suddenly realised there was more to this. So they’ve done other projects. They are reviewing their timetable, and they want to build Magic Me into that so every year there’s a project that’s part of a life-skills course. It feels

SUSAN LANGFORD

like it's really got through that tangible educational gains can be made from working with older people.'

With gentleness and determination in equal measure, Susan has built a powerful model that is breaking down prejudice, building connections and touching lives. Susan reflected on what has made Magic Me so successful and why it has meant so much to the individuals and organisations it has worked with. 'The people we work with feel that both young and older people are generally underestimated by society, that they are not listened to or noticed enough. I think the strength of intergenerational work is that it looks at what people can do rather than what they can't do. So often, provision, particularly for older people, is about what they need and what they lack, whereas actually what they've got is an incredible amount of talent and skill and energy and time. And the same goes for young people. It's not just about providing youth services where they can come and do stuff but about harnessing their energies. How do we look at people in terms of what they bring rather than what they need?'

The wider lessons are clear: 'Government and local government and commerce divide people up into age groups. They provide services like that. Consumerism is all age related, so twenty-one year olds to twenty-four year olds buy this phone, and then the next group want something else. We need to think more coherently about how those things add up together. How do we provide for people in ways that bring people together rather than dividing them up?'