

Homeless have new anchor they can trust in their lives



Keith Fennell – ‘Our aim is to help our residents tackle and overcome life’s obstacles, so they may realise that they have the skills and talents necessary to be happy and successful in life’

ANN WIDDECOMBE and Jeremy Paxman make an unusual combination. But then Anchor House in London’s Olympic borough of Newham is an unusual place.

Founded by the Apostleship of the Sea in 1962 as a mission to seafarers, Anchor House is a Catholic charity offering hostel accommodation and life skills for homeless adults.

Every year, staff provide support to over 200 homeless and workless people, helping them move on to employment and independent living.

Yet just six years ago, Anchor House was in danger of closing. That was when Keith Fennell gave up a top management role in the public sector to help a sector of society that much of the public felt had no role.

In those few short years, Keith – a Catholic – and his team have transformed Anchor House into a textbook for tackling homelessness and the numerous issues surrounding it.

Ann Widdecombe and Jeremy Paxman seem to agree. They are the latest in a long line of public figures and celebrities who have agreed to become patrons of the centre.

They will be working closely with Keith to help raise the £16 million needed to overhaul the 50-year-old hostel and transform it into a 21st century solution to the capital’s homeless problem.

Visitors to Anchor House, which lies in the sixth most deprived borough in England and Wales, are quick to notice there is something special about the place as soon as they walk through the door.

“There is no institutional smell,” smiles Keith.

“We have paintings and fish tanks, flowers and a wall full of awards we have picked up, in the foyer. Residents have their own hotel-style fob keys and come and

PROFILE

Anchor House’s Keith Fennell offers a new approach to homelessness – and as he told James Hastings, it’s Catholic social teaching in action

go as they please. There is a friendliness here, so that people hold doors open for each other and there’s no shouting or swearing.”

Today is Homelessness Sunday and the work of Anchor House comes more into focus. However, it is the work that Keith and his staff do for the rest of the year that makes this Catholic charity – open to people of any faith or none – stand out.

“I was 52 years old when I applied for the position at Anchor House, after 25 years at senior level management,” explains Keith.

“The position was advertised in my parish newsletter. I had an interview on November 5 and was at my desk three days later. My faith means so much to me and I wanted to put it into action. This was the perfect opportunity.

“It meant a big cut in salary but my wife was very supportive. We sat the children down and told them we would still manage but finances might be a little tighter. I had absolutely no hesitation going for the job and no regrets since.”

Anchor House is supported by Westminster diocese while the centre’s resources would revert to Brentwood diocese in the event of it closing down.

A number of senior clergy are on the board of trustees and involved in different ways.

Keith encourages parishes or individual Catholics to become involved as supporters which can be done in a number of different ways.

The centre has been so successful in helping homeless people back into work that in November last year it won four National Training

Awards from the UK Skills Centre. Its employment and training officer, Aggie Chikiwa, was awarded UK National Trainer of the Year. Keith was a highly commended runner-up for the *Charity Times* Award for Charity Principal of the Year.

“Over 180 single homeless people, many with substantial support needs, stay at Anchor House each year,” adds Keith.

“We provide a holistic, multi-tiered approach incorporating counselling, rehabilitation, medical attention, recreational activities and volunteering opportunities. Between 2008 and 2009, 39 residents found jobs while 32 moved on to independent living.

“We offer accredited life skill training courses such as NVQ Levels 1 and 2 in construction including health and safety certification, plumbing, tiling, brick-laying and carpentry. We also offer distance learning training courses in our computerised learning zones where residents enrol on courses for literacy, numeracy and IT. Anchor House is also a great community resource.

“**W**e have an elderly lunch club, weekly meetings of alcoholics and cocaine anonymous, an after school art class for mums and kids and a music and performing arts group. We even have our own local football team called The Warriors, named after HMS Warrior built in the nearby docks.”

Keith stresses that Anchor House believes that everyone has an ability within them to achieve success in life, whatever the term ‘success’

means to that person.

He explains: “Our aim is to help our residents tackle and overcome life’s barriers and obstacles, the expected and the unexpected, so they may realise and accept for themselves that they have the skills and talents necessary to be happy and successful in life.

“This aim gave birth to what we call the Aspirations Programme. The journey of realisation and change begins as soon as a previously homeless person arrives at Anchor House.

“Many arrive at our doorstep feeling totally demoralised and broken, carrying on their shoulders a variety of complicated and troubling issues, with very little faith and barely any sense of optimism.

“A large number have been made homeless for the first time. They feel alone, shocked and scared, lost in their new world, with no trust or assurance that there is a chance that they can get their lives back on track.

“The Aspirations Programme helps them get back on the road to their own future, through working with them to develop their individually tailored personal development plan, and then through education, training and guidance to help them.”

The £16 million renovation scheme is an ambitious plan to transform both the building and services on offer.

It is expected that by 2012, Anchor House will be providing top-quality accommodation, first-class training and personal development to help people to find both a job and a home.

To date £6 million has been raised, although the prospect of Jeremy Paxman shaking a collection tin with his trademark *Newsnight* stare should hopefully increase that amount.

“We don’t want to be a revolving door outfit, we want people to move out of homelessness for good, equipped with the life-skills and abilities to sustain independent living,” explains Keith.

“In order to continue our transformation and to meet the aspirations of homeless people and the long-term unemployed in Canning Town, we are planning a major development to improve and expand our accommodation and communal spaces as well as the range of services we offer.

“**T**he renovated accommodation will create 115 individual learning zones, equipped with multi-media facilities and furniture suitable as both bedroom and study; and 25 new flats for high support, first stage move-on accommodation. The redevelopment of the ground floor area has been designed to inspire contemplation, communication, learning and work-based training.

“It will include an ICT infrastructure and telephone systems for multi-media training initiatives, flexible training and activity suites, additional outdoor space and a domed atrium to create a much-needed natural light source.

“There will be ambient, quiet spaces for multi-faith activities and alternative therapies, larger, better equipped self-catering kitchen and laundry areas, open-plan lounge and dining areas, and a restaurant and training area for commercial catering.”

Anchor House is an example of Catholic social teaching in action and something more Catholics are supporting. You might even get to tango with Widders.