

A new start after 60



I was in the bath when my life changed for ever

One morning in 2007, Frances Harper was taking a bath and listening to the local news on BBC Radio Suffolk when a story caught her attention. A young woman, Louise, was being interviewed about her life as a sex worker in Ipswich. “I couldn’t see how the interview was helping her situation,” says Harper, who was 60 at the time. “I got out of the bath and made some notes. I realised she needed a documentary to tell her story properly and I thought perhaps I could try to make it.”

Harper had never owned a video camera and had no idea how to shoot a film. She had spent the past four decades working in secretarial jobs, as well as raising her son and supporting her husband in his construction business. “I was busy but something was always

missing,” she says. “Something I could do for myself.”

Armed with a sudden sense of purpose and without a current job to keep her occupied, Harper rushed out to buy a basic camera, read the manual and began trying to contact Louise. The police wouldn’t share her details, but after finding the name of her solicitor in the local paper, she left a letter with the firm to be passed on. “Soon after, Louise phoned me and we met in a cafe in Ipswich,” Harper says. “I told her I’d like to make a documentary to share her story and help her. She agreed, and that was my entry into a new world.”

Following Louise for weeks, Harper documented her life on the streets, her drug addiction and sex work, while learning how to shoot and interview. “She told me that no one had motivated her or really cared about her life,” she says. “She

was interested in art and history, so we went to galleries and even an afternoon tea - things she’d never done. We spent a lot of time together as I had the time to spare.”

The more Harper got to know Louise, the more concerned she became about her. “She was basically sleeping in an electrical cupboard on an Ipswich street,” she says. “I started booking her into bed and breakfasts. It really showed me how lucky I had been. It’s changed my thinking ever since.”

Once she had enough footage, Harper put together a taster of the film and contacted the local BBC News office in Norwich. The idea of an older Ipswich resident befriending a young sex worker and producing a film was so unusual that Harper was invited to a meeting and commissioned to shoot a half-hour special for BBC East, which aired in February 2008. “I couldn’t

believe that Louise’s story would be out there,” she says. “I hadn’t told too many people about it so my friends were shocked when it came out. Once it did, I also battled with the council to get Louise a flat.”

Sixteen years later, Harper, 76, is fully immersed in film-making. She became more interested in the world of drug addiction and produced a film for Sky, which was narrated by Davina McCall and followed two mothers coping with the impact of their sons’ drug abuse. She has also completed a commercial film for the seaside town of Southwold and a charity short for an emergency response service. She is now working on a series about women in horticulture, as well as a film about the life of female fighter pilots.

“I just can’t stop,” she says. “I feel I’ve found my calling. I get ideas all the time, although I can’t make all of them because I fund my

own projects and it’s hard to come by funding for older people.”

But age does have its advantages. “I think people are more inclined to be polite around me because I’m older,” she says. “I’ve also gained newfound confidence through this work. I didn’t know whether I’d achieve anything but I weaved around the obstacles in my way.”

As well as changing her life, Harper has recently learned how her films have affected others. “Louise contacted me last year and we carried on talking as if no time had passed,” she says. “She told me: ‘You were the only person who believed in me.’ It made that decision to pick up the camera completely worth it.”

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