

The Volunteers Tale

TOM SAYERS

Tom is a latter day Robin Hood, always ready to help a friend in need. In spite of the hectic personal life, this human dynamo is involved in several charitable ventures locally. He specialises in practical solutions to other people`s problems – and he succeeds by breaking all the rules.

I was born in Dublin in 1943 and I`m married with six children. Coming to Milton Keynes was an accident. I was working in West Germany for the British Government laying television and telephone cables. I got the job because I can speak German and English and we were working with a German crew. It was a great job, simple and straight forward, and it involved a lot of travelling. But my wife hated Germany. We lived in a little village right on the North-Eastern border where British people are a definite no-no. It was one of Hitler`s strongholds. In fact one of the men in my work crew used to be a sergeant in the S.S. I read in an English newspaper that British Telecom were building a new telephone exchange in Milton Keynes. I`d never heard of the place. It could have been a village near Timbuktu. I said to my wife:

“How would you like to live in England?” “I`ve never really thought about it,” she said. The only time she`d been in England was when we`d passed through on the way from Ireland to Germany.

My boss arranged my transfer to the U.K. and we kissed Germany goodbye. We spent a day in Holland, got the ferry to Felixstowe and travelled to Milton Keynes. We went straight to the Development Corporation offices. They told us our house wasn`t finished and we could either live in a caravan park at Ashland until it was ready or pick another house. We decided to stay in the caravan and have a look around.

What I didn`t know at the time was that the anti-terrorist squad were looking for me. Half an hour after we`d left Germany a bomb had gone off in the telephone exchange where I`d been working. Two soldiers were killed and many people injured. A man, who fitted my description, Irish accent and all, was seen leaving the building. A few days later our house at Gibbwin was finished and we moved in. After a while I got the idea that people were watching me but I couldn`t explain why. I didn`t know what was happening. I was in the house one night and all hell broke loose. Front door, back door – I`m sure if they`d had helicopters they would`ve come in through the roof as well. I was taken to the headquarters of the Thames Valley Police at Kidlington, quizzed and grilled. They checked with Scotland Yard. They checked with Dublin. I was the most wanted man on their list, but of course, I was in the clear and they let me go. That was how we landed in Milton Keynes – with a bang.

After all that hullabaloo I decided to look for another job because the money at British Telecom was so pathetic and it was shift work. I went to work for Llewellyns

the building contractor where I became their maintenance plumber. I am a plumber by trade. But that didn't last and eventually I was made redundant.

I have a lot of energy and I need to burn it off in some way. I became involved with Channel 40, the local cable T.V. station. At that time Channel 40 were just finishing doing the television side of things and going over to radio. One of the first jobs I did was to build a radio studio and I sound-proofed another studio for them. I thought that I'd love to have a bash at doing a radio programme and they said: "No problem." I got a real kick out of doing that. Then, when the news was announced that Milton Keynes was going to have a hospital, a campaign started for a 'buy a bed' appeal. We decided to do a radio marathon. Different D.J.s were going to go on every four hours and we'd have competitions and people could pay to hear a particular record. At the last moment I had this crazy idea of doing the whole of the marathon myself without a break and get people to sponsor me. All my job was supposed to be was to stay awake but I ended up doing the broadcast as well. I did eighty-four hours of it and at the end I was completely wrecked. On my sponsorship alone, we raised £1570, and we bought five beds.

After that CRMK went downhill. The money was tight and neither the corporation nor the general public felt they were getting value for money. It was all on cable which meant that you had to plug your radio aerial into the T.V. socket in your house so you couldn't listen to it in your car or whatever. I got a bit disillusioned and started looking for another avenue to channel my energies into. One day, by chance I went to the Pilgrims Bottle on one of those boring nights when there's nothing to do except go to the pub, and I noticed the Linford Community Workshop building right opposite. I went in and had a look round and someone asked me if I wanted to do a bit of pottery. I said: "You must be joking, but I'll give you a hand if anything needs doing around the place." I went to the Users Committee and twelve months later became treasurer and the next year I was chairman.

I got to know Vikki Bennet who runs a refuge for battered women and their kids in Bletchley. , I'd seen some of the problems that these women had to put up with and I decided that I'd like to give them a hand. So I devised a scheme where the Development Corporation - God bless their souls - would provide transport so I could take the kids out and give their mothers a bit of a break. I had to convince the Development Corporation that I was 'one of theirs' - which I wasn't. I'm still not. I got over that obstacle by getting to know some of the nicer directors in the Corporation. By now I was a trustee of Milton Keynes Community Workshops and I was given permission to drive the Corporation van assigned to them. But I really needed a mini-bus for the kids outing so the next stop was to swap the van. I found out which departments had mini-buses and when they were available. That information came very easily. So then, usually every weekend, I'd take a van to Stacey Bushes, park it in the Corporation garage and exchange it for a mini-bus or a staff car, or the executive bus, depending who I was taking out. I would fill up with Corporation petrol - Bless 'em - and take the kids out for the day.

Another group that I stumbled across was a home for the mentally handicapped in Bletchley. I was down at Coffee Hall workshop one day and I saw them doing

pottery and woodwork. I thought they were marvellous and then I found out that they were often stuck for transport to get them about. I went to see the people who run the home and said: "How would you like me to take a bunch of them out on a day-trip?" It was Christmas time and we took them to Woburn Wildlife Kingdom. I went to Stacey Bushes, got this big eighteen-seater Transit and we were off. It was the 28th December and of course everything in the Safari Park was closed. We asked them to open up the Dolphinarium.

I said: "You've got to feed the dolphins sometime so why not put on the whole show for the kids." The man said: "You're mad. It's freezing, we've been using a bulldozer to clear the snow up here." We got stuck too, we had to get towed out by tractor. It was fabulous, the kids never even felt the cold. We drove right round but it was so cold, most of the animals stayed indoors. Eventually the Development Corporation twigged the transport thing when the petrol bills started coming in. So they put the mockers on and for a while it made life a bit difficult.

Probably the biggest event in my life happened this year when my wife was pregnant, my daughter was pregnant, my sister was pregnant, and they were all due on the 27th March which is my birthday. My wife nearly came up trumps, she went to the 28th. Ten days later, Caroline, my daughter gave birth to a baby girl, and the day after that my sister also had a daughter. So in the space of a couple of weeks I became a dad again, a grandad and an uncle.

I've been waiting twelve months to go into hospital for an investigation operation. I got a computerised letter the other day – Please report at the Stony Stratford Health Centre on Wednesday morning. I went down there saying: "What's this? Am I going for an operation?" And the doctor says: "No, this is the vasectomy clinic!" I had asked my doctor in passing about having the chop but he said that there was a twelve month waiting list. Anyway, this doctor says: "Tell me your circumstances." And I told him: "Daddy, Grandad, Uncle. . ."

"How many?"

"Six"

"Holy Shit," he says, "you can go straight to the top of the list!" I came out of there laughing. The wrong clinic on the wrong day; it could only happen to me.

I definitely want to stay in Milton Keynes. At one stage I got a bit homesick and went back to Ireland, but once back there I thought: "Christ, who wants to come home here?" You don't realise how much you take Milton Keynes for granted until you leave it. I think I will spend the rest of my days here. I did own a little plot of land in Ireland that I was keeping for my retirement but I sold that about five years ago. I see myself staying here and maybe with a bit of luck I might just get a job here too.