

# Man with a mission

In six short years, Keith Fernett has transformed a shabby seamen's refuge in London's Docklands into one of the capital's best-equipped hostels for the homeless. He talked to Sam Adams about the next phase in the development of Anchor House – and breaking the cycle of poverty



Time is of the essence for Keith Fernett, – and he is loath to waste even a second of it. I caught a fleeting glimpse of him as he hurried through the smart reception area of Anchor House in Canning Town, east London, as I waited to begin our interview.

"I'll be with you in a sec," he promised as he disappeared through a door with the air of a man with a dozen things on his mind at once. A self-confessed workaholic, Mr Fernett now has more on his plate than ever as he puts the finishing touches to two projects that will define the Catholic charity's future in both the short and long term.

When he finally joined me he explained that the first, and most pressing, challenge is to secure a new contract from Newham Council – without which Anchor House could not continue with its work – while the second is the launch of an ambitious fund-raising campaign for a £9-million expansion project.

Mr Fernett has enlisted the support of a host of influential figures behind the Home

and Hope Appeal, which reads like a *Who's Who* of the Catholic world – from the Archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols, to BBC chairman Lord Patten and the former Chief of the Defence Staff Lord Guthrie. There are also prominent non-Catholic supporters such as the former *EastEnders* star Barbara Windsor and the *Newsnight* presenter Jeremy Paxman – who is a patron of the appeal and who agreed to write the foreword to the charity's glossy fund-raising brochure. Mr Paxman summed up his support by describing Anchor House as a charity "which delivers results" – a sentiment appreciated by Mr Fernett, who said: "I have a good team around me, and this is a good cause. People recognise that."

In many respects Anchor House is a model of the Government's Big Society ideal – a Catholic charity running a vital service for the good of the local community. It is at present a 118-bed hostel that provides accommodation and back-to-work training for destitute

men and women. Built in the early 1960s by the Apostleship of the Sea as a refuge for seamen from the then nearby docks, the facility had gradually fallen into decay over the years and required more than £2 million when Mr Fernett first arrived as director in 2004.

Since taking over its reins he has overseen a multi-million-pound makeover, transforming the hostel into one of the best equipped of its kind in London. Sitting in the shadow of the conspicuous wealth of Canary Wharf, the centre provides back-to-work focused training and education for its residents – and members of the local community – with the aim of helping them to live independently.

"When I arrived here there were cockroaches everywhere and earwigs coming out of the wooden framed beds," said Mr Fernett. Now each room is clean, well maintained and has television and internet access. During the last three years, the centre has moved more than

150 residents into independent living and around 90 into full- or part-time employment – no mean feat, given the enormous challenges many of them face. The majority are men, with many facing a multitude of personal problems, from mental illness to drug and alcohol dependency to criminality, and sometimes all of those things at the same time. A few years ago Mr Fernett had to call the police after a mentally ill resident ran around the centre brandishing a samurai sword, while more recently he personally confronted riot police who had arrived to arrest a former resident whom they wrongly believed had returned to Anchor House. Those residents who find work are given a special rental bursary by the centre to help boost their incomes and "break the cycle of poverty", which trapped them in dependence on state benefits.

"I suppose you could say the Government is following our lead on that one," said Mr Fernett with a grin, alluding to top-up benefits available to the low-paid. Most residents are referred directly by Newham Council and stay for around 18 months on average, though some remain for up to five years. Before being accepted by Anchor House, they are each asked to sign an agreement committing themselves to improving their lives.

"They have to commit to developing themselves and working towards becoming independent again," said Mr Fernett. "That's the deal. We make sure the expertise is there to help to prepare people to move on. They are here to learn and progress, not to stagnate."

An economist by training who worked in local government and as a consultant for such organisations as the Metropolitan Police, he decided to give up his earlier career to "do something meaningful" with his life, as he explained: "I could have earned substantially more than I do now if I had stayed doing what I was doing previously – but there comes a time when that isn't fulfilling enough. I knew I could bring the professionalism I was used to from my previous work into this role and make a success out of it."

Keith Fernett was born in Buckinghamshire to Catholic parents, but spent his formative years in Lancashire. He recalled how his mother

"moved heaven and earth" to get him into Thornleigh Salesian College in Bolton, where he was taught by the order's missionary priests. He says he draws on his experience at the college in his work at Anchor House, explaining: "That is definitely a factor. They [the priests] were dealing with people who were bottom of the pile, and I suppose that is similar to the situation of a lot of people here."

Despite this inspiration, he said it was his wife, a Catholic schoolteacher, who gave him the push he needed to take the job: "She said it was time to take up the challenge. I was restless." There is a light in his eyes that betrays this restlessness, his urgency to achieve, which is essential to the work he does. His skills will certainly be tested, as he is to project manage the new accommodation's construction – but, as he said, "I'm one of those people who wants things done now."

Such urgency translates to his life outside work. As a member of the congregation at Our Lady of Lourdes Church near the family home in Wanstead, east London, Mr Fernett, a father of two, played a key role in helping raise funds for a new parish centre. "I want to use the experience I have to make things happen. It is important that people give their time to these kinds of things."

If the Home and Hope Appeal is successful, the new building will boast a multifaith room, workshop and other state-of-the-art facilities plus 25 self-contained "move-on" flats.

The money will also pay for the centre's current rooms to be refurbished, while new training facilities and a new kitchen will enable more residents and members of the local community to study for professional qualifications.

The wheels of the project are already well in motion, with planning permission granted and £6 million invested towards the total cost of the project. A lot of work is going into raising and maintaining the charity's profile, with Mr Fernett concentrating his energies on potential big donors such as major companies and organisations.

"With things the way they are at the moment economically, money is tight for many potential donors," he said. "So you have to be savvy about how you approach them – you have to be professional." Professionalism is a watchword for Keith Fernett in his management of the charity, along with a clear Catholic ethos, which is present in the example set by the 42-strong team that operates the centre.

"I suppose you could say we are evangelising through example here," he said. "We try to reflect Catholic teaching through the way we behave each day and the way we interact with the people who live here."

Reaching over and grabbing the plans for the building project, he flicks excitedly through the document, pointing out his favourite features. "I find myself often working here from early in the morning until very late at night. There is just so much to do."

■ Former Anchor House resident Aggie Chikiwa, 52, now works at the hostel as a trainer, teaching basic work and life skills.

The father of three, who was a head teacher in his native Zimbabwe before coming to Britain in 2002, arrived at Anchor House in 2006 after losing his two jobs as a road sweeper and a delivery driver, following an industrial injury, and being thrown out of his rented home.

He said he was inspired by what he found at Anchor House and credits its staff with helping him turn around his life over the next 12 months.

"They gave me a roof over my head, support and encouragement, and the access to the resources I needed to complete my bachelors degree in education," he said.

## Voices from Anchor House

"I got all the help I needed to get back on my feet."

So successful was Aggie that he was asked to stay on at Anchor House as a paid teacher in April 2006, training residents in English, maths, IT, citizenship and customer service. He has also won several awards for his work at the centre, including best trainer in the voluntary sector, and is now head of education and training at Anchor House.

"Anchor House helps people to help themselves. It certainly did that for me," he said. "The key to the success of Anchor House is its leadership – not just Keith's but the whole team."

■ Current resident Nddi Onuorah, 28 – a Nigerian-born Christian – was close to graduating from her media studies degree course when she lost her funding and was forced out of where she was then living. She then had to leave another flat after discovering that it was being sub-let, and found herself at Anchor House in May 2010.

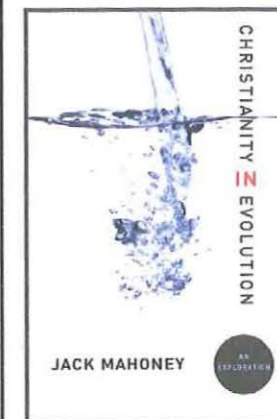
Ms Onuorah credits the hostel with providing her with the "safety and stability" she needed to finally get back on her feet. She says that her experience had taught her that anybody could end up in the same situation.

"What Anchor House does give you is the

sense of safety and security you need to find the training and work that suits you," she said. "I have changed as a person since I came here, I have grown up and see the world very differently. The thing that strikes you is that there are a lot of skilled people here who have run their own businesses and are very well qualified, but have, for whatever reason, fallen on hard times. This could be due to anything from marriage breakdown to losing their jobs. It really could happen to anyone."

Ms Onuorah now hopes to enter into a media career, in writing or broadcasting and to get married and have a home and family of her own. "I want to be independent again," she said, "I never thought I would end up in a hostel."

## ALTERNATIVES



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