

Looking Back

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By Anne Barrable



I'm looking back – first to the 80's, when I was young, around forty, and a volunteer at Chelmsford prison, then for the Probation Service, and later on to the night shelter for the homeless.

Starting at the prison, I was a visitor for the young lads who had no family or friends to visit, either because they were too far from home or because they had been disowned. When the prison was no longer for young offenders, I moved on to evening classes. Another volunteer and I used to lead what was basically just a chat group. The other volunteer, who was a war veteran and a very learned man, had many interesting stories to tell and led many discussions, while I was a sort of mother figure. I then moved on to day classes, helping with basic English, which was quite a challenge – for both them and me! I suppose a highlight of my time at the prison was when I was chosen to meet Princess Anne as a representative of the volunteers when she visited. Colin was also there to support me, so he can also say that he has been in prison!

For the Probation Service I used to visit prisoners' wives in their homes, which took me to some of the more remote places around Essex, sometimes on winter evenings and finding my way around without the benefit of a satnav – extraordinary when you think that I really don't drive any more. We befriended one of the wives who I visited, and we are still in touch. Were it not for the pandemic, we would have been to see her these past months, when she has been in hospital several times.

Moving on to the 1990's, I started helping with the homeless. At first it was the Chelmsford churches that saw the need and the only facilities available were church halls, and there I began sleeping on the floor with as many as twelve men and another volunteer, also a man. I'm sure that wouldn't be allowed these days! As it swiftly became clear that this was a long-term need, a charity was formed, and premises became available where a hot meal, a bed and some breakfast was provided, and I was able to sleep over in a sleeping bag on a settee in the lounge, although not in the best of atmospheres as in those days smoking was allowed. That charity still exists, and nowadays gives a fully rounded service, not only providing a night shelter, but helping people back into their own accommodation and employment when possible.

In those early days, people would say “Anne, aren’t you ever nervous or frightened?” I can honestly say that I wasn’t and looking back I know that God was with me and looking after me. Nowadays, when a young lad knocks at the door selling his wares, trying to make good after coming out of prison – as long as he shows his credentials – I’m happy to help out. If Colin answers the door, he will immediately call out “Anne, it’s for you!” You wouldn’t believe the number of pairs of oven gloves I have in the cupboard!



Anne doing a fundraising abseil off the roof of the County Hall in Chelmsford

(Top image by [Gerd Altmann](#) from [Pixabay](#))