



Charity for homeless can depend on 'Anchor man'



PROFILE

Tara Holmes meets **Keith Fernett**, the man at the helm of homelessness charity Anchor House

TURNING round a failing organisation requires a radical vision and a leader who can inspire change. When Keith Fernett arrived at the Catholic homeless charity Anchor House eight years ago he knew he was facing a tough challenge.

The charity, with its 118-room centre in London's Canning Town, was on the brink of collapse and no longer able to carry out its mission to help homeless and jobless people back to work.

A former director and management consultant with more than two decades experience in the public sector, Keith remembers sitting down with despondent staff and residents on his first day and announcing it was time to start over.

"We decided on a no blame culture," he recalls. "I got out a blank sheet of paper and said: 'Right, what are we going to do? What's our vision?' We resolved in five minutes flat what needed to be done and we decided we were going to be the best in London."

With building repairs for the homeless centre estimated at £2.5 million, it was an ambitious, almost impossible, plan.

"We had no staff resources. Like a lot of charities at the time that had done things the traditional way, we were facing problems with changing legislation. We had major financial difficulties, were losing funding and receiving only a sixth of that of other similar charities."

A former hostel for seafarers visiting the ports of East London, Anchor House was originally set up in 1962 to help those who became redundant on arrival at the docks. In the 1980s, as needs changed, the charity started to take in homeless people. Situated in one of the most deprived areas of East London, the homeless centre was soon struggling to stay afloat.

"Although Anchor House was set in the docks, it had missed the boat," explains Keith. "But we still had one resource – our residents. Before residents had been second-class citizens. We started to change the culture.

Within 18 months the residents had already won an award."

Since then, the charity has won a string of awards, attracted new funding following a successful pitch at a *Dragon's Den*-type scenario and used its proximity to Canary Wharf to forge links with the City.

"Using top management techniques, we had to make sure everything was tightly, tightly managed," reveals Keith.

"When you have few resources you have to use them effectively. The attitude has to become 'can do'."

Part of the new 'can do' approach was to introduce the business concept of performance management for both staff and residents alike. "Some don't like it," says Keith, "but most rise to the challenge. We agree a personal development plan. We work with people to set personal aspirations."

There is also a "pecking order" in place so only clients who have proven themselves can earn privileges like access to the bedrooms with the best facilities.

"The pecking order is determined by the residents themselves and their involvement," stresses Keith. "On day one, we give them a licence with a notice to quit within 28 days unless they do what they've promised. They might promise to sort housing benefit, sign on with the doctor or see the nurse. We've only ever shown the door to one young man."

Born in Amersham, Buckinghamshire, in 1952, Keith, a cradle Catholic, moved from town to town throughout much of his childhood. His father worked in the prison service, his job taking the family to Lancashire, Durham and Leeds.

"I got my stubbornness from being taught by the Salesian Fathers in Thornleigh in Bolton,"

he chuckles. "If I had stayed there I expect I would have become one."



Instead he studied for an Economics degree at Hull University. His first job in 1976 was as a town planner in Accrington, Lancashire.

It was around this time that he became interested in Catholic social action. He set up Planning Aid, a body that fought unpopular local authority planning. But didn't this mean he was effectively fighting his boss? He laughs loudly confirming that I'm not the first person to spot the irony. "I was a town planner by day and by night I fought the adjoining local authorities on behalf of the community."

That chapter came to an end in 1981 when he decided to follow his wife, Frances, to London in search of work. "I decided to head off to the capital because the streets were paved with gold," he jokes. He pauses before explaining the real reason. "My wife was training to be a teacher and needed a job. Most teaching jobs were down in London."

Leaving his job in the middle of the 1980s recession was a risk for Keith but it was one that paid off.

He spent five years working for the London Borough of Hackney in three different jobs. He moved to the London Borough of Newham where he was appointed assistant director of housing.

"They kept giving me bigger jobs. The leader of the council appeared in my office one day and asked me to become director of building services. The next thing I knew I was responsible for 1,000 people. Then I became manager of direct services, looking after things like parks, schools and refuse, and inherited 2,000 further staff."

Deciding it was time to become his own boss, Keith set up a consultancy. He led programmes for customs and excise, and was at one point responsible for collecting £70 billion in VAT. He advised the police and was a trouble-shooter for local authorities including the London Borough of Southwark.

He also advised both the Maltese government and the 'Reinventing government' programme in the United States, reporting direct to Vice-President Al Gore.

"I was leading things and then leaving. I wasn't part of anything. I got lonely." In 2004, he tried to beat back the blues by taking up a job as a deputy chief executive of a large housing group. But he still felt unsettled.

The yearning to make a radical change in his life eventually got the better of him after he both broke his hand playing basketball and "sliced the cartilage in half in his right knee" during a game of tennis.

Both injuries came within the space of eight months and caused Keith to question where he was heading in life.

