



Anchor House - the charity using business expertise

By Rob Virtue on February 2, 2010 11:15 AM | **Tagged with:** Anchor House, Canning Town, Keith Fernett

Six years ago Canning Town homeless charity Anchor House was on the point of collapse.

With major financial problems and a serious lack of funding, the future looked bleak, until the arrival of Keith Fernett – a man with a successful business background.



At 51-years-old he took some time to re-evaluate his future following a bad run of sporting injuries – and ended up at the Canning Town charity.

Keith said: "At the time I'd turned 51, I'd served 20 years at director and senior management consultancy level.

"Then I bust my hand playing volleyball and I'd been doing so much travelling with work I just wanted to do something in north-east London where I lived.

"It was when I bust both my legs playing football that my wife said to me, 'Learn to walk again, have a rest and find that thing you want to do'."

Soon after, on a visit to his church Keith saw an advert from Anchor House – a homeless charity with 118-room centre with a mission to help the homeless and jobless return to working life – advertising the role of director.

He applied, got the job and within three days he had started. But what confronted him was an enormous task.

He said: "Like a lot of charities, it had done things the traditional way and was facing major problems, especially with changing government legislation.

"It had major financial problems and was losing funding. It was receiving one sixth of the level enjoyed by other homeless charities.

"I got a clean sheet of paper and said: 'Right, what are we going to do? What's our vision?' We decided we were going to be the best."

Keith, now 57, decided all aspects of the business had to be scrutinised to to reduce costs and find revenue streams.

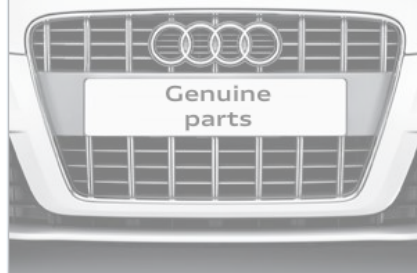
It was decided, for example, to make use of the roof by searching for a business which wanted to put a mast on it.

Rooms, meanwhile, were targeted for a 24-hour turnaround.

So if a resident moved out it would be ready for someone to move in the next day, if not the same day.

Focus then turned to repairs to the building, which were estimated at £2.5million. It was a bill more than matched by Keith's long list of contacts.

He said: "We have made £6million investment since I joined and people in the City are helping us raise another £9million as we have planning permission to redevelop and build another block of flats."



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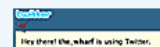
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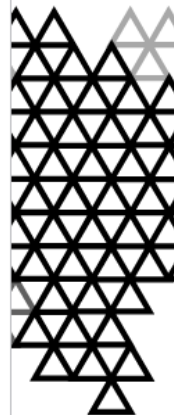
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The "people in the City" Keith describes are hedge fund workers, lawyers and those in insurance, all working on a voluntary basis.

As part of the charity's programme to get people off the streets, residents at Anchor House work while staying with the organisation.

Some spend time training British Transport Police in diversity, while others help at Alcoholics Anonymous, schizophrenia and drugs courses, or around the building and in the kitchen.

They also work cleaning the streets and cutting lawn, which has led to neighbours nominating Anchor House for a community award.

Meanwhile, an open area on the centre's ground floor attracts 2,500 daily visitors and a planning application for expansion is universally welcomed.

An air of positivity is what Keith has tried to build and it's paying off.

Since the recession started Anchor House has moved 60 of its residents into work.

Two of those are now on the Olympic site and recently won a government award.

The charity has also made technological advances under Keith, going from three computers to 97.

These are used to generate more income by renting out IT suites.

Keith is keen to continue this success by drawing further on the talents of those in the business sector. Last year, he recruited a strategic director from Mars Confectionery to bring in more cash to fund expansion.

Keith said: "We've managed to attract people like myself who have taken a 50 per cent salary cut and we're putting our business skills into the charity sector. Everything is run like a business.

"I'm able to utilise my business, commercial and management consultancy experience to put something back into a part of society which desperately needs help.


"We've taken people who have been in prison 30 times and turned their lives around."

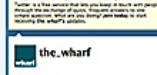
Keith said he was much more content working in the third sector than his previous roles.

He said: "I'm not playing silly games with power brokers any more. I'm just a person who's helping people get jobs.

"Many people who come here to visit expect to see a dosser asleep on the floor with a can of lager.

"Instead, they see a hotel-style reception with rugs and tropical fish tanks. We've made great strides."

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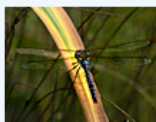
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