

Roberta Blaikie, Activist.

A Tribute by Lynn McCabe, Community Worker, Edinburgh

ac'tiv|ist ['aktivist]

a person who campaigns to bring about political or social change.

community ac'tiv|ist

a person who is active in their community, usually in order to make it a better place to live.



A quick google search of the terms activist and community activist generated these definitions. I like them for their simplicity, clarity and lack of baggage. They also invoke happy memories of the heady days of 1984 when the good citizens of Edinburgh elected their first Labour controlled council on the back of a manifesto commitment to improve services and create jobs. I was 18 at the time and had just landed my first full-time job as a clerical assistant in the Labour Group office. It was there I first came across the term 'community activist' – a term which very quickly became synonymous with a certain part of the City. It was my contact with many of

the activists and workers associated with that community that ultimately led me to a career in community work and to a long association with North Edinburgh.

This article pays tribute to Roberta Blaikie, a community activist from North Edinburgh who I had the privilege of knowing and working with for the best part of 25 years and who died in December 2015. She was a good friend, a trusted and loyal colleague and a dedicated and committed activist.

Roberta came to activism like many people - because of an issue and a desire to get something done. It was the mid 1970s and her gripe was that her local community centre was failing to cater for the needs of young mothers like herself. Shortly after raising her complaint at a public meeting, she found herself in charge of developing a new group for local women. Even at this early stage, she had a keen sense of what was needed and how to go about it. Within a short time, she had recruited a number of local women who, like her, were looking for a safe space where they could come together to chat and get advice and support from each other.

Through her participation in this group, Roberta discovered community arts and the powerful role it could play within the context of community activism. This early experience played a huge part in her personal, social and political development and became a springboard to a long career in activism. Her involvement in this initiative also brought her into contact with Jane Jones and Barbara Orton, two local workers, who shaped her view of what constituted good community work and whose friendship and support helped to sustain her during the final months of her life.

There were many issues close to Roberta's heart throughout her life but she was particularly passionate about socialism and pacifism, which underpinned her view of the world and her analysis of what was wrong with it. She joined the Labour Party and CND in the early 1980s and was actively involved in both organisations at local level. Her involvement in party politics brought her into contact with many people from the labour and trade union movement and this experience contributed to a finely tuned political analysis, which informed her thinking on the many local issues she took up.

Like many of us, her involvement as a community and political activist awakened a desire to learn. Craigoyston Community High School had recently been awarded community status through the Van Leer Foundation and had opened its doors to adult students seeking another stab at education. Taking part in a class full of unruly young people was not an experience that she particularly relished so this adventure was relatively short lived. Her return to education did, however, have a major impact on the direction of her life and the young Jim Crowther is credited with providing the all important vital support and guidance at the start of her journey. New opportunities followed including sessional work in an oral history project, a part-time position as an ABE tutor and, a few years down the line, to a full-time position working with volunteers in a city centre project.

Her dedication and commitment to making her community a better place to live didn't stop when she found work. In her early days as an activist she was a cleaner at the local Wire Works rising from her bed at 3 am. The early shift gave the family a bit more financial security and enabled her to fulfil her role as a mother to Donna and continue her work as a local activist. Throughout her working life, her involvement in many local campaigns - to save Ainslie Park school, to secure a new day care centre for elderly people, to stop the closure of A & E at the Western General Hospital, to fight budget cuts to local services – were fitted around both work and childcare commitments.

I first met Roberta in 1990 when I did a placement at Pilton Health Project. By that time, Roberta was back working in North Edinburgh as the manager of Pilton Elderly Project, which was based in the same building. She was very supportive and provided me with a fascinating insight into the community politics of North Edinburgh and the essential do's and don'ts of community work!

Our paths crossed a few times over the next few years but it was 1994 before we actually worked together. By then I was working for the Community Education service as a fieldworker for the Royston Wardieburn area which was her patch. There were significant problems in Granton Medway at the time and after a few meetings

with Roberta and some of the neighbours she had got together, an action group was established. Over the next 2 1/2 years the group undertook a huge amount of work, collating tenants' complaints and documenting the effect of cold damp houses on their physical and mental health. Their work paid off in 1997 when the Council agreed to insulate their homes, provide new windows, central heating and carry out environmental improvements in the back greens. The fact that 26/1 Granton Medway, the house that George and Roberta had lived in for 40 years, already had new heating and windows was neither here nor there. She saw the big picture. She saw the impact poor housing conditions were having on her neighbours and on the neighbourhood generally. She saw on a daily basis how the Council was failing to fulfil its legal responsibilities to its tenants and understood how this situation had to be tackled through collective action.

We next worked together in 2009 on the *Never Give Up* Project, which documented the history of community activism in North Edinburgh. Roberta was retired by then and like many activists was disillusioned at the state-sponsored community engagement structures being imposed on North Edinburgh. For the 5 activists involved in the project, *Never Give Up* was an opportunity to celebrate a different type of engagement – one which grew organically from the grass roots and could not be controlled or tamed by officials or politicians. By the time they finished their project, North Edinburgh Social History group had produced a 55 page publication, a film, an exhibition, resources for schools, a back-catalogue of archives and a new course on the History of Protest in Scotland. Roberta's contribution to the project was immense. Her experience of oral history, her knowledge of the area and local campaigns and her strong relationships with activists from across all the communities in North Edinburgh were crucial in building support for the project and ensuring its success.

The following quote sums up why *Never Give Up* was so important to Roberta:

Local people have always had to fight for the services they have. It hasn't always been the way it is now. People don't realise that. We wanted to

show people all the things that people like ourselves had achieved, all the battles we had won to give us the projects and the services we have today.

Roberta's involvement in her local centre, both as a centre user and a member of the management committee, shaped her vision of community centres. She saw their potential in creating opportunities for the community to come together, to meet, discuss and act on the issues, which concerned them. She also recognised from her own experience the importance of community centres as a safe place where relationships, friendships and connections with the wider community are developed. And so it was fitting that almost four decades after raising her complaint about the lack of provision for young women in her local centre, that she was back again championing the needs of older women.

At an initial meeting to discuss their needs, the women who attended made it perfectly clear that carpet bowls were definitely not on the agenda. On the contrary, they had much to contribute to their community and while they didn't envisage storming the City Chambers, they felt the knowledge, skills and experience they had acquired from years of campaigning could be put to good use. Out of these discussions came the Women's International Group (WIG) who for the last four years have worked tirelessly raising the profile of women's issues locally and helping to develop networks and connections across the community. The list of events and activities they have organised is impressive and includes a women's health day, four international women's day events, three hustings, a public meeting on local housing issues, a seminar on welfare reforms, two large exhibitions on inspirational women at home and around the world, a public meeting on the Referendum on Scottish Independence and a fundraiser to raise cash and clothes for Syrian refugees. The group also led the fight back against cuts to local services in North Edinburgh and became the first group to challenge the Council's budget with a song!

Sadly, Roberta died of cancer at the end of last year in St Columba's Hospice only a few months after her 70th birthday. The week before she died she attended a planning meeting for the third 'Getting Together, Making a Difference' event – an opportunity for women of all ages and from all backgrounds to meet together in a safe

environment to discuss and take action on the issues they face. The previous two events had been a resounding success with over 60 local women attending each event, engaging in discussions about poverty, racism and inequality and making a commitment to making North Edinburgh a stronger and more caring community. The arts featured strongly in both events with the launch of a new exhibition, poetry readings, music and the odd bit of drama – some scripted, some not! It is some consolation to those of us who worked closely with Roberta on this initiative that she was able to see for herself the legacy she was leaving behind.

Roberta's involvement as an activist began in her local centre around her concerns about lack of provision for women and it was fitting that it finished there almost 40 years later with a commitment from the next generation to continue this work.



I would like to finish this tribute with a short poem by Jim Aitken, which I think Roberta would have appreciated.

Struggle

Not to certainly means
worsening conditions
inevitable defeat.

To engage in action
even if you lose
means dignity at least.

It also means
just could mean
that you actually win.

But its more than that
for in the process
people change.

They awaken and grow
like desert seeds
receiving rain.

And give to others
a sense of vision
and possible dreams.

From 'A Rose Loupt Oot', Poetry & Song Celebrating the UCS Work-in by David Betteridge, 2011.



A final tribute to Roberta by fellow activist Anna Hutchison

Roberta we miss you
And the things you used to do
Campaigning all your days
Nothing getting in your way
CND was your thing
You wore the badges and Ear Rings
You made us laugh
You made us cry
You even made some people mad
Never downhearted or even sad.
Public services
Saving jobs
Always fighting for a worthy cause
Respected by one and all
You certainly stood tall
Never afraid to speak your mind
You definitely were one of a kind
And now I want to tell you summin'
I'm so glad you were a Granton wummin'

Follow this link for Never Give Up Film by North Edinburgh Social History Group (June 2011)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yK1_QDgoryY&list=UUEZoO7B3ytiWRkt5G8I5oWQ