

# LOCAL HEROES

Forget do-gooders who tirelessly bake for charity. Today, being active in the community has more to do with women sharing their skills – from photography to aromatherapy – to help others and themselves. By Jane Hughes. Photographs Polly Farquharson



When Julie Brown set up a scheme providing organic vegetables to people in her neighbourhood of Stoke Newington, London, she had no idea that seven years later she would be running three growing sites on a part-time salary funded by the Lottery. Julie had left her job at Friends of the Earth to go to art college and set up a pottery business from home. But although she enjoyed the creativity of her work, she was lonely and her heart wasn't in it. However, she was still passionate about the environment, and decided to team up with a friend to expand the vegetable delivery scheme into a project called Growing Communities.

'The idea,' says 38-year-old Julie, who lives with her partner Antony and two young children, Jonah and Elsa, 'was to bring derelict land into use and encourage local people to grow food together in Hackney.' The open-door policy has attracted people from across the community, including eco-warriors, Hassidic Jews, Turkish immigrants, schoolchildren, professionals, and the unemployed. 'It's a brilliant way to get to know a neighbourhood,' Julie says. 'Every time I go in to Stoke Newington I meet people I know.' Together with some friends who run the management committee, Julie's planning a café and farmer's market, plus courses in horticulture and office administration for unemployed people. 'The possibilities are endless and incredibly exciting,' she exclaims.

According to Julia Middleton, founder and chief executive of the independent educational charity Common Purpose, Julie is typical of a growing number of women in their thirties who are putting their skills and experiences to use in the community. 'Most people want to make things better or give something back if they've been successful,' she says. 'But in the past five years we've seen more women who are determined to do something about what they see around them.' Research carried out for Common Purpose found that 50 per cent of women thought it was very important to become actively involved in their communities.

One reason for this is our need for roots at a time when we're shifting from job to job and place to place with more

ease than ever. 'People used to feel tied to the area they grew up in, but these days they tend not to know who their neighbours are,' says Martin Hayward, chairman of The Henley Centre, a consultancy for forecasting consumer demand. According to their research, only 45 per cent of full-time working women felt there was a sense of community where they lived, compared to 52 per cent of non-working women.

The interest in community also comes at an age when, having thrown ourselves into careers in our twenties, we want to redress the balance between life and work. As Hayward says: 'In their thirties, a lot of people find that their work becomes a lot less satisfying, and they start looking for a richer portfolio of emotions and experiences.'

That's certainly true for 32-year-old Jacqueline Rogers, who runs a holistic therapy practice offering massage, reflexology and aromatherapy in Stroud, Gloucestershire. Jacqueline, who lives in the Forest of Dean with her fiancé, had become conscious that many of the people who'd benefit most from her skills could not afford them. And as a relative newcomer to the area, she was also keen to broaden her social circle.

Her solution was to join Fair Shares, a community-based charity that lets people 'bank' hours of their time doing things they enjoy for others, thereby earning credits to save, give away or exchange for services they need. 'I see a lot of people getting very stressed, particularly young mums who don't have the extended family support they need,' says Jacqueline. 'It's important for me to help. There's nothing like seeing someone get up off the couch after a massage and move their shoulders and smile. It's incredibly powerful.'

Fair Shares was set up three years ago in Gloucestershire, and now has several pilot projects. 'It's a new way of volunteering that recreates the idea of neighbourhood, whether literally or as an extended network of reciprocal arrangements,' says projects coordinator Joy Rogers. 'Instead of private exchanges, the Time Bank acts as an information system about what different people in the community can offer - from dog walking to website design; professional photography to childcare. It removes the stigma of charity because everyone's time is worth the same.'

Jacqueline has made friends with people she met via the scheme. She recently completed a teacher-training course, and a couple who live nearby acted as students for part of her training. 'They're great, and we're a similar age with the same interests,' she says. 'And I'd never have met them without Fair Shares.'

Research shows that the number of people seeing their best friends once a week dropped over the last two decades, and figures for relatives tell a similar story. As the support networks of family and friends weaken, Joy Rogers sees involvement with community projects as increasingly important, particularly for those who are new to an area or are out all day.

Once women start moving out of their own bubble, they see how exciting and challenging it is to

'The idea behind Growing Communities was to help people in an inner-city area bring derelict land into use and grow food together, but it has also turned out to be about making friends'

So says 38-year-old JULIE BROWN, a former environmental consultant and potter, who lives with her husband Antony and children, Jonah and Elsa. Now in its third year, Growing Communities has three sites in Hackney, North London, where people come along to landscape derelict land and prepare it for growing food. 'We get this terrific mix of people working side by side, who have a real sense of belonging to something worthwhile.'

