

The Workshop Manager`s Tale

SUE SENIOR

The community workshops in Milton Keynes were set up to provide city residents with the resources to `do it themselves`. Between them, they are equipped for such diverse activities as woodwork, computer programming, pottery, welding, printing, textile crafts, and photography. Sue`s job is a demanding one, involving creative, technical and administrative skills. When she started she also had to cope with the pressure of being a woman in a man`s world – and the prejudice that goes with it.

The workshops are a direct product of Milton Keynes being a new city. When I came here there were only three workshops in Great Britain and they were all in M.K. The idea came from Cindy Hargate and the Corporation who thought there ought to be one on every housing estate. They stopped with three. In fact I don`t think there should have been one on every estate because there wouldn`t have been the time, the room and the resources. Sweden, for instance, had one in every town and there are some in Canada. There are others being set up in cities near us and they`ve been to see us about it. These three in Milton Keynes are the first of their kind - very revolutionary.

Anyone Can Come In

The policy of this place is that we have an age range of nought to ninety, so we have a crèche at one end and we work with the geriatrics at the other - any shade, creed or colour - and that`s written into the running of the workshop. We also have special sessions for the physically handicapped and the mentally ill - you name it.

We`re basically here as an open resource centre. Anyone can come in at any time and use the facilities which they can`t, in essence, afford to have in their own homes. If you`re unwaged it costs twenty-five pence for three hours and there`s something like fifty-six thousand pounds worth of capital equipment for that amount of money - it`s very heavily subsidised. You can also get guidance and teaching.

The workshops are working and fulfilling their purpose but it`s the same with the leisure centres, you`ve got to educate the public into using them. This is why we`ve got such a hot policy for children. You`ve got to start getting the kids in first and then the rest of the family.

I came to Milton Keynes because my husband was fed up with his job in Yorkshire and got a job at Cranfield doing wind technology. We got a council house through Cranfield and so I arrived as a housewife with a small baby in 1979.

The first I saw of M.K. was in the middle of the night from a layby. I was breast-feeding my son and he was covered in milk and that horrible packet baby food and it was snowing. I thought: "What the hell am I doing here?" and from then on it got worse. We drove down from Yorkshire and moved in at midnight. Martin said:

“Behind here is a hill with trees on.” And I thought: “Yeh, I believe you.” And in the morning I saw I was on the estate of Bradville, so my initial impressions were very confused. I wrote to Stantonbury Campus and got some evening class work there teaching pottery. I wanted to get back to work so much. I felt very isolated and spent a lot of time in the house or meeting the neighbours.

I couldn't find anywhere to go with a child. There weren't any crèches and he was too young for playgroup. Anyway, I started teaching at Stantonbury and the kiln blew up and Leuan Jones said: “Fire the pots at the workshop.” And I said: “Hold on where's the workshop?” I was literally half a mile away from Linford and I'd never heard of it, I cycled over there and I couldn't believe what I saw. My degree was in graphics and here was all the litho equipment and stuff that I hadn't seen since I was at college.

About a month later I started a little firm of my own doing macramé kits and came down to Linford to do some printing for it and had a fantastic time. They said that they were looking for a Manager for the pottery side. I phoned up Cindy Hargate and said: “I'm the woman you need.” The Linford job didn't actually come up before the Coffee Hall job which I applied for and got.

Coffee Hall was in a terrible state when I started. There was no storage space and the place was full of dust. There were no users and the place was in debt. It was very run down and had a dreadful reputation. The workshop had attracted a certain kind of person which didn't include women or children or grannies, in fact none of the estate. It was basically men between the ages of twenty-five and thirty. They wanted the workshop as their club. The day I came to interview here they were welding a car and gas bottles which is illegal and incredibly dangerous. The car had a full tank of petrol, you know? There was a tremendous feeling of aggravation a) because I was a woman and b) because I wasn't going to have things as they were. I had to face a massive six months complaints procedure of them against me until they resigned and went.

A Really Good Place For A Woman To Be

Milton Keynes is a really good place for a woman to be. It's one of the few places that employ women in management without feeling bad about it. It's got good child care - if you're prepared to pay for it. And it's so easy to move here. It is also easy to get things going because people are new and interested in new ideas. If you can give them a sheet of A4 saying this is what I want to do, nearly always it's acceptable or possible. They're with you, with the growing spirit which is just not true in other places I've worked. You know, usually everybody immediately gives fifteen reasons why you can't move the furniture. Here it's so different. I've said that the workshops can spin on a sixpence, but after the Development Corporation has gone it'll probably be a lot more difficult. In a lot of ways it's a whizz-kid city.

In a physical sense the city is great, just a very different concept. Well, it's changing a bit; in the first stages when you came to the city you couldn't see anyone because we're all behind sort of hills and everything. My Father-in-law said, when he

was planning to visit us : “Oh, I’ll ask someone the way.” And we said: “You won’t you know, because you won’t see anyone.” That was very foreign to him. But that’s the good news. It’s great on the estates, knowing your children aren’t going to get run over. Fifty-one per cent of Fishermead was under five years old when I first came here. My son Eddie never has to cross a main road and my ex-husband (now) was telling a colleague in London that Milton Keynes is the only city where he could get out of his city house and cycle through two parks and in ten minutes he would be in a very high-tech office, you know, and next to a lake. It’s a lovely city to live in.

I’ve been here nearly four years and I’m very aware of the fact that although I’ve learnt a great deal and we’ve got good things going here, I don’t have any dance, theatre or cinema. These are the areas I feel I need to develop in and I can’t do in this building. So I want to leave, I always want to move continents. There’s always time to move on and I want to leave all to this to someone young who can grow through this as I have. I’ll never leave this place in my mind – it’s been such a colossal part of my life. This is very much a young person’s job and I honestly think you should boot people out after five years. You need somebody with all-energy and all-input. I want to run a bigger workshop with better facilities in another country. And if I’ve got to move I may as well get warm too. It was an accident of birth that I’m in Britain. I love M.K. and if it was by the sea you’d never get me out of it. I also object to having a cruise missile site fifty miles from the back door, so I’ve decided that the Southern hemisphere is definitely the place to be.