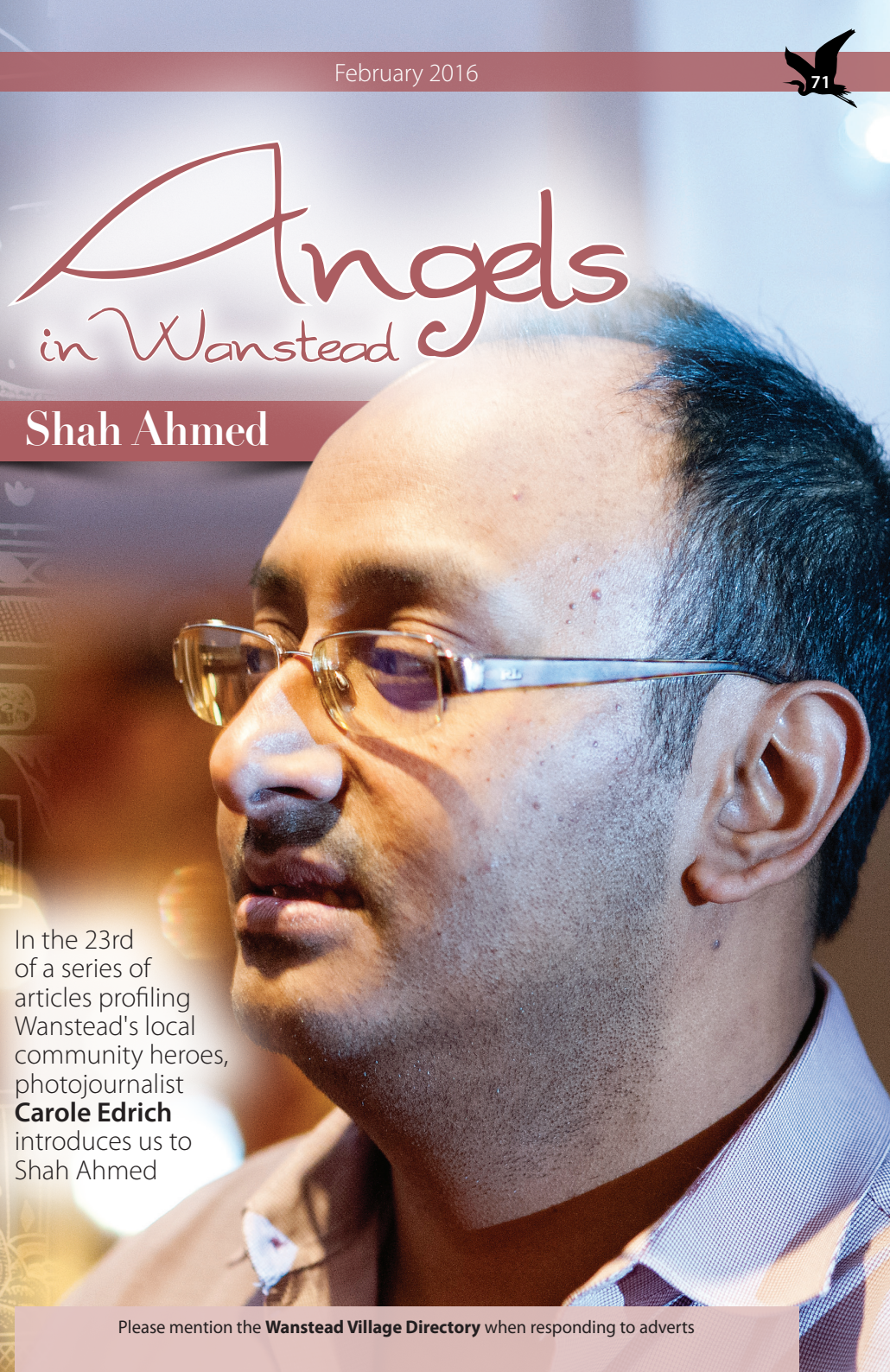
Angels in Wanstead

Shah Ahmed



In the 23rd of a series of articles profiling Wanstead's local community heroes, photojournalist **Carole Edrich** introduces us to Shah Ahmed

"My dad wanted me to get a degree because it helps you think," explained Shah Ahmed, proprietor of the Star of India in Leytonstone. "When you've got a degree, you can ask questions properly and can think through the pros and cons." Whatever his plans, his father's untimely death meant he gave up his biochemistry degree course to manage the family's thriving business.

Now married with four young children, Shah divides his time between the restaurant, other local business interests and a huge range of charity and local community work. He was invited to 10 Downing Street for a local entrepreneurs reception hosted by the Prime Minister; he is chairman of more local enterprises than I can list here; and was involved with the introduction of BID, an initiative of the Leytonstone Business Forum, which aims to encourage new businesses to the area. He is a sociable business man with an encyclopaedic memory of people and ideas and a passion for keeping things local.

While Shah's main focus is his family and restaurant, he's one of those people who compulsively fill up their time with good works. He is chairman of the Leytonstone Festival, campaigns for the Labour Party, is on school PTA boards, works hard in campaigning for Fair Trade goods in local businesses, provides summer fayre and Christmas meals to schools in Wanstead, Leytonstone and Ilford, pensioners meals at Easter and Christmas and, to celebrate the Star of India's 30th anniversary, started the Cygnus Trust, a small charity that raises money for local groups.

I asked Shah how this all came about. Half joking, he told me it was because he had got a bit bored. Originally he was at the restaurant at 10am to do cleaning and preparation for lunchtime before the traditional closing time at 2.30pm. From there he'd collect the kids from school and get a couple of hours of rest. He thought there must be more to life than this, so joined the PTA and helped set up Cheeky Monkeys, the parent and toddler group at St John's Church. As the only man in the group he would initially just accompany the fundraisers as they walked through Leytonstone. Over time it became clear that the weekday lunchtime trade wasn't enough to justify opening the restaurant and his involvement in Cheeky Monkeys and other enterprises grew. Among other things, he was working with a team on Leytonstone Festival. Shah talked about the challenges involved in making Leytonstone Festival such a success and his satisfaction in seeing local businesses thrive as a result.

By using the restaurant for fashion shows, auctions, quiz nights and musicals he has extended what his father started by donating the money raised to largish charities, such as Haven House. Then things developed: "It's a pleasure seeing people enjoy themselves. As a restauranteur that's what I do. But we wanted the money to have direct impact so we started the Cygnus Trust to provide small amounts of money – between £500 and £600 – to local grass roots organisations," he explained.

Shah tells me his wife thinks he's nuts because he just won't relax, and that his children love the restaurant and charity work but get frustrated that he is always talking to so many people. I think the man is ingeneously adaptable. Rather than allowing himself to be trapped in the traditional role of restauranteur, Shah has created a lifestyle of friendship, challenge and charity around it.

Star of India – which is located at 875 High Road, Leytonstone (call **020 8989 4028**) – will be providing the food for a PTA quiz and curry night at Wanstead High School on 6 February (call **07753 612 917**)

If you run a small local charity and would like to find more about the trust, visit **cygnustrust.org**

To nominate someone for a future *Angels in Wanstead* article, visit **wavidi.com/aiw**