

Autumn 2014

ISSUE 126



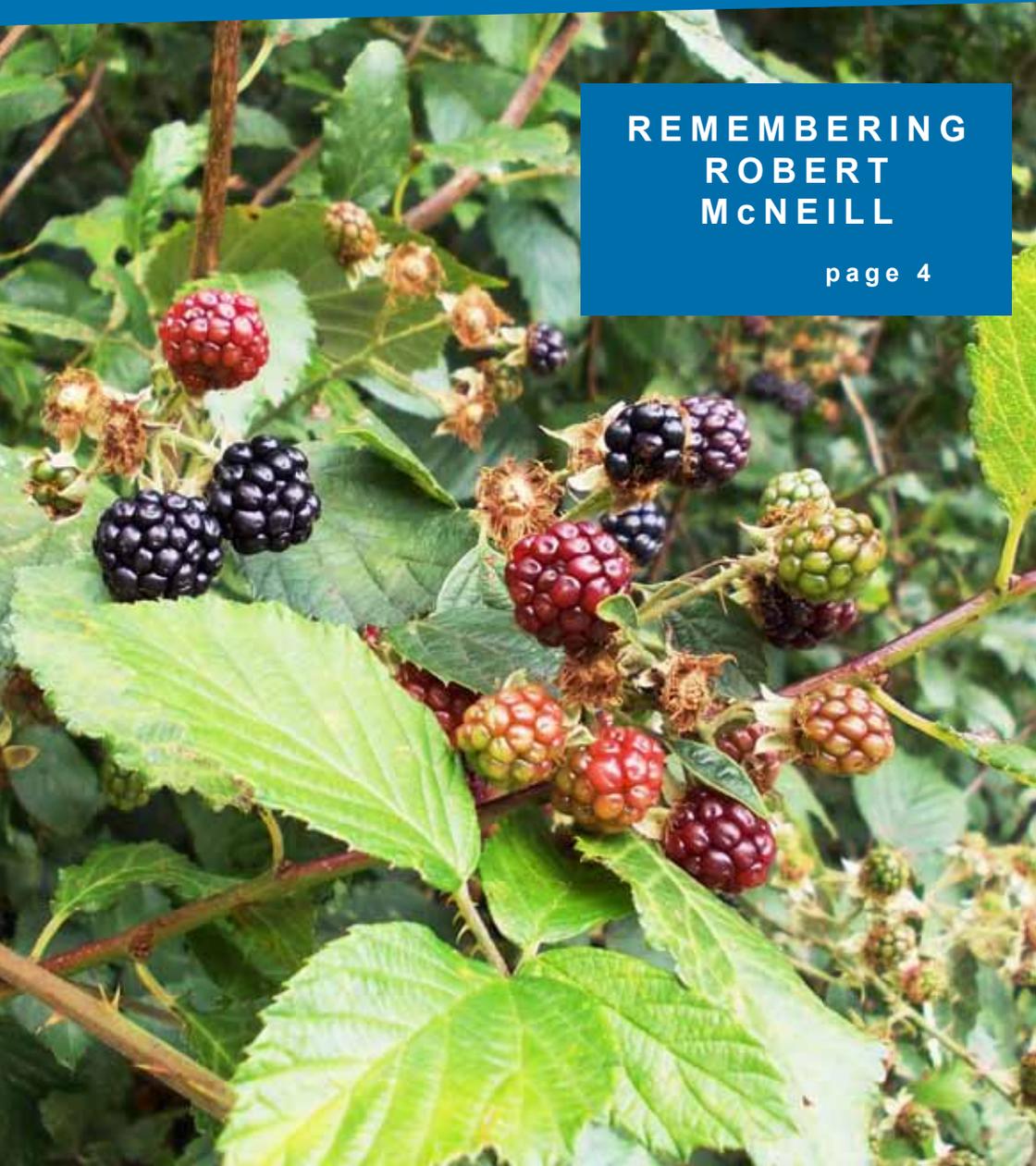
THE  
*Simon*  
STAR



[www.simoncommunity.org.uk](http://www.simoncommunity.org.uk)

REMEMBERING  
ROBERT  
McNEILL

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THANK YOU

Pret a Manger  
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Gail's Bakery  
St Giles In The Fields  
Robert McAlpine  
Aztech IT  
Citystore  
Thorntons Budgeons  
Catholic Worker Farm

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Thank you for reading this autumn edition of Simon Star and for supporting the Community. We use this newsletter to let you know what is going on here and invite you to share your stories.

