

Caring Bolton: Portrait Commission

Interviews by Marge Bradshaw

Barry Sloan, Volunteer at Peter House Vaccination Site for Westhoughton Primary Care Network

“Our local GP surgery, Peter House, became the nominated vaccination centre for Westhoughton. I was keen to help out and my first shift was in mid-January. It was snowing so I wrapped up, wearing waterproof boots and a woolly hat, and I was asked to help in the car park.”

“That first shift went very quickly as around 1200 people were vaccinated in about five hours. I felt very proud to be part of such an incredible community achievement. It’s now May 2021 I’ve just completed my 20th volunteer shift. I’m still on the car park and we have been out there in all weathers: snow, hail, wind, rain, even a bit of sunshine. We’ve had people bring us trays of freshly baked brownies and cookies, along with cards and chocolates, and also many people have simply expressed a heartfelt thank you.”

“I’ll be volunteering on the car park as long as the clinics continue, and they need me. It’s been a tough 18 months, but it’s brought a lot of us closer together, and certainly taught me just how important family, friends and community are.”

Nik Gandhi, Deputy Headteacher at Eagley Junior School

Sheetal Gandhi, Pharmacist

“The biggest highlight of the entire lockdown was the birth of our beautiful little girl Neyla. Becoming parents for the first time was daunting enough an event but throw in a lockdown pregnancy and we had ourselves a new level of bonkers! Sheetal attending appointments

alone whilst I sat in the now very familiar Bolton Maternity Ward car park fast became the norm.”

“I was six months into a new role as the deputy head of a primary school when the pandemic began. This wasn’t quite what the job advertised but with a supportive headteacher and a superb team we managed to continue to provide a broad and balanced curriculum to the children of key workers and those learning remotely at home. The adaptability of the teaching profession, amongst many others, during this pandemic, has been out of this world and everyone should be extremely proud of their efforts.”

“During the pandemic and whilst heavily pregnant, Sheetal continued her role as a pharmacy manager, working all hours to ensure an increasing demand for medication was met. She worked right up to the point Neya was ready to make her appearance.”

Rachel Hughes, Founder/Musical Director of Horwich Community Choir

“Leaving the music teaching profession after 15 years, I poured my heart and soul into building a local community choir in my hometown of Horwich. When the first lockdown was announced, I knew that it would be at least a year until we could all be together singing again. We tried but struggled with rehearsals via Zoom - they didn’t work for me, and they didn’t work for the choir. We just all loved the sound of us being together too much to sing alone – so instead we produced two brilliant virtual performances.”

“Horwich Community Choir is the loveliest of musical families - every single member is important; every note sung is about being together. We were regularly in touch during lockdowns through social media, quiz nights, sharing music videos - it was as good as it was going to get. I’m

still waiting for all sixty voices to be together, in one room, with that kaleidoscope of sound - what a moment it is going to be!"

Yvonne Heywood, Assistant Head, Ladywood School By Marge Bradshaw Photography

"As a special school we understood how hard lockdown was going to hit our families. We didn't have long to prepare, and we learnt a huge amount along the way. We kept in touch with families, learning was done via our blog and resource packs were sent home. We also provided equipment such as toys and bikes via doorstep drop offs."

"It became really clear that we needed to think differently for our hard-to-reach pupils who had fleeting attention and learn in very sensory ways. We managed to secure funding for our "Stay at Home Superhero project" which supported children who were struggling to engage with our core offer. This consisted of us delivering boxes of resources linked to stories to homes. We used actors who dressed as superheroes to do doorstep drop offs, and we provided kindles as each day there was a video or Zoom linked to the activities. Before the summer holidays each child was provided with a project box linked to being active and improving wellbeing. All this whilst still teaching our most vulnerable and children of key workers. I am incredibly proud of all our staff team at Ladywood."

Jennifer Leece, Chair of Bolton Rainbow Community

"I'm Chair of Bolton Rainbow Community, a LGBTQ+ community support group. We support members through regular meetings, fun events and signposting members to other helpful organisations. We've remained in touch and do calls on a case-by-case basis which we've found actually works the best rather than Zoom."

"We've found that members have really missed having a physical presence of people in their own community, and some have had to go back to hiding their sexuality or gender identity because they've been stuck at home with unsupportive family members. We were successful in getting a grant at Christmas and that meant we were able to buy and deliver food for a festive meal over Zoom, which our members enjoyed - it was great fun."

