

Angels in Wanstead

Monica Bujor

In the 24th of a series of articles profiling Wanstead's local community heroes, photojournalist **Carole Edrich** introduces us to Monica Bujor



Lee Marquis, editor of the Wanstead Village Directory, is a regular customer



Monica started selling The Big Issue in 2006, the same year the Wanstead Village Directory was founded

Like any high street vendor, *Big Issue* sellers buy their stock (magazines) from a supplier (The Big Issue Foundation) and make a fixed profit on each sale. Unlike other high street vendors, they only have one product and the margins never increase. By selling the magazine, Monica, who you'll have seen on the High Street, is helping others as well as herself, which is why we've chosen her as this month's Angel.

Originally from Romania, Monica has been in the UK for 11 years and a *Big Issue* seller for 10. Her mother and father, who had a small business making shoes and clothes respectively, passed away when she was nine years old. She went to live with her uncle, but he was violent towards her and one day she took the opportunity to escape and ran away. After several years and a complicated story she ended up in Manchester: "I didn't go to school and I can't read and write. My oldest son is teaching me now. He is doing well at school. In Manchester, I had to find a way to earn some money and I started in the church, where they let me wash up and clean for some money. But after two years, the pastor who had helped me died, and I had to leave. I was pregnant and saw my belly growing and I had to earn money for my baby. I took the coach from Manchester to London with my boyfriend. We went to the *Big Issue* office and gave our names and they asked us questions and said we could sell the *Big Issue*. David (her partner) sells the *Big Issue* too."

Monica first sold the *Big Issue* in South Woodford, but after eight months her manager told her that she could move to Wanstead. Monica says her life changed from then. "I am so lucky. I can not read and write but I have a job. I am much happier in Wanstead and I have four healthy children. If I think of when I ran away from my uncle, I had no shoes when I escaped from the window and only the clothes I wore. I didn't think about what to do next. I only had to get away. Now I am selling the *Big Issue* in Wanstead and living in Ilford and I have a partner and wonderful sons and friends in Wanstead. My friends in Wanstead helped me learn to speak English. People ask me how I am and talk to me, they buy me coffee and clothes. They gave me a buggy for my children. Some people buy me shopping. It feels like a big family. I never imagined that this could happen."

No sales mean no money, but she is determined to do the best she can by her children. She knows exactly how many magazines must be sold to buy a pair of shoes for her son and told me how pleased she is that her children are in a good school. She wants them to have a good education: "I want my sons to be happy, not tired all the time. I want them to have the money to live and not be like me in the street all my life." Her Wanstead friends have helped considerably, her friend Laura shares her house with Monica's family for a nominal rent, Margaret and Peter and their children are friendly and attentive, local shopkeepers are kind and give her snacks and coffee. She says that even Wanstead's beggars buy a *Big Issue* when they can.

Even though life is quite a struggle, Monica is determined to keep on working and give her boys the best she can. Sadly, a tiny minority of people give her grief and a few passers-by tell Monica she should 'get a job'. I have a personal message for them: we're a nice community in Wanstead. If you think that your behaviour is acceptable, it would be better if you left.

Monica can be found selling *The Big Issue* outside The Co-operative on the High Street.

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

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