Are you interested in doing some fundraising for our winter night shelter this year? This is a great service that takes 7 people directly off the streets for the coldest months of the year. If you would like to do a sponsored run/walk/crawl, hold a bake sale or a raffle please get in touch with us on 02074856639.

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# WELCOME TO THE SIMON STAR

Welcome to the Autumn edition of the Simon Star, we trust that you enjoyed the beautiful weather that we have seen this summer.

We have certainly benefitted from all the sun in the house, the garden is looking great and the volunteers have been up to Hampstead Heath swimming in the ponds.

While we count ourselves lucky to be where we are we, we are also reminded on a daily basis through our outreach work that there are many people not so fortunate.

Though our services have reduced since the closure of our day centre, we are certainly not seeing less people out on the street through our outreach work.

Last year we had two tea runs per week seeing around 30 people each time. We now go out four times a week and are seeing around 100 people each time. This is a worrying indication that the numbers of people needing our help are still growing.

As we move into autumn we begin to plan our winter shelter and hope that we will have the chance again this year to help some more people find an alternative to life on the streets.

Our work to provide for those who need it most is only possible through the generosity and kindness of our supporters. Thank you for taking the time to read this newsletter and for your support and interest in our work.



**Chris in the garden**



**Zola and William**

# REMEMBERING ROBERT McNEILL

Robert McNeill was one of the rudest men I have ever met. He was a chauvinist, a misogynist and a racist, but all the while with a twinkle in his eyes and a wry smile on his lips. Yet I am pleased to say that he was my friend.

Robert was born in Cape Town in 1949 of English parents. He spent most of his life in South Africa, but he had been a well travelled man and was used to the high life. Years ago tragedy had touched him when he lost his wife in a fatal air crash and he was left to bring up his young son. Health problems over the years had also taken their toll on him.

Family matters brought him to London in the early 2000s, but his plans did not go well. After a short stay on the streets, he was invited into the Community in late 2004, firstly to Anton Street and then to 129.

I first met Robert in 2007 at 129 where he was a very dominant resident. He loved to be outrageous and controversial, whilst doing his best to disrupt Community meetings and insult as many people as possible. Yet when you got to know him, you realised that he was a kind and generous man.

He would have been very amused at what I am writing now. He told me once that he only insulted people he liked; people he didn't like, he just ignored. At that time his plans for the future were varied and different, but conversations of 'simply puzzles', his 'hit list' and the 'bullshitometer' all gave us many reasons to smile.

Having only a South African passport, his residency in the UK was not secure. However he was eventually able to obtain his British citizenship in 2010, marking a very proud moment in Robert's life. In 2011, he moved from 129 to accommodation in Stockwell, but continued his links with the Community and often visited to play a game of chess and catch up with the news.

He was well loved by those who knew him and his sudden death in March was a shock to us all. He will be very fondly remembered by many.

May he rest in peace.

Cynthia Jameson

May 2014



**Robert McNeill**

## **HELLO & GOODBYE**

Since the last issue we have said goodbye to Lindsey and Libby who have both returned to the USA. Both of these full time volunteers made huge contributions to the Community while they were here.

We have welcomed Chris from Leicester (you can read about his experience so far on page 9). Chris brings a lot of energy to the Community. More recently we are

delighted to have welcomed Sophie from Switzerland.

On a sad note, we have recently said goodbye to our Services Coordinator, Phil Hole. Phil's successes in the Community include a thriving day centre the renovation of 129 Malden Road. Phil has built strong relationships with residents and colleagues during his time here and will be sorely missed.

# HARD LINE MEASURES

**Community Manager Jamie Nalton talks about the spikes that have recently featured in the news and other punishing measures used to tackle the growing problem of street homelessness**

Since the last issue of the Simon Star our readers will no doubt of heard the story regarding spikes installed outside a block of flats in South London which were designed to deter the homeless using the area as a place of shelter.

Quite rightly this draconian, hard line measure caused a national outcry, which quickly went viral with many hundreds of thousands damming the actions on social network sites which in turn resulted in the national news channels and press picking up the story and joining the public in saying "People sleeping rough should be treated with dignity and respect, and not with spikes".

**"People sleeping rough should be treated with dignity and respect - not with spikes"**

It was also discovered that the tactic of installing spikes where rough sleepers have and may try to find shelter had been implemented at various buildings and structures such as Supermarkets and motorway underpasses.