Domina Achioyamen, CEO Precious Gems, Bolton

"At Precious Gems, we empower women and girls to fulfil their potential. Everyone was terrified during the first lockdown, but if you're an older person, from a BAME background or have health conditions, you were even more scared. It wasn't good for our members' mental health and wellbeing in general as they were so isolated and inactive."

"I created a WhatsApp group where members could chat with each other. We delivered wool, jigsaw puzzles, and embroidery material to people's doors. We also made regular calls to every single member of our project to minimise loneliness and helped them with shopping and picked up prescriptions. We recorded videos of Tai Chi and chair-based exercises, posting them in groups and on our social media; then we started doing exercises twice a week on Zoom to keep members active."

"We also supported refugees and asylum seekers who didn't understand what was happening. After going to everyone's door to teach them how to use Zoom, we offered two English classes delivered by Bolton College."

"I'm very grateful to our team because without them we wouldn't have managed to support as many people. I thank my very understanding husband. I have two little kids who were doing home-schooling, and

every day I had to focus on our members, our team and Zoom activities, whilst he was helping our kids with online learning.”

“In life, you need people; you cannot achieve much on your own.”

Rebecca Hawthornthwaite, Staff Nurse, NHS

“At the start of the pandemic I was a third-year student nurse. I was asked if I wanted to opt in to work on the Covid wards to help staff and care for patients during the pandemic. There was a lot of uncertainty around my decision. But in the end, I decided to opt in as this is what I had trained for.”

“I remember the first day I worked on a Covid ward. The first thing was the PPE, full gowns, aprons, mask and eye shields. Completing 11-hour days in this was exhausting. The hardest thing for me was the amount of people who were extremely unwell. As soon as you had helped one person another person needed help. It was so upsetting to see people on high amounts of oxygen and then fighting for their breath and feeling helpless as there was nothing more you could do than hold their hand and reposition them to help their lungs. For me, I wasn't just a nurse caring for my patients, but I became the only contact for that patient. The only thing they had between them and the outside world.”

“Working at Bolton hospital throughout the pandemic has showed how amazing staff are. Everyone pulled together and did what they needed to do.”

“I've learnt a lot about myself over the past year and a half, I've developed as a person, as a nurse but I think one of the main things are resilience and determination, to carry on and keep fighting when times are tough.”

Chris Fallows, Greengrocer, The Glass Onion, Westhoughton

“Who’d have thought that a small greengrocers would have turned into one of the most in-demand shops?! We had people ringing from different areas and even different countries at some points. We tried our best to respond and sort out everyone’s orders, but a lot of people didn’t know that the shop was only run by me! The demand was so intense, I was exhausted and struggling to manage. My partner Laura sorted out a new shop assistant Nikki, and we got Lee from the local gym to help me with deliveries.”

“Our customers have said that visiting the shop and having deliveries from us was one of their main memories of lockdown. They’ve said that at times we’d be the only interaction some of them would have all week and that chatting to us was a positive memory.”

“I think the one thing I have learned is that we often don’t realise how we can help others by the little things we do: a smile, an acknowledgment, a chat and the ‘be kind’ ethos can go a long way. One of our sayings now is ‘a greengrocer is for life not just a pandemic.’”

Hazel Jayne Deighan, Senior Care Assistant, Spennymoor Care Home

“In November 2020 when the second wave of Covid hit us it was a really challenging time in the care home. All the senior staff got Covid, plus half of the residents. I ended up covering with another two members of staff whilst our colleagues were in isolation for ten days. I worked every day during that time, from 8am to 10pm. Luckily our night staff tested negative so they were able to continue working. But it was really hard trying to keep everyone fit and well, not lose anyone to Covid, and of course reassuring all the families that their loved ones were OK.”

“There were a million things going through my head – I had to look after the residents, talk to doctors, talk to the families and try and keep colleagues up to date. I just had to be everywhere at once!”

“To keep everyone safe my son went to live with my Mum, so I was going home to an empty house every night. And then unfortunately when our staff returned from isolation, I tested positive for Covid myself and had to isolate for ten days, which meant not seeing my son at all during that time which was really hard and upsetting. The pandemic has made me realise we take small things for granted, like going for a coffee with friends or calling to see a family member.”