

Professor Day,

On Tuesdays in the early eighties a seventeen-year-old youth worker helped to run the Pool Girls Club in Elswick. The club had been founded by local social workers to address an urgent need in the area. The youth worker was bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, an eager "apprentice" and, soon, fully employed and learning to manage the club. Today that club is the West End Women and Girls Centre, and we celebrate that youth worker, Huffty McHugh, with an honorary doctorate.

Huffty means a lot to many people, both in Elswick and beyond it. In her twenties and when Section 28 was still in force, she was the first openly gay woman to be a presenter on UK television, but always kept her connection to the West End of Newcastle. As Centre Coordinator, she has been instrumental in developing what is now a nationally-recognised provision for women and girls in the city – overcoming austerity and an often hostile environment to do so. The Centre serves over ten thousand women and girls a year, ranging from age five to ninety-five and reflecting the diversity of the most ethnically diverse area of our city. Its members include victims and survivors of domestic abuse, single mothers, and those with large families or other caring responsibilities. The website for the Centre proclaims its values: belonging, equality, transformation, passion, grass roots, integrity, leadership, and courage. Huffty embodies these values. She has done every job in the centre: cleaned the toilets, bid for funding, run the clubs, staffed the desk, repaired the sink, sat and listened, held space – and always been her authentic self. Everywhere she goes in Elswick she knows people and they know her; she sees the potential in the girl expelled from school, and she has the ears of the police chief, the shopkeeper, the local mums, and the building site workers. When it came to refurbishing the Centre, some did not believe it would be possible to raise the funds or arrange the asset transfer. Huffty believed. Twelve years and £1.6 million later it finally happened.

The design of the refurbished Centre was carried out in consultation with the women that used it. The whole process is one example of how Huffty combines the qualities of a visionary and a listener. She listens to a lot of hard stuff, she thinks deeply about what people need, she takes their ideas and says 'yes'. There is only time today to give a sample of the projects, courses, and clubs she has made happen. The Safe 4 Life domestic abuse recovery course supports victims and survivors on their journey to safety; the Domestic Abuse Peer Education Project delivers workshops in any setting where young women are present. The Edible Elswick project responded to Bengali and other residents' wish for a place to grow food and has been breaking down racist barriers for over a decade. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Centre ran Scrان 4 the Fam, delivering soup to thousands, helping everyone from single men to big families and vulnerable women to stay in contact with the wider community.

All these projects align with Newcastle University's commitment to social justice and working with partners to help address longstanding inequalities that have held back this region and its people. The Centre Huffty leads is already one such partner, collaborating with the university on its Women's Library, support with research projects at all levels, and work with NUSU on student safety and wellbeing.

Everything that happens at the West End Women and Girls Centre, and everything Huffty does is either important or great fun (and often both). To mark the Centre's fortieth anniversary, Huffty made something happen that had never been seen before: lights, fireworks, projections, a funfair with a helter skelter, an ice cream truck and a red carpet all appeared in Elswick for an enormous celebration. On International Women's Day in 2024, volunteers, members, and friends gathered at the Centre's Fallowlees farm, with the Duchess of Northumberland joining them. That farm, an idea born out of the confines of the pandemic, now produces four tonnes of produce a year, and welcomes twice weekly minibuses full of girls and women eager to share the countryside together. Huffty, shouting 'free food' as people walk by the Centre, makes sure that its produce nourishes the local community.

The West End Women and Girls Centre “saves and celebrates life”. So it says in the foreword to *Forty Women and Girls*, a book honouring those who have been the “heartbeat” of the Elswick community. Huffty is one of these forty, but her name runs through the whole volume like a golden thread. Huffty says “why don’t you go” to the young woman who does then go to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Women in New York. Huffty suggests that a nervous speaker tell her audience about her anxiety. Huffty works more hours than she’s paid to do, has that “extra bit of fight”, and “obviously wants to change the world”. She it was who encouraged several women to join the Centre’s board of trustees, secured the funding for the community garden, “sorted out” Queen’s birthday honours for a long-serving volunteer, texted another “how are you?” when she was sick and away from home, and “put all the right measures in place” to protect a vulnerable woman. One of the forty women recalls that, as a girl visiting the Centre, she “thought Huffty was proper funny”. Another recognizes her “absolute commitment”. Another will never forget how Huffty “went into court with me so many times”. And another describes how Huffty would just “keep going, and keep going, and keep going.”

Huffty does keep going and she builds power as she goes. She has nurtured a new generation who make the Centre work, and who prove, as a seventeen-year-old youth worker once proved, how capable young women are.

Professor Day, for her vision, her spirit, and her capacity to listen, to welcome, to care, and to build power, I present to you Huffty McHugh as a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Civil Law, *honoris causa*.

James Harriman-Smith

Public Orator

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