Whilst it is pleasing that the outrage did result in the spikes being removed from the flats and some supermarkets,

it is a worry that the more important questions did not get as many column inches. Let's not miss the fact that before the spikes were installed somebody's only option for a bed was to sleep on a concrete floor underneath a concrete ledge. I believe this alone should be enough to cause an outrage amongst the public and press.

**"Clearly the hard line measures are not working. The numbers of people sleeping rough in London are truly startling"**

Hard line measures in dealing with the homeless and vulnerable on the street of London has been happening for many years, such as Operation Poncho (waking up rough sleepers and hosing down the area) ASBOs, not to mention plans that some London boroughs are looking at the possibility of making rough sleeping a illegal activity and are warning against organisations providing food to people living on the streets.

Clearly none of this is working as the numbers sleeping rough in London today are truly startling.

“The figures, released by the Combined Homelessness and Information Network (CHAIN), show that 2,029 people were sleeping on the streets of London during the first quarter of 2014, an eight per cent increase on the same period last year. This comes on the back of three years of rises in rough sleeping representing a 75% increase. “(Crisis)

**“Unfortunately homelessness is accepted as a normal part of the scenery on the way to work or on a night out”**

This is a headline that should be on everybody’s social media site, in the papers and the first story on the 10 o’clock news. But unfortunately homelessness has been prevalent for so long that it is accepted a normal

part of the scenery whilst on the way to work in the city or during a night out at bars, theatres and restaurants. While there are many organisations doing fantastic work to support rough sleepers despite the limitations the current economic crisis, I am still left wondering ‘what is the answer?’

I ask myself whilst writing this and if I whisper my individual thoughts here it may cause a ripple amongst our readership then it would likely end there. But It has been proved that if we shout as collective “the homelessness situation in this country is unacceptable, hardline tactics clearly do not work and the support on offer has to be urgently and seriously looked at,” then just maybe we can shake up the system and make a positive change...

**Jamie Nalton**



**A Simon guest beds down in his regular doorway**

# IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT THE FOOD

We get all kinds of calls at the Simon Community, when you answer the phone here you never know who will be on the other end. It could be someone whose life has come undone looking for somewhere to stay or information about how to get some help. But for every call we get from someone in trouble, we probably get one from someone who wants to help.

Often help comes in the form of donations (always are gratefully received as long as we can use them) but also from people who want to get involved and help out. Quite often people ask if they can come and work in a soup kitchen. We don't have a soup kitchen. We do have a kitchen, but you can't fit many people in. People don't come to us for soup – we take it to them. Our soup runs go out twice a week to a few prime spots in Central London where people know us and will be waiting.

Giving out soup seems to be the thing that people associate with helping our homeless friends, but it's not the only thing we do. We have early morning tea runs that provide a much needed hot drink and food to people that have spent the night on the streets. We go out on Street Work in pairs or

small groups to chat to people who are sleeping out. At the weekend we have a street café where we pitch up in a churchyard in Central London and offer drinks, cakes and a few hours away from the stresses of life on the streets. A chance to sit down without getting moved on, ignored or abused.

As a guest at any one of these services you are likely to be offered something to eat, it may be a delicate pastry from an exclusive French bakery, it may be a jam butty, but as we always say... it's not about the food. It's humanity we're offering, not carbohydrates.

Sometimes new volunteers worry about what to say, but it's really just talking to new friends. And part of the respite for many is to have a chat about something very ordinary, not their problems or anyone else's solutions. We talk about the weather or the football. I usually have a dog with me so people tend to talk to me about dogs. We don't need to have the answers.

If you can talk kindly to strangers about nothing in particular, and you'd like to come and share a bit of your time, we'd be very pleased to see you.

**Rachel Cullen**

# VOLUNTEER LIFE

I've been asked to write about what it is like to be a full-time volunteer (FTV) with the Simon Community. I'm sure this article has been written before, but as all experience is relative, here goes with my own take of FTV life...

It's different, that's for sure. I gave up my 9-5 job in the commercial world, and while at the time I thought it was a busy and varied position, it's nothing like working at The Simon Community.

From the moment I wake up I'm working. Indeed, even while we are asleep we are 'on-call' should something happen that needs fixing. During the day anything can (and does) happen. It is tiring both physically and mentally, but is comfortably the most enjoyable work experience I have had to date.