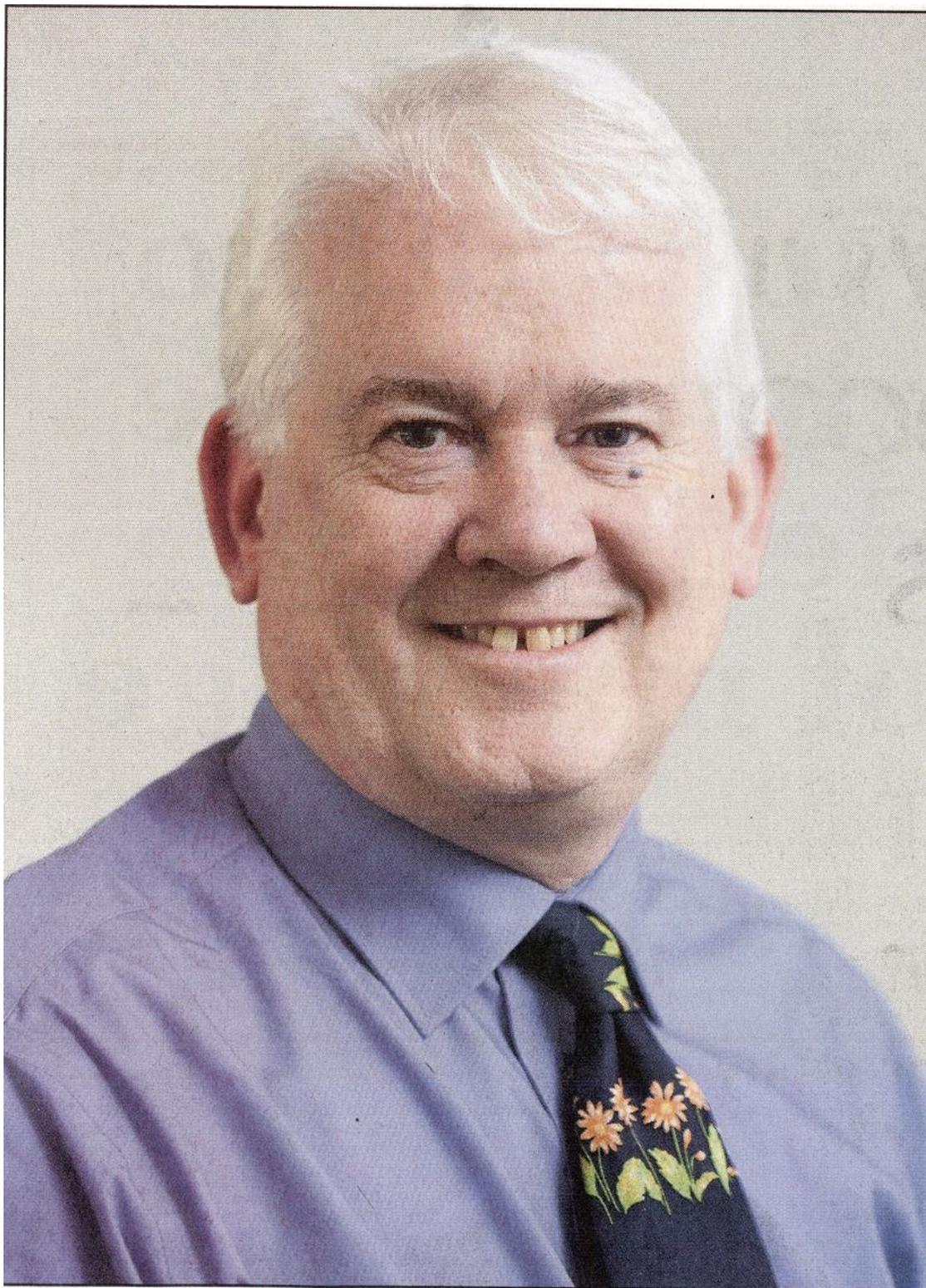
He sighs: "I had both knees operated on simultaneously. My lovely wife, Frances, grabbed hold of me and said, 'I've had enough of this. Have a sabbatical. Go and do that thing we've always said you'd do - teach in Africa or run a charity.'"

In late November 2004 Keith spotted an advert for Anchor House in his parish newsletter. He was interviewed for the job on 5th November and was at his desk three days later.

"With Anchor House, I've landed where my thoughts are.

"I've always been interested in people. I've had a Catholic upbringing and have believed in Catholic social teaching ever since social justice first started coming alive in the Church in 1968.

"My career history means I can be as tough as boots but I'm a big softie too. I feel humbled to see people with drug and mental health problems flourish. That's where I get my real buzz."



Anchor House director Keith Fernet – ‘With Anchor House, I’ve landed where my thoughts are. I’ve always been interested in people. I’ve had a Catholic upbringing and have believed in Catholic social teaching ever since social justice first started coming alive in the Church in 1968.’