

Your Story & Mine



Words Alive Writing Group for older people thank all those who shared their stories with us as part of our Outreach Project.

Here are some of them.

My First Dance

Diane

My taste in music changed dramatically in 1958. From singing *On top of old Smoky* and *How much is that doggy in the window?* I now joined in with Tommy Steele *Singing the Blues* and jived with Elvis and his *Blue Suede Shoes*. My friends had taught me how to jive and now I was ready for my first dance.

I set off on the 33 Bus, headed for the city centre. Sitting on the top deck, I was very careful to hold my dress close as I climbed the stairs, very ladylike. I got off the bus and as I passed the front of the City Hall I felt a tap on my shoulder. I looked around and a very kind lady said, "Love, your petticoat has been trailing behind you since you got off the bus."

I was mortified. I reeled in the yards of tulle and bunched it up as best I could. Aunt Lily wasn't such a good stitcher after all. Somehow I made it to the YMCA and reached my friends. A quick repair was made in the Ladies. I can't remember where the pins came from, but we managed to secure the petticoat and I made it to Sammy Leckie's Dance School ... and so my dancing days began.

Memories

Beth

I lived on the Woodstock Road and I remember the hardware shop at the top of the street with everything outside on display.

When my father came home on leave in his uniform I screamed. He was loud and shouty and I didn't know him.

I learnt to dance at Betty Staff's and went for fish and chips at Eddie Spence's on the way home. One night three of us got on the 33 Bus into town and sat in a row together. All our skirts bounced up at the same time because we had put wire in them to make them sit out.

We went to the Orpheus ballroom above the Co-op in town. My uncle played saxophone in the band and spied on me and the boys I danced with.



Diane and Beth

Saturday Morning Matinee

Gerry

Sent out early on a Saturday
I'm sure it was a rest for Mum
Fourpence for the Clonard cinema
It had a balcony, and Roy Rogers every week.
Sometimes the sequence was wrong.
You might see Roy escaping from the Sheriff's jail
Although he wouldn't be arrested for another two weeks.
Threepence for the Diamond at the corner of Cupar Street.
Church pews were used for cinema seats.
Now and then if you stood up, so did everyone else.
The Three Stooges hopped a railroad car
And unwittingly shared it with a circus lion.
Usherettes and ice-cream ladies were not required.
Bouts of unrequited pandemonium of unknown origin
Would break out, heightening one's power
Of concentration when they once again subsided.
If the projector did not break down more than once
We were usually out in time for Saturday football.

All the Boys I Danced with are Gone Now

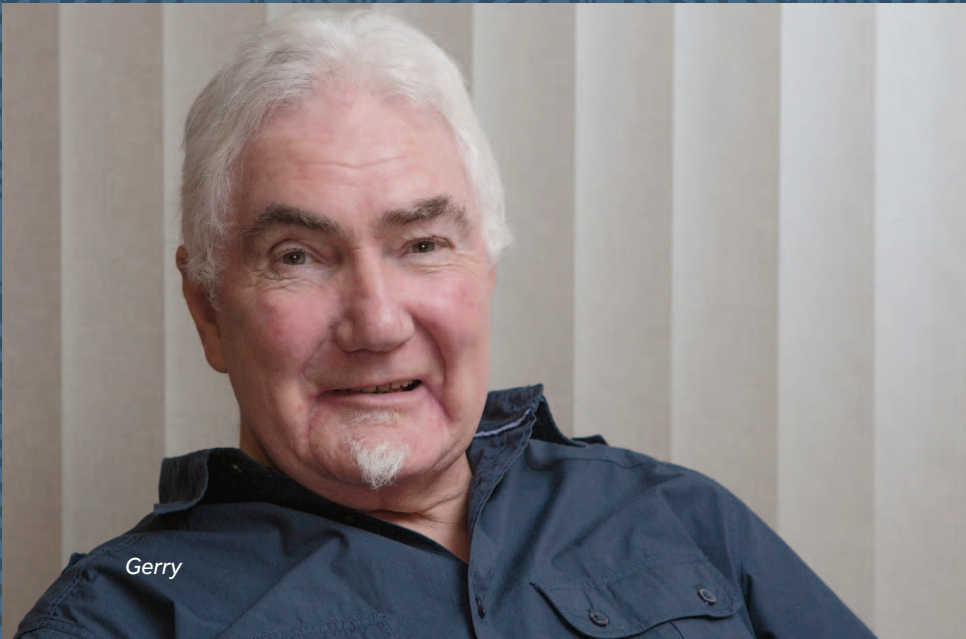
Bernadette

I didn't really go to Sammy Huston's in High Street. He would make
you get up to dance whether you wanted to or not. I went to the
Plaza in Chichester Street. You could dance away there.