In the couple of months I have been part of the community I have been all of the following so far: a provider of tea, a disher-out of food, a cook, an available ear to listen to problems, a sounding board for ideas, a removal man, a collector of donations, a sorter of clothes, a barrista, a musician, an

organiser of daily activities, a lifter of heavy materials, a dishwasher, a sous-chef, a minute-taker, a 'business development' coordinator, an outreach worker, a personal shopper, a companion to the doctors, a cleaner and many more things beside.

However, having read the brilliant histories of the Simon Community (No Fixed Abode and Caring on Skid Row) it is clear that there is one particular activity that has always been an integral part of life at 129 Malden Road... Whether for the mix of people who come to our door in daylight hours, or in preparation for one of the outreach services, the ability to put butter on bread is one of the key skills required.

Honestly, I am learning something every day, and the experience so far has been nothing but positive. I am due to be here for the next 9 months, and I am very much looking forward to honing my sandwich making technique.

If Chris's story has inspired you to get involved, please give us a call to find out more about how you can join in!

**Chris Francis**

# NEWS FROM THE FRONT LINE



**Volunteers at the House Meeting**

As you will see from the letter from our full time volunteers (opposite) our street cafe is back in St Giles in the Fields every weekend. It has been great to get back to our guests and to have that space for them to rest at the weekend.

The soup run is going strong. We are seeing on average around 100 people when we go out twice a week.

The tea run has grown this year at an alarming rate. This is a clear indicator to us that homelessness is a growing problem. The people that use this service are not in hostels or vulnerably housed like some of the guests from our other services. If someone comes to our tea run it is because they have just woken up on the street and they need a hot drink and a friendly face just so that they can face the day.

We are grateful to the volunteers who have been working on streetwork, going out in pairs and small groups at night to talk to people on the street. They provide an invaluable service.

Music Tuesday has seen a few new guests in the last couple of months, but unfortunately this has not been the same for the Women's Group. Since we relocated to Gospel Oak following the closure of the day centre.

As for so many other organisations, these are testing times for the Community. The need for provision grows while resources grow more limited. But there is still plenty of work to do.

Thank you to our supporters and volunteers whose generosity and spirit allows us to continue providing much needed services.



**Sofie washing up**

# LETTERS

## A Letter from our Full Time Volunteers

Hello all!

This summer we have seen the return of the Street Cafe to our list of regular services. As before, we have very graciously been afforded the space we need by St Giles in the Fields in the West End.

A big thank you must be extended to Rev. Alan Carr for allowing us to invade his spot twice each weekend. This is especially true as the Church has recently undergone a major redevelopment, only reopening the space in front of the Church a few months ago.

There have also been changes to how the service operates from our perspective that are still currently in a trial period. It had been noted in Community meetings that while the Street Cafe was busy dishing out hot food, we had perhaps strayed from its original purpose; as a safe and quiet space at which people could meet and talk to others.

It was agreed upon that instead of providing stew, we should instead invite people in to take home-made cakes and a hot drink, and to relax in an environment conducive to conversation. It was felt that hot food could also be found locally through other providers throughout the weekend, and that this new model would serve its intended recipients with something not offered elsewhere.

Throughout the past couple of months, we have been monitoring the attendance at the cafe, as well as the reaction to the change in what we now provide. There has been encouraging feedback as to the idea.

While it is certainly true that there have been individuals who would prefer hot food, the men and women who attend regularly have found the atmosphere calm and relaxing – and Chelsea's baking each week is much

appreciated already. Attendance has remained steady at 50 day with similar faces showing themselves week by week.

Street Cafe has traditionally been a popular service amongst our volunteers, and this remains the case. We encourage all of our volunteers, however, to get more involved.

We have found that the more relaxed and less hasty environment has enabled us to speak at length with those who are not usually reached – this is where our volunteers are able to make a real difference in the lives of those they touch.

We will be discussing the longer-term sustainability of the Street Cafe in the coming weeks, and welcome your thoughts and suggestions. Please feel free to get in touch on 0207 485 3602 or at [rota@simoncommunity.com](mailto:rota@simoncommunity.com)

Finally, thank you to you all for your hard-work and commitment. We would not be able to provide half as good as service without you! All the best,

The Full-time Volunteers!

If you have some news to share, good or sad, or have someone you would like to remember, or say thank you to... please get in touch. You can write to us at:  
129 Malden Road  
London NW5 4HS

