



Sheila, look what
you gave us

A tribute to Dr. Sheila Marsh
11th December 1954 – 1st August 2024

Sheila, look what you gave us: Who's talking?

We are a small number of the very many people whose lives Sheila touched. We worked with Sheila in a professional or voluntary context. Or we were lucky enough to have Sheila working for us, directly or indirectly. This is a collective attempt to honour her memory and the impact she has had on each of us.



Life as work-in- progress

Longstanding friend and colleague, Suzanne Tyler, commented, *"I'd worked with Sheila, or been part of groups that she had facilitated, and knew right from the off that she was exceptional."*

How did she know? How did any of us know? Sheila was modest, and her approach to work and people was markedly un-driven by ego. Yet there was something about her; and the more people got to know her, the more deeply they appreciated her. Suzanne went on to say, *"I watched her in large and small groups recognising and celebrating the accomplishments of others, without even considering her own role in making the magic happen."*



Forget theory vs practice

Sheila was a scholar and researcher, an intellectual with a profound interest in theory. She was also well grounded in the practicalities and complexities of real life. She saw no clash between these two dimensions – or indeed between the old sparring partners, 'qualitative' and 'quantitative'. She taught many of us that thinking in terms of 'either/or' was likely to lead to sterile conflict; much better to look for the richer pastures associated with 'both/and'.

Ethical values were the ground rock of Sheila's life. And one of these values was to do all that she could to help shift the power balance in a breathtakingly unequal society. To that end, she developed relevant knowledge, skills and experience – and deployed all of these to very good effect.

Her career displays powerful interplay between theory and practice, thinking, doing and feeling – and the rest of what have been considered conflict zones. Throughout her life, Sheila observed closely what was going on around her, picked out what truly mattered, and wove it into her life and work. True to her nature, she didn't just keep these insights to herself; she tested them with others, always seeking to learn and grow through shared experience.

Initially a manager in hotel and catering operations in both public and private sectors, she joined the Hotel and Catering Industry Training Board in 1979, taking up a training advisory role with a variety of national firms and running its small business advice service for London.

Subsequently in local government, first as a senior officer with the Greater London Council (1983-86) leading the Greater London Training Board Unit and then as Head of Economic Policy with the London Strategic Policy Unit (a post-GLC consortium of London Boroughs), she set up training and labour market initiatives in partnership with both industry and community interests, principally to support broader economic regeneration objectives.



In 1987 she launched herself as an independent consultant, working throughout the UK and beyond on training and management consultancy assignments, mostly in the public and not-for-profit sectors. Over the next 37 years, she focused on change through leadership and management development strategy and practice, including approaches to achieving quality services; analytical and problem-solving skills; working with diversity/equality issues; and applying 'whole systems' methodologies. Of increasing interest were facilitation, learning design, evaluation, policy development and research. She also led work on public involvement with service development.



Doctoral work at University of Lancaster School of Management developed her research and evaluation skills, in a range of qualitative methods especially, including action research, ethnography and realistic evaluation ('theory of change'). Her PhD was awarded in 2006; and her thesis was published in 2009 as *The Feminine in Management Consultancy*.

In recent years, Sheila became increasingly concerned with the conditions in which the health and wellbeing of populations and communities are (or are not) sustained. She also explored deeply the continuing challenges faced by unpaid carers, and worked with others to find ways of addressing the most pressing issues.

Sounds dry? It wasn't.

Who wouldn't want to work with Sheila?



Whether you were a client, colleague, friend or partner, you knew pretty soon that with Sheila you'd landed in clover. A colleague shot a query to her at the start of an innovative project, 'Sheila, how do we know this stuff works?'. Sheila immediately provided the key academic references – and described her previous experience of working through some of the main challenges.

She enjoyed collaboration (usually – even with Sheila there were some outliers) and was exceptionally good at it. Over her many years as an independent consultant, she played a crucial role in the life of three professional groups: Health Directions, Continuous Learning in Organisations, and PublicServiceWorks. Voices from these groups echo through this booklet.

Health Directions is a small group of independent consultants, all women, who have been meeting regularly since the 1990s. What began as a joint exploration of the dilemmas and issues associated with the life of work morphed over time into equally committed scrutiny of the work of life – and now, sadly, death.

Continuous Learning in Organisations was formed early in the millennium to give a home to a group of educators and researchers who were committed to working with health and social care leaders at master's level in such a way that their experience of work was enriched and the outcomes for patients and clients improved. Under the inspirational leadership of the Dean, Lois Croke, the Faculty of Health and Human Sciences at Thames Valley University (now the University of West London) supported a series of transformational programmes.

PublicServiceWorks was created following the years of austerity when demand for services had rocketed up; running costs had been reduced to the bone; and sources of funding were becoming ever more constrained. (And no big change yet.) The team behind PSW offer help and support to leaders in the public and not-for-profit sectors struggling with these issues.





This is what working with Sheila was like

We could fill volumes with tributes to Sheila, but will confine ourselves to some areas that were particularly important to her.

"Sheila was brilliant at diplomacy whilst maintaining integrity. She always looked for areas of potential collaboration rather than looking for conflict and scoring points. In the work context, she very successfully negotiated for the master's course validation in what was sometimes a hostile environment. On a personal level, beautiful inside and out."

Lois Crooke

Leading through education

Learning came as naturally to Sheila as breathing, and it gave her great pleasure to share the experience with others.



"I knew Sheila first as a tutor when she was one of the honorary lecturers (with Marion Macalpine) on my master's course. In my very large extended family, I was one of three who had gone on to do degrees, two of us in our 40s. Firstly, the style and teaching methods blew me away and very much appealed to my rubbish attention span. Sheila was so good at gauging the energy in the room, using innovative teaching methods, explaining complex ideas and most importantly convincing me in a subtle Sheila-way that I was a little bit brainy – or brainy enough. What a gift that is! Later I worked with her and became her friend. From where I'm standing, Sheila made everyone feel they had something important to say, whether she agreed with it or not. Her gentle brilliance, curiosity and analytic spirit shone so brightly and will remain."

Pauline Cross

"Sheila and I spent at least 20 years talking and working together, sometimes a few times a week. She was the most collaborative, supportive, utterly dependable, intellectually stimulating friend anyone could wish for. In our work together, I learnt so much from her about thinking together, and about enabling learning. We brought ideas from our different interests and she had an uncanny ability to enable us to put them together in a way that recognised both connections and complexity. In our writing, once we had mapped out our main ideas one of us would be at the computer, the other suggesting a starting point which we developed together. When we were confronted with difficulties, she could lead us on to practical and ethical solutions. I owe her enormously for the development of my thinking, feeling and learning, over a long period."

Marion Macalpine



"It was my good fortune to work with Sheila from the inception of the pioneering group venture called Continuous Learning. Being part of its multi-talented team remains one of the most fulfilling episodes of my working life to date. Of all Sheila's qualities, one stands out for me: the remarkable ability to make social change feel within our grasp. This wasn't a politician's soundbite; it was a message built on sharp intelligence, a steadfast commitment to social justice, and a compassionate way of leading – not from the front, but alongside us all. I never left a conversation with Sheila without feeling more enlightened, encouraged, or (if my pride had been dented) still able to smile at myself. What more could one ask for, other than to have benefitted even longer from her energy, wisdom, and dry sense of humour? I am deeply grateful for the ideas and ideals she generously shared with me, and for their lasting influence in my life."

Steve Cranfield

"She was great to work with. She led the master's programme a group of us ran for 10 years for managers in the NHS. It was a creative and collaborative endeavour but couldn't have been successful in the way it was without her talents in holding us together with her balanced and thoughtful approach, her tolerance of others' views while sticking firmly to her values of justice and equity and capacity to stay the course when under pressure. She had a steely core within a modest, non-ego driven approach and was able to welcome and incorporate new ideas that came along. Her balance enabled space to think and reflect before jumping to judgement."

Jud Stone

"I don't think anyone ever felt 'led' by Sheila. They felt listened to. They felt reassured. They felt empowered and emboldened. They felt motivated."

Marsaili Cameron



Engaging people, including the ever elusive 'public'

Many people, Sheila knew, find it very difficult to make their voices heard – or to believe that the effort is worthwhile. Over many years, she explored different ways of prompting and sustaining conversations within and across communities. Her work with Roma Iskander resulted in pioneering use of Open Space technology in the UK and abroad.

"This loss will be devastating for all who worked closely with Sheila, as well as for her family, community and wider society. A member of a group of inspirational women, Sheila will be someone who really shaped my conscience, ambition and commitment to decent public consultation."

Heather Richardson, St Christopher's Hospice

"Sheila lived to listen, because she knew intuitively that we are not all the same."

Suzanne Tyler

"Sheila helped propel the issue of violence against women and girls to become a frontline topic for Herefordshire and organised and chaired a highly successful open meeting to hold the public agencies to account for what they were doing."

Jacqui Molloy, Herefordshire Constituency Labour Party

"I think I met Sheila through Health Directions, that remarkable group of women consultants to the public sector. Through Health Directions and, later, PublicServiceWorks, Sheila and I worked with the UK government, various levels of local government, the NHS, charities, and NGOs and in academia. Sheila combined a remarkable range of intellectual and practical skills which enabled her to apply her formidable knowledge to the specific needs of all these systems and organisations and find solutions which worked for them. Her strategic brain, fused with her artistic and technological abilities and a consistently ethical approach in all areas of her life were unique in my experience."

Maria Duggan

Promoting health and wellbeing – and never forgetting inequalities

Sheila was an early adopter of the idea that health should not be separated from wellbeing – and that mental and physical health depend upon each other, both for carers and those cared for.

"