I'd a dirndl skirt and when I twirled round doing the jive it would all sit
out. The boys would sling you from one side to the other. I was that slim
they could lift me easy. And the band played live music.

Rossi was the band leader there and he was always dressed in a suit,
the height of style. He walked about with a wee dog under his arm or in
his pocket and that was how he got the girls.

All the boys I danced with are gone now.



Gerry



Diane and Bernadette

Meant to Be *Linda*

When I was wee I used to sit up on the stairs at night when my uncle and my dad would drink a couple of beers together. Inevitably my dad would speak of the man he became close friends with in the Second World War, who was killed right beside him in action. They had both grown up in Sandy Row, only a few streets from each other, but only became chums after they'd joined up. Recruits from the same area were put into the same unit.

When I came to live in the home here I didn't know a sinner. But there was a man I would see when I was out for a smoke who seemed approachable. I asked him one day what he was called. And when he said his name, it pulled me up short and I asked him, "Were you named after your father?" And he nodded, puzzled.

I couldn't believe it. I discovered that his father had been the very same wartime comrade that my father missed so much. It didn't feel like a coincidence, it felt like it was meant to be, That we were meant to be friends like our fathers before us.



Ruth and Linda

In the Thick of It

Audrey

My father came here from Newcastle Upon Tyne. He was an engineer and helped design the engines for the Titanic. He was also a distinguished tenor and sang in St Anne's Cathedral choir. He was often booked to sing at people's funerals.

When the War broke out I couldn't wait to leave Victoria College. I wanted to get as close to the fighting as possible. Aged 19, I went to England to join the A.T.S. and I went on to train young men for battle.

I remember being home on leave when there were Air Raids over Belfast. We sheltered in the cupboard under the stairs and heard the bombs dropping. My father said, "That was a near one." They were alarming times but I enjoyed them.

As you get older you wonder will you be able to continue to do things for yourself. You don't want to think that you won't be able to do all those things you could do when you were younger.

Keep right on to the end of the road.

Keep right on to the end.



Peter and Margaret

Coming to Northern Ireland as an Outsider

Peter

How could you not know if there was a question about religion on your job application forms in England?

I was asked this in 1979, not long after I had moved to Northern Ireland from England, where a person's religion was so inconsequential that I had no idea of the religion of any of my fellow workers. But in Northern Ireland, it was the first thing to find out on meeting someone new – to discover which group they belonged to.

And I soon learned how it was done, by asking: someone's name; their school; where they lived; and where they worked.

Just as I learned to open my bag to be searched on going into a shop, and to ignore the heavily armed army patrols as they passed me in the street.

On a visit back to England, I drew strange looks as I walked through a shop door and opened my bag, looking for the security staff. And I was astonished to see a group of soldiers in casual khaki uniform strolling around the city centre, without any protection. Then I remembered that I was in Birmingham, not Belfast.

Yes, even to me, the truly abnormal had become normal.

Baking and Bread Card

Margaret

I was born on 3rd December 1950. I was the youngest of five children, with two brothers and two sisters. When we were little, my mummy lived on a shoestring. She made lots of vegetable soup, and sometimes at the weekend there would be a wee piece of bacon or sausage in the soup.

Mummy was always baking, all kinds of bread, like fruit soda and wheaten. She had a griddle to make potato bread. On a Sunday we would have a sponge cake with pink icing. Mummy taught me how to make apple cakes.

We used to go to the Belfast Market for the butter and eggs. We always got hair-cracked eggs because they were cheaper. At home, I helped Mummy to crack the eggs in half and then move the yolk from one half to the other, so that we could make sure there were no impurities before we used them.

I left school at 15, and my first job was in the office of J.B. Kennedy's bakery. I had to look after the discounts on the bread card. In those days bread was delivered to your door. The bread man marked up your card and at the end of the week, the cards were brought into the office. I used an adding machine with big white buttons to work out the discount that each person was due.

Pirouetting the Boards of the Opera House

Marianne

I will never forget the excitement of dancing on the stage of the Opera House. I was 11 and we danced the Tarantella, part of Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker Suite, on three Saturdays in April 1961. All the steps and movements we had practised in our Dance School in Frederick Street came into their own when we set foot on that stage.

We wore full circle black skirts trimmed with red, blue, yellow and green ribbons, red satin tops and a red rose pinned in our hair. I first had to dip my pink ballet shoes in a box of resin to ensure I did not slip and I carried a tambourine as I danced.

Breathless at the finale, I can remember the huge swell of emotion as we curtsied. It was such fun to wear greasepaint, share sandwiches and make lasting friendships. On the trolley bus home, I lost my tambourine, but luckily a phone call restored it in time for next week's thrilling performance.

