

NO REST FOR THE OPTIMISTIC

“Every single one of us is capable of being much more than we think we are, given the right kind of push and pull.”

Optimism, it seems, can keep you awake at night.

“I sometimes find it quite hard to sleep because I’m so excited,” says Ruth Turner, non-executive director at social research company Vision 21. “There are just so many possibilities for making things better.”

Still in her early 30s, Turner has already had plenty of excitement in her life. Given the scope of her career to date - co-founder of two businesses, award winner, member of the Labour Party’s National Executive Committee, board member and more - it’s perhaps surprising she isn’t asleep the moment her head hits the pillow.

It was Turner, along with co-founder Anne MacNamara, who brought The Big Issue up north from London to a humble portacabin in Manchester’s Piccadilly Gardens. That was in December 1992, when she was aged 22 and newly graduated from Salford University.

“It was a very, very exciting time,” says Turner, and one conducted in an atmosphere of “beautiful, creative chaos.” Inevitably, mistakes were made. For the first issue “we ordered 20,000 and sold about 2,500. So we used these stacks of unsold magazines as seats because we didn’t have any chairs.”

It was also a time when Turner learned many lessons that have stayed with her and cemented her positive outlook. “One of the things which I’ve learned and held with me is that most things are possible if you work hard, are resourceful, and are not daunted by the fear of failure... it’s about inciting and inspiring enough people who are prepared to put some effort into it, to go with you.”

Under Turner’s editorship, The Big Issue in the North won a hatful of awards and weekly circulation climbed to over 60,000.

But with The Big Issue as her first and only ‘real’ job, in 2000 Turner moved on and soon found herself working for Vision 21, a social research company set up by Simon Danczuk, a former social research manager at The Big Issue. The company carries out community consultation into a rich mix of social issues, working with the public on topics ranging from begging to regeneration projects.

“The age of deference is over,” says Turner. “For too long the mistake was made to do things to people, rather than doing things with people.”

It was the idea that projects tackling social problems should be based on sound evidence that appealed to Turner. But there has also been a growing appreciation among organisations in a range of fields that people need to feel involved in the changes that affect them if the benefits are to be long lasting.

One organisation Turner is working with is Mersey Waterfront, ensuring that local people in Liverpool, Sefton, Halton and the Wirral are able to have a say as projects to refocus attention on some 70 km of the River Mersey’s waterfront are designed and delivered.

“There’s absolutely no point in building and developing great things,” Turner points out, “if they then fall into rack and ruin through vandalism or neglect or not being loved and cared for.”

How organisations talk to people and gather evidence is another question, however, and this is where Vision 21 comes in. These days there is a sophisticated tool kit of techniques available to help facilitate the conversation. It might be as simple as conducting a survey. Or for more intensive research there are the many different kinds of focus groups, on up to citizens’ councils or citizens’ juries, which can last for three or four days.

But if the conversation between organisations and the public goes well, the pay off can be huge. Organisations become more effective, while the impact on members of the public can be transformational. Turner tells the story of how Vision 21 were asked by the NHS to find 30 people who had never previously been involved in public life to be part of a new citizens council. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence wanted to bring a public perspective to decisions on how drugs and treatments should be used in the NHS. Over 35,000 people came forward. Now when the company contacts people on the original list they are often no longer available. Instead, they have been motivated to volunteer their time to other organisations.

The point for Turner is that individuals and organisations alike have to be inspired to want to make a difference. “I think that you can create an environment in which people start to believe that it’s possible to make a difference and that generates its own momentum and excitement.”

“If you assume that you are surrounded by good people who want to do their best ... then people really live up to that and really respond and that’s when big things become possible.”

1992 Graduated from Salford University with an honours degree in English and History. Soon after, co-founded the Big Issue in the North.

1998 Became board member and later executive committee member of Sustainability Northwest, which works to promote a sustainable future for the region.

1999 Awarded Ernst & Young’s Community Entrepreneur of the Year award for the north of England, along with Big Issue in the North co-founder Anne MacNamara, in recognition of their application of business excellence to the social sector.

2000 Became non-executive director at social research company Vision 21, based in Manchester. Elected to the Labour Party’s National Executive Committee (NEC). Re-elected in 2001 and in 2002 and sits on the NEC Business Board, the Organisation Sub-Committee and the Selections Panel.

2001 Appointed as the first ever lead representative for the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts, based in the Northwest of England.