

In the 22nd of a series of articles profiling Wanstead's local community heroes, photojournalist **Carole Edrich** introduces us to Frank Charles

Angels in Wanstead

Frank Charles

Have you ever met one of those people who you instantly gelled with? Someone who is funny, thoughtful, honest and genuine and who takes time to listen and to think? That's Frank. A whole book wouldn't do him justice, and after spending a long time wondering how on earth I can tell you enough about him in 600 words, I've decided I won't try. I'll just tell you a few of the things he's told me and let you join up the dots yourself.

As a school kid playing football in Forest Gate, Frank used to think what a lovely place Wanstead was. Later, he got to know the area well as a postman (which he was for 14 and a half years). Frank has been in Wanstead since 2004, the year of his second marriage. The first fell to pieces as a result of the loss of his son Ashley, who died suddenly and unexpectedly of Hirschprung's disease (where all or part of the gastrointestines can't function because they have no ganglions) at a very young age. Frank himself spent six years of his childhood in Great Ormond Street Hospital with the very same disease.

Already working for Barnardos, the death of his son showed him how life can change in a second: "My world was my child. That lead to me doing lots of voluntary and charity work, which I've done over 30 years." I think he's probably simplifying things, he showed me two very prestigious awards given to people who work in the public sector and have contributed exceptionally to local communities and charities.

Every year he does something to raise money for charities. Earlier this year, he raised over five thousand pounds by cycling from Land's End to Jon O'Groats. He tells me that on the third day he was finding the hills of Cornwall so hard that he sat down and thought 'I can't do this'. He managed though, because he jokes, that when he called his wife to say how hard and high the mountains of the Scottish Highlands were, she laughed and said 'that's why they're called Highlands!' All this would be hard for a healthy man, but five years ago Frank was diagnosed with non-Hodgkins lymphoma and bone marrow cancer. They're managing to keep it stable, but it hasn't gone away.

Frank says a lot of his charity work is because of his background: "While I was at hospital, I had nice clean clothes every day, food that I really enjoyed and more. Before I went I hadn't realised my family was poor, when I came back I did. People would bring round clothes and toys, and secondhand things felt like new. We didn't go away but the church would arrange a day trip to somewhere like Blackpool and we'd love that as kids. So I want to give some of that back. It's a nice thing to do, even if it is a tiny bit. That's why I started the Frank Charles Give a Gift Appeal . Hasters Foundation in Loughton have done all the paperwork for me, and it would be a wonderful Christmas gift if the Charity Commission said yes [to making it a registered charity]."

Meanwhile on 17 December, he'll be taking toys to the Acorn Ward at Whipps Cross. If you'd like to donate money or gifts, please leave them with Ali at Wanstead Pharmacy (75 to 77 Wanstead High Street) and Frank will pick them up from there.

To find out more about Frank's charity work, call **07782 218 112**, visit **frankcharles.org.uk** or follow him on Twitter **@ frarnie**

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