Angels in Wanstead

Sandra Irwin

In the 13th of a series of articles profiling Wanstead's local community heroes, photojournalist **Carole Edrich** introduces us to Sandra Irwin



Although I used to pop in to Coco to buy clothes and maybe have a cup of tea before my cancer, I didn't really appreciate what wonderful people work there until I was on chemo myself. When I told her, Sandra's immediate reaction was to forget the sales, share her experiences and offer a sympathetic ear. It soon became apparent to me that the same empathy, openness and sharing was offered to everyone, irrespective of who they were.

I went there recently to interview Sandra about the thousands of cups of coffee and tea they must make while sharing time with those who come in, and Sandra said: "We are a little bit like a club here. People are welcome, we listen to everyone's problems and advise when we can." This has happened for as long as anyone remembers, Sandra Irwin's friend Sandra Bramley, who was there at the time, joked: "You should give them a bill at the end of the conversation for the advice." Tania Lee joined in: "It has always been like this, hasn't it? Even in the old shop. We used to call it the Friday club." It's not just Fridays though. People might come and chat, maybe even spend the day, and they're made welcome and their experiences are shared in the nicest, warmest, least judgemental way that anyone could imagine.

That first time I talked to Sandra, Karen (her daughter) and Tania, was just before chemo when I was looking for clothes for a very special date. Sandra shared her experience regarding what to expect and made it clear I was welcome to drop in anytime. Although I'm sure they were already friendly and welcoming, Sandra's cancer made her more determined to help others. She said that one of her friends wrote a beautiful six page letter, explaining what she had gone through during her cancer, so when Sandra started (her treatment was particularly aggressive) she knew she wasn't alone and more or less what to expect.

Sandra continued: "At the time, people didn't talk about cancer. You must talk about things, and if you bottle it up inside, you don't have any rest. Then, when you start sharing, you realise how many other people are going through the same thing. It's very hard, because when you are having chemo, you do feel ill. My eyes were very bloodshot all the time. You also feel you can't eat. I had very good friends bringing me chicken soup but there's a constant metal taste in your mouth. If you just say that to other people they feel so much better."

My personal experience of her generosity was when she offered a cotton insert for my bra. Her surgeon had recommended she use them, so Sandra, who had more than she needed, gave away what was left. Tania told me of a time one of Sandra's customers had come in while she was on holiday. The customer had said they were talking about looking one's best during chemo. Sandra told the customer she only used the expensive Bobby Brown makeup because it was best for the skin at such times – and took her own makeup out of her handbag and presented it to the customer as a gift.

Her generosity goes further still; every year they hold a fashion show. It's a fun day with no obligation to purchase anything other than the raffle tickets (although of course some people do). The Coco team get raffle prizes from all their companies, Sandra prepares lovely homemade cakes and there's plenty of wine. Sometimes they raise around £1,500 for breast cancer charities, sometimes more. This year, they're thinking of doing a summer event, with Pimms and something outside, so keep an eye on Coco or pop in and ask, and join in a day of fun.

While the people are lovely, I don't visit as regularly as I'd like. The clothes in Coco are so lovely (chosen, I'm told, by the Sandra-Karen mother-daughter team) that I have to ration my visits or I'd end up with the best wardrobe in Wanstead and not a penny for food. Pop in and see if you agree.

Coco is located at 125 High Street, Wanstead. For more information on their events, call **020 8989 1008**

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