The Younger Twin

John

Me and my brother Harry were identical twins. Well, Harry was older than me - by a few minutes - as he would remind me whenever he wanted to pull rank! But both of us got a lot of fun out of being identical. Even our mother couldn't tell us apart, so it was easy to trick the teacher, and we certainly did that! I remember one day I wasn't feeling well so Harry did my paper round for me and nobody noticed any difference. I'm happy to say I got paid as usual (though I did split it with Harry).

About five years ago or so, Harry got cancer and then he had to go into hospital. I visited him every day until he died. He was a heavy smoker and I smoked too, but I've given them up now. I'm happy here in Fairholme. I can watch films, play my Country and Western music or go out to see my friends at City Way. The staff here are very good to all of us.



Marianne and John

The Lady in Red

Isabella

I worked in Mulholland's chemist on the Cregagh Road for years. Then one day Mr Mulholland announced he was closing down the shop.

"Isabella, you're a very good worker and I'll recommend you for work with either of the two chemists on the Road."

"Mr Mulholland, I don't want to work anymore."

"Well, what are you going to do?" he asked.

"I'm going to get married."

"Are you going with anybody?"

"No I'm not, but I will be."

"You be very careful what you're doing."

On the last day, no-one came in until about noon and then in walked this gorgeous looking man. After that a girlfriend of mine said a man had been asking about me and she had told him I would be helping at the church Jumble Sale.

The Jumble Sale was almost over when the same gorgeous man came up and asked, "Can I help you pack up?"

A friend called over to me, "You're all right there, Isa!"

The man's name was Eddie and he asked me if he could walk me home. I said, "If you want to." So he walked me down home and all I could hear in my head was, *what the hell will I do when we get to my home?*

We got married on a sunny Saturday in June, 1978 and honeymooned in Malta. His children became my children. Eddie was very good to me.



Ruth and Isabella



Jane

Remembering a Different Time in a Different World

Jane

I have sat out on a warm night, listening to the stillness, when there was no longer the hustle and bustle of people going about their business. Maybe, if I was lucky I would hear the sound of night animals, such as the cry of the fox, or the call of the cuckoo, or corncrake, living in the dense shrubbery or cornfields. In the far distance a dog might be heard, barking at the sound of footsteps.

Electricity is a great gift for people now, but sometimes I think it has taken away the magic of night-time: the glimmer of candles in the windows on a Christmas morning as we walked to midnight Mass, usually trying not to fall on a very icy road; or visiting a friend's house where the only light was an oil lamp and the glow of the turf fire where we all sat around and burned our shins, telling ghost stories. My mother used to say it was the sign of a lazy woman if her shins were 'measled', she'd sat too long by the fire.

Friends in City Way

Marjorie

What shall we do when all else has gone?
The times when we laughed and cried all done.

The wonderful memories of laughter and tears
Bring back those happy, happy years.

To think of the new friends we have found
So precious they are, when you're up or you're down.

It's a gift they accept me with all my frowns,
More precious to me than a great golden crown.



Marjorie



Denis, Words Alive Chairperson

Smithfield

Denis

In the sixties, when I was about 15, I started to go round Smithfield market. At the entrance, a fusty smell of damp and cats filled my nose as I joined the hustle and bustle of the cobblestone lane down the middle of the market. I went to Harry Hall's first to have a browse and found the stories I liked - good old Pan books. I bought half a dozen to keep me going which I would bring back to exchange for more.

There was music coming from Premier Records round the corner, *She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah*. The place was packed, everyone buying singles and L.P.s.

Then on to my favourite, The Magic Box, to buy a few packets of itching and sneezing powders to try out on my mates. Lastly I called into Jo Kavanagh's 'I buy anything' to exchange my mum's embassy coupons for the grand total of four pounds seventeen and sixpence.

There was nowhere like the old Smithfield.

This pamphlet, along with the exhibition of photographs by Bernie Brown, gives a glimpse of how the sharing of poems and personal stories touches others' lives, awakening their own memories and experiences and affirming their part in the bigger story of the social and cultural history of Belfast.



Some feedback from the writing group:

I loved every minute of it, talking one to one to residents and hearing their stories. Diane

You never know what a person has seen or done or come through. Gerry

It brought back a lot of memories for me, I've enjoyed meeting people and listening to them. Jane

Being part of the group has been very fulfilling. It has not only stimulated my own writing, but has also meant I was privileged to hear about the lives and memories which others wished to share. Peter

Words Alive is an older people's writing group who developed this outreach project, drawing on their own creative writing to engage other older people in care homes, sheltered housing and day centres.

We wish to thank members of staff and residents of Fairholme Supported Housing and Haypark Residential Home, along with all at City Way Day Centre for their kind assistance.

For advice on setting up your own reading and reminiscing outreach project, contact Engage With Age: 028 9073 5696. Follow us on Facebook - EngageWithAgeBelfast

Pictures by Bernie Brown
www.bbphotographic.co.uk

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**Belfast
City Council**



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