In the 21st of a series of articles profiling Wanstead's local community heroes, photojournalist **Carole Edrich** introduces us to Ruth Huntman

Angels in Wanstead

Ruth Huntman



You know the way you get to know and keep up with locals in Wanstead? I've known Ruth Huntman like that for years. She has always been open, helpful and thoughtful when we've chatted, and while she is far too modest to have talked about them directly, over the years I've been left with the impression that undertaking small and thoughtful acts of kindness are simply an expression of her character (although simply might not, in this case, be the right word). In current vernacular, she doesn't 'big herself up'.

A journalist who has interviewed many A-list names over the years, she simply says: "I'm really lucky to have a job doing what I love… and meet some incredible people. But at the end of the day, it's just my job and you have to put it in perspective… especially when you see those much less fortunate on your own doorstep. It's no big deal to give a little back… Even if it's just to sit and have a chat with a lonely stranger." What she didn't tell me is that she has done PR work for Carers UK and has a blog on their volunteer hub. That's why I asked the editor to include a particular photo; Ruth's trademark hair with her face hidden expresses her modesty extremely well.

At the moment, Ruth is getting an elderly Redbridge resident's life story on paper. That the fee is nominal is a massive understatement but she is enthusiastic about the project: "Most 'ordinary' people don't realise what fascinating lives they have. This gentleman set up a learning centre working with universities in underdeveloped countries like Namibia. I've been contracted to interview him to produce a book. In one breath he says that he doesn't think that he's interesting and in the next says he'll not be available for a few weeks because he's taking a tall ship voyage around the Caribbean and Southern India, stopping in New York for a long weekend!"

Ruth spends her professional life interviewing celebrities. Working with this man, who wants to create this book so his grandchildren know something about his past, is very different. Ruth continues: "Celebrities all have an agenda, so there is never a problem getting them to talk. Just persuading this gentleman that his story has value is a challenge." She explains that even though he's doing this to do better by his descendents, he darts around a lot, so writing a coherent story is more difficult than you'd think. She was expected to complete the book from 10 hourly visits. That clearly isn't the case.

Ruth was born and bred in Barking: "You can take the girl out of Barking," she laughs, "but you can't take Barking from the girl". She is still fiercely proud of her origins and that she is the grandchild of immigrants. Wanstead gossip being what it is, I've heard her stand up for her and other peoples' rights when it would have been easier to stay quiet. "You've got to be pulled up on casual racism," she explains. "It's not acceptable". She's right.

Ruth lost her mother 14 years ago and is now her father's carer: "Dad is 95, has lost all of his friends and most of his family, so now he lives with me. Mum was really creative. She was into am-dram and very gregarious. I'm the first on Dad's side to have an education. I'm quite proud of that but it also makes me sad." Ruth started at the *Barking and Dagenham Post* at the age of 15 and wasn't considered important enough to have a chair until the day she left.

She went on to the *Ilford Recorder* to cover crime, then found herself working in entertainment: "I hadn't intended to go into entertainment but wanted to be a feature writer rather than do news." She discovered a talent for entertainment writing and became well-versed in celebrity interviews, which are more of a challenge than you might think. When pressed, she told me she didn't like to boast, but she had never imagined she would one day interview her heroines Bette Midler and Joan Rivers. She has also interviewed Brian May and Roger Moore, who she says: "got me shaken not stirred because he's so charming."

Even with 100 words too many I've barely touched the surface of why Ruth's an Angel, but keep an eye out and you'll see for yourself.

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