Oaks from Acorns Grow

Peggy Bainbridge, long-standing volunteer and founder of the Rennie Grove Retail arm talks about her experience of launching our trading empire from one small market stall...

It was one Saturday afternoon in 1992 that I first met Deborah James and Rowena Dean; they were manning a stall selling books for a charity quite unknown to me at the time. I remember that I bought all they had and told them that I would sell them on at a profit! I didn’t enquire very much about the charity - only to hear it was young and that a small team of nurses were looking after people with life-limiting illness.

Some months later a friend’s husband was diagnosed with a brain tumour and because I was somewhat involved doing what I could, I met two nurses - Daphne Vessey and Maureen Bryant - and was amazed at their fantastic care both for my friend's husband and the entire family. They offered wonderful support and nothing was too much trouble. After the inevitable happened and my friend was alone, I thought what can we do to help raise money perhaps? Money was short and so the idea was well-received.

With Rowena’s help and Deborah’s banking skills, the retail fundraising began a market stall in Tring on Fridays, 7am till 5pm just one day a week; quite a small acorn but better was to come. After all, Marks and Spencer started in the same way: small - and "small is beautiful" and it was a beautiful experience. Such enthusiasm, fun and good value for money. We sold donated items: everything from linen to pans, jewellery seconds and books, etc. Business was brisk and we couldn’t fail. Our first week’s profits were £77 and the next week £100. I’ve never known what that amount paid for: one must remember this was a long time ago and much has happened since.*

The intention of this story is to record the start of our first shop and remember the people who manned it. A shop was so needed as now we were doing good trade and the donations were coming in, stored in my house which began to look like Auntie Wainwright’s of Last of the Summer Wine.

*£100 could pay for five hours of specialist nursing care in a patient’s home

We were fortunate to know a landlord, a Tring man, and we decided to take a shop on Tring High Street. Rowena - Chief Executive of Iain Rennie Hospice at Home - was my boss. She was a star and could see we were onto a winner.
I didn’t get involved in negotiations about rents and decorations, but I agreed to look after the shop affairs for six months. Lots to do: pricing garments and other items, just the same as in the market. I felt that we started out with a fan base. Now for the staff: open 6 days a week, 9am until 5pm with four people at a session, two sessions a day, morning and afternoon. I rallied the troops and the rest is history. We needed a nimble-fingered person for the till; someone to count the money and bank at the end of the day. We tried to make the shop look nice; however, when I look back it was really only a second-hand shop. We were asked for blankets for dogs and cats; knives and forks for college freshman and, later, dress suits for May Balls. We tried to accommodate the strangest requests, for example, flimsy female underwear for someone in Cuba in spite of Castro implementing a ban on such things! We even had a cross-dresser who came and changed into a dress in the changing room and swept out after paying and thanking us profusely.

We began to get donations from the ever-increasing number of nurses who brought clothes and belongings for us to sell. Our figures began to look better and better. The first six months passed quickly and our business continued to improve. I remember we took our first cheque for quite a large sale of clothes and shoes. The customer was a doctor from the West Country and I forgot to ask for her cheque card. Rowena agreed it was time to employ a manager – but unfortunately after three months she left us. During this time two volunteers agreed to do our first-ever clothes show with models from the shop volunteers and every outfit sourced from our stock. This was very successful and we were fortunate to have booked a venue that was required by a film company making the Politician’s Wife. We moved over to another venue and the film company generously paid our fee plus an extra something for the inconvenience - £1,500 I think it was. And of course it gave us a head start on the clothes show fundraiser! The show sold out and set the standard for the next one. The volunteers who organised and those who modelled were delighted.

The next manageress stayed much longer, in fact, until her retirement some twenty years on. The start was such fun, with volunteers offering advice and help and constant breaking of rules that couldn’t possibly offend or harm; someone or at least something was looking after us.

I can recall such funny happenings: one Saturday morning a very useful gentleman who worked on Saturdays came in carrying a bag from which he produced a pick axe and said he was going to demolish the wall dividing the shop. Even I knew it was load-bearing! I managed to get him to delay until Rowena came to negotiate!
We also had a flood from the flat above: a small stain appeared in the ceiling and grew and grew and we couldn't get access to the flat without the fire brigade who came and cleared the shop of customers. We covered what we could and then part of the ceiling came down. We were duly fumigated, cleaned and had a grand re-opening recovering our loss of earnings and much prestige. We served tea to people after a street accident in the high street and on one occasion we rendered first aid to a member of the volunteers. We called a doctor who said we had done perfectly well (as we had an ex-nursing sister with us so we should have!) We also boasted a midwife, secretary to Mr Churchill no less, various people with banking experience, a delightful ex-wardrobe mistress, an auctioneer and an expert from the BBC Road Show - a wealth of expertise, always on hand to help and advise us.

Another comical thing that happened involved a regular customer whom we could never seem to please. One day this young man was desperate for a new suit and we came up with one. It was, however, needing alteration, so our wonderful seamstress measured him and agreed to do the alteration (for no charge I suspect), but after the final fitting it was rejected once again. I don't think we ever sold him anything in my time! It was impossible.

All this rhetoric is to tell of the passion and commitment that abounded and what fun it was. People made friends, found partners for life and a busy social diary: pre-Christmas dinners; trips to the seaside on a coach with a quiz and sweets, satsumas and lemonade - all down to dear Deborah and Rowena. Always a smile and a genuine concern for the giver – plus a huge sense of having helped the nurses care for more patients when we sold something and had record days.

The nurses came in on a fairly regular basis; it was always great to see them and they were always busy. “We do it for the nurses” was the answer when we were asked the question ‘why?’ - and so it was, I think, without exception.

This was the start of something big: to quote the song, an acorn, an idea - leading to a substantial income to meet ever-increasing requests for help. We were a reliable means of support to the fantastic nurses and I’m sure we are all glad it was so and that we were allowed to do what we did with blessings from Rowena and Deborah and the odd “we can't do that ... can we?”

Thanks to Peggy’s vision and the hard work of her team of volunteers, our Retail operation now boasts 20 shops with more in the pipeline, a lucrative eBay store, specialist wedding service and profitable recycling scheme – all of which brings in over £2million with a 45.5% profit margin.

Peggy Bainbridge (28 December 2013)