# new communities

use their leadership and communication skills in other ways. Organisations such as Fair Shares and Common Purpose, which runs an information website called [citizensconnection.net](http://citizensconnection.net), help facilitate the shift. As does the Millennium Awards Scheme, which has given out more than 15,000 grants of around £2,000 to people with ideas for community projects. Pam Hardisty, director of C2M (Centenary to Millennium project), which allocated millennium grants in the Bradford area, says that most projects are run by women. 'Women are good at networking and recognise that for their lives to be better they must make things around them better,' she says. 'Once they start, they realise just how much power they have.'

**C**atherine LeRoy, a 39-year-old nurse, set up a child-bereavement project named FLAGS (Family Liaison and Grief Support) with a £4,407 millennium grant. As a trained volunteer working with bereaved adults at the St Peter's Hospice in Bristol, she had become concerned at the lack of help for grieving children. Catherine's idea for the project began to form after her sister-in-law died of cancer, leaving two children.

For Catherine, who lives with her husband and two children in Bristol, one of the most important parts of FLAGS's work is the after-school group for children. 'Often children think that bereavement hasn't happened to anyone else, so it's a relief for them to support each other by saying what's helped them,' she says. The challenge and fulfilment she has found through the project have also added new dimensions to her life. Since starting FLAGS, she has rethought her career and become a cancer nurse, looking after patients in their own homes. Recently she was named Marie Curie nurse of the year in England.

Careers adviser Lisa Cooper is another woman who thinks nothing of spending her spare time helping others. Instead of waiting for somebody else to deal with the issues that confront their community, Lisa, her husband Paul, and other residents of the Methleys – an area of back-to-back housing in Chapel Allerton, Leeds – do it themselves. Reclaiming the street from through traffic by temporarily covering it in turf, for example, was a way of highlighting the need for children to be able to play



'All sorts of people have got together to make the streets a better place to be'

'When I was younger I never imagined I'd be interested in litter,' says 35-year-old careers adviser **LISA COOPER**, who now finds herself organising spring cleans and annual street parties for Methleys Neighbourhood Action, a community group in North Leeds. 'The group includes an IT specialist who set up our website, and two filmmakers who made five-minute shorts of children playing in the street, as well as eco-warriors, actors and young parents. I like being part of a community where you can chat to people in the street, or ask your neighbours for help without feeling awkward.'

safely outside. The council has since agreed to pave over part of the road in order to create more room for pedestrians, and later this year everyone in the Methleys will be 'greening' their streets by planting hundreds of trees and shrubs.

'I'm not the type to shut myself in and never walk down my street,' says 35-year-old Lisa, who has replanted a shrubbery and organised litter collection for the Methleys Neighbourhood Action group. 'I like being a part of somewhere. It's empowering to see how people can improve where they live with a little effort.'

It's an enthusiasm that's catching. As business psychologist Marie Mosely puts it: 'People are glad to put something back into the community if they believe their contribution will be valued. After all, people making a difference for other people is what life is all about.'



'I grew up in a small, friendly community where it was easy to say hello to people in the street. Fair Shares has allowed me to re-create that sense of neighbourhood'

'I love seeing the difference in people after I've given them a massage or healing session,' says **JACQUELINE ROGERS**, a 32-year-old holistic

therapist who offers free Reiki, aromatherapy and massage through Fair Shares, a Gloucestershire-based system of skills exchange. In return, Jacqueline, who lives in the Forest of Dean with her fiancé, John McCrone, receives help with her accounts and gardening.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Citizens Connection provides information on how to be an active citizen, find expert advice, and start your own community project. Contact them on (020) 7608 8148, or log on to [citizensconnection.net](http://citizensconnection.net).
- Get a free information pack on the Millennium Awards by calling 0800 06801 2000, or log on to [starpeople.org.uk](http://starpeople.org.uk).
- Details of Methleys Neighbourhood Action can be found at [methleys.org.uk](http://methleys.org.uk).
- Fair Shares can be contacted on (01452) 541337 or 0870 702 7428, and found online at [fairshares.org.uk](http://fairshares.org.uk) or [timebanks.co.uk](http://timebanks.co.uk).