In the 19th of a series of articles profiling Wanstead's local community heroes, photojournalist **Carole Edrich** introduces us to Mike Edwards

Angels in Wanstead

Mike Edwards



"It's interesting to experience an interview from this side" said Mike Edwards, who *Wanstead Village Directory* readers will know well from his Wanstead Stories series. What you might not know is the host of other things he does for the community and environment. I thought it was about time to set that right.

"My green-ness doesn't fit my background at all," explains Mike, who was once a manager at Coutts & Co, the 'Queen's Bank'. One day, having a massage started a slow change in his outlook and lifestyle as it signalled the conscious awareness of alternative health. He loved massage, so when he was made redundant in 1991 he decided to train as a sports masseur. He felt the career choice was justified when, in the first six months, he received more thanks than over the entire previous 22 years in the bank.

Years later, he joined a pilates class with his partner, Kathy. When his pilates teacher suggested he should train as an instructor, he felt he lacked self confidence. "The idea of standing up in front of everyone scared the hell out of me." But he trained and qualified over 10 years ago and it's an aspect of his life that gives much joy. He's clearly still surprised and delighted that most of his work now comes from referrals. Unsurprising though, since it's also clear that helping people and reducing their pain is very much more important to him than the money he gains.

His political views developed around the same time: "Working with people who appreciate what you do makes you look more widely. You listen and think better. That moved me politically left." He got more involved in supporting campaigns he believed in. His first march was in protest of what was happening in Iraq. Now he is on the campaign trails, signs and supports petitions to help protect wildlife, help the underprivileged and he works as much as he can to save the local and national environment.

Although taking an allotment was Kathy's choice, Mike has become an enthusiastic gardener, who is happy to pass on some of the excess produce that his green fingers create to good causes. Through doing this he says: "I realised if you give unconditionally and unselfishly, something positive comes back. Sometimes from the most unexpected source". He set up allotment 'drinks' at the local pub to swap ideas and seeds, then joined Wanstead Transition. This environmentally friendly group was about using less fossil fuel, better recycling, green ideas, reducing car use, teaching how to grow food, mending rather than buying new, sharing tools and more. But when the group folded he kept the network going with his allotment friends. He still both practices and talks about all the principles now, and was pleased to tell me of one of his pilates clients who moved from disposable nappies to cloth ones on hearing of the formers' cost to the environment.

Practicing what he preaches, he and Kathy often go scrumping (for him this means the legal acquisition of fruit that isn't owned by others) and he relates with delight that their last expedition got them enough plums to make 14 jars of jam and chutney. Mike also flies as little as possible, preferring train travel, cycles rather than drives, calls himself a 'recycling maniac', has solar panels on the roof, three waterbutts, and makes teas from their own garden herbs.

Mike says; "The High Street is really important to me. I stay away from corporations and multinationals as much as possible and I love promoting local causes."

That's why he took five years to write and shoot photographs for a book of the stories of local 'venerable' people (his word, not mine). *Shelf Life E11:E4:E18* still sells well and is extended through his monthly articles in this publication on businesses new to the district.

A while after the interview, Mike sent another warmly enthusiastic email: "Sitting in the garden eating 'scrumped' Elderflower home made ice cream. Mr Whippy eat your heart out!" Even though I've only touched the surface of what he does for the community, this makes such a lovely picture that I think it's best to leave him there.

Shelf Life E11:E4:E18 by Mike Edwards is available from 84 Gallery, Time for Tea and Bennetts of London. For more information, visit **mikeedwardsphotography.co.uk**

To nominate someone for an *Angels in Wanstead* article, visit **wavidi.com/aiw** or leave a message for Carole at The Larder, 39 High Street, Wanstead.

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