

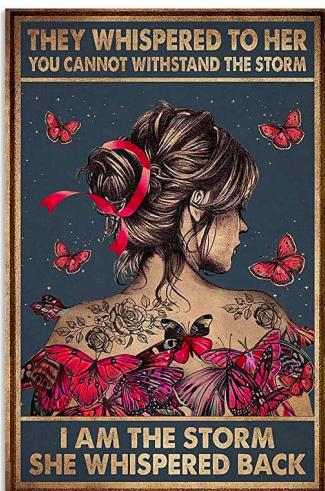


International Women's Day

MONDAY 8 MARCH 2021



Let's all choose to challenge.
#IWD2021 #ChooseToChallenge



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A colleague asked, "will you write a blog for International Women's Day?"

"Yes", I said, and then instantly worried if anyone would be interested in what I might have to say. I guess we all sometimes worry if anyone is interested in what we have to say but the alternative is staying silent and that's not really much of an alternative is it? And let's be honest, Emmeline Pankhurst fought for the right for us to be heard, so on that basis here I go...

As a kid, I loved writing and was usually burrowed in a quiet corner somewhere, always deep

in thought, scribbling 'stuff' down on paper - usually, it was to do with worrying about something or someone. My mum jokes I was born responsible, I was and I'm ok with that.

So, I guess no one in my family was really surprised about my career choice, although I never know how to answer the question of, did I choose it or did it choose me? I don't really know, and I guess it doesn't really matter. I just know that I have a great sense of peace with it because I've spent my time doing the thing I feel I was supposed to do, not in a 'calling' kind of way but in a way that it just fits me, its who I am and what I believe in. I think that however we choose to spend our time, we should always try to make it count.

I was born the backend of the swinging sixties and lived on Baguley Street in Stockport - a row of terraced houses with no gardens, outside bathrooms (well toilet really) and cobbled streets - clogs were worn by all. It was a very working-class, poverty-stricken area, although I don't think anyone felt poor because I don't remember there being another option. To the left at the end of my street was a permeant traveller site where we all played and rubbed along together and to the right was the stables where Stockport's Rag & Bone men lived with their horses. I should

make a point here, for our younger readers, that I am not referring to Rag 'N' Bone Man, the artist. Hillgate was famous for Christy's Hat Works and its long strip of endless pubs – hence a lot of the menfolk were hardcore drinkers and certainly this was a factor in the high level of social problems that existed for many households in my neighbourhood. I have a real love of horses and I think that goes back to my childhood and those many hours spent helping look after them – you can learn a lot about life from spending time with equines

I thought about how much I would share of my earlier life in this blog and decided just to go with a shortened version because I genuinely believe, and I tell my three sons this all the time, it doesn't matter where you start out, it matters where you end up! That statement has little to do with material things. Suffice to say, my childhood years were challenging and like a lot of children from similar backgrounds, I knew far too much about social problems, responsibility, anxiety, being judged and nowhere near enough about the sense of freedom and feeling of safety that should come with childhood. But let me tell you what I'm thankful for; resilience, adaptability, kindness, the ability to keep moving forward and a diverse, unjudgmental heart – all factors which I believe are the best of me.

The butterfly picture at the beginning of this blog is my 'go to' picture and I have it hanging on a wall in my house as it articulates nicely where I'm at as a person, as a woman on her journey. It sums up how I feel and think during tough times - I often look at it when I need a bit of strength or courage and a reminder of who I am and what I'm capable of. And that's really all I want to say about my younger years.

In terms of my career, I intended to join the Police and whilst waiting for recruitment to open, I took a job with the DSS (as they were called back then) working on new benefit claims in reception. In came a young man who had just been released from prison and was dressed in what we would traditionally recognise as female attire. Thankfully, this isn't a shocking event today but in the late 1980s people could be unashamedly and blatantly ignorant and my manager and others were openly laughing at the young man and made him cry. Even writing this now takes me right back to that moment and hurts my heart and I'm so thankful the wrongness of the situation wasn't lost on me. I walked out that day knowing I wasn't going to return; I just didn't want to work for people with those views. I think the diverse mix of the neighbourhood I was raised in had a positive impact on my views and thank goodness for that!

I started to look for a new job (in the Stockport Express newspaper – there was no internet then) and there it was, a Housing Assistant for Stockport Council. I got the job and was deployed to Reddish Housing and all I can tell you is how amazing it felt and immediately I knew that this was the thing I wanted to do, always!

I remember my first day like it was yesterday and I'm smiling as I write this and so grateful for the right turn and choice I made for myself that day. I had completely overdressed for my first day and I remember a Housing Officer saying I looked like an air hostess and wouldn't last 5 minutes....well here I am, 29 years later! I'm still as shocked and saddened today as I was back then that people aren't able to take for granted having a safe roof over their head and this is something, we in this sector should never stop striving for.

I'm not saying in this sector that I haven't come across situations or people like my old DSS manger, because in the past I have, but there's something about doing the thing that you believe in that

gives you the courage to stand up and call out what's not right...sometimes that's cost me but looking back it's what led me to where I am, what I've achieved.

The best leaders stand up to be heard, try new things, they don't sit down and turn away, it's not a game of chess where every move matters and careers aren't always linear, but I have noticed integrity mostly leads to longevity.

I believe you should craft your leadership based on your authentic self and a clear set of beliefs and leadership is not just for those with fancy titles it for us all as a way of being. One of my other sayings that I repeat to my sons is "count yourself in, not out". Careers are like life, they aren't built on hedging your bets or trying to say the thing you think will get you the furthest, it's about being authentic, having an opinion, being prepared to have a go and in my experience, people genuinely respect that.

I remember very quickly deciding I wanted to be a Housing Officer and my big, longer-term goal or ambition at that time was to be an Assistant Area Housing Manager. If I'm honest, at that time those jobs were mainly held by men in badly fitted grey suits and I didn't think for a minute I would ever achieve it. I was always quite driven but, typical of people from my background, I lacked confidence and self-belief and suffered terribly with imposter syndrome. Along came the opportunity I'd been waiting for and I remember attending an interview for a Housing Officer. My legs were shaking really badly with nerves and the person interviewing me, Keith something or other, commented on it and said he thought it was a sign that I wasn't ready for a Housing Officer role. He spent the next hour telling me all the things he thought I lacked and why I wouldn't be a good Housing Officer. I cried after the interview, a mixture of humiliation and disappointment that I'd missed an opportunity because I had somehow convinced myself that his appalling interviewing technique was somehow my failure. The next day I was told by him that he was reluctantly giving me the job because the HR person had told him I'd scored the highest, but he let me know in no uncertain terms that he expected me to fail. I remember as clear as day thinking I was going to make sure I was the best Housing Officer they'd ever had – not in a way that was about being better than anyone else or being brilliant at the job but in a way that would make him and anyone else for that matter think I was a good enough person to do the job. And it makes me feel sad that I let someone make me feel that way.



At your absolute best, you still won't be good enough for the wrong person. At your worst, you'll still be worth it to the right person.

I loved being a Housing officer (best job I ever did) and I was eventually promoted to Senior Housing officer, specialising in homelessness having studied Homelessness and Housing Law for three years. I could tell you about a funny story when I saw my career flash before me. I was escorting the then Housing Minister Sir George Young around a regeneration area when a resident threw urine at him... but I won't tell you, because it's not funny.

And then it happened - an opportunity presented itself to apply for an Assistant Area Housing Manager position at Trafford Council, my big ambition and here it was!

A senior manager named Annette told me about the job and said I should apply and that I would be brilliant, funny enough I bumped into her last year and actually thanked her for the encouragement she gave me all those years ago and told her that her words had given me just enough courage to have a go at getting it. I went for the interview, which is all still a bit of a blur and was told they'd decide in a couple of days and get back to me. I remember my husband and I were decorating our bathroom and the house phone rang (what's one of those now?) and the person on the other end said "Congratulations, you've got the job". I couldn't believe it and I'm sure I asked them if they were sure!



If you don't go after what you want, you'll never have it. If you don't ask, the answer is always no. If you don't step forward, you're always in the same place.

I think this was the point I really started to believe I deserved to be doing what I was doing and that I might actually be quite good at it. Although even then there was always that imposter syndrome gnawing away at me in the background and in my experience, there is always someone around to feed that insecurity – another one of my sayings to my poor sons is What you permit, you promote.

I then achieved another promotion to Area Housing Manager – so now in my mind I was overachieving and for a short while that made me nervous, threw me off my game and I coasted a bit. But I settled into it and was still driven by proving I was a good enough person to be doing the job – those gremlins don't just go away. Then an opportunity came up for a Principle Housing Manager which was a position in charge of all the Area Housing Managers. I was asked if I would cover the post for six months, so I did it and it went really well – I made it count. The job was advertised permanently, I was of course asked to apply and I did, but I didn't get it. Devastated does not do justice to how I felt, it wasn't about having a sense of entitlement to the job but more that it was explained to me that the man who got it would be good for the cricket team – and that's not a joke. Interestingly, I'm still good friends with both the man who gave the job to the cricket player and the cricket player himself... Sometimes life gives you lemons and yes here's another saying my poor sons have to endure - you have to strive for sweet oranges. This requires integrity and dignity - battles take many forms and one of my heroes Michelle Obama said it best.



We learned about honesty and integrity - that the truth matters...that you don't take shortcuts or play by your own set of rules... ..and success doesn't count unless you earn it fair and square.

You aren't always going to get every opportunity you put in for, but I do believe you always get some wisdom out of trying.

You can't let these things knock your confidence or become a personal blocker, success is in trying and putting your best foot forward because that's in your gift. The getting it isn't, so don't make that your success measure. If someone beat me to a job, I always preferred to have the outlook that I was pleased for them and I'd get the next one. It's not that I don't live in reality, it's that negativity creates a cloud you don't need to walk around with and anyway, no one person is entitled to a specific job.

I got the next promotion to Principle Housing Manager and very quickly another promotion came along to Head of Supported Housing, then came the other promotions to Assistant Director of Housing, then onto Director of Housing and then to where I am now as Deputy Chief Officer.

I never take it for granted and I do still have to pinch myself some days and somewhere along the way I stopped feeling like an imposter – but I won't lie, I can still have moments.

There are many stories I could tell, ups and downs, but mostly ups and that's a good balance. Here are some things I have learnt along the way – these are my truth; they may not be yours. The last saying I have that I force on my 3 sons is: you will get lots of advice along the way, if it sounds useful, bank it; and if it doesn't, throw it away in the rubbish bin.

What I feel strongly about



You have to believe in yourself, otherwise, you can't ask anyone else to



You have to take a helping hand when it's offered, we all need someone to lean on or support us from time to time



Things will go wrong, be honest, dignified and keep learning – it's how you recover that counts



Be kind to yourself, you got here because of what you can do, not what you can't yet do



I never once feel a sense of entitlement, my advice is to stay present and always strive to make it count, if it doesn't work out, learn and move on



Only battle if it's needed, battling is not a way of life, it's often loss of control being displayed for all to see



In the end the good days, the bad days take care of themselves, it's the learning from them that makes the difference



Having a diverse heart, to me, is the very essence of a decent person, I will always be thankful for the diverse neighbourhood I grew up in



Beyoncé, a woman who knows what she's talking about... who run the world, girls!

My heroines



**ROSA LOUISE
McCAULEY PARKS**
The first lady of civil rights



ELSIE PLANT
A suffragette socialist,
campaigner for birth control
and born in Higher Hillgate



ANNE FRANK
Even to this day I will
still read about her like it's
the first time I'm hearing it



RACHEL
A young homeless girl
who taught me a lot about
the kind of Housing Officer
I wanted to be

So, I raise a glass to men and women on International Women's Day as it is both sexes that create parity and I have been lucky enough to have come across great male and female role models who have believed in me. To those who didn't, well they're in the rubbish bin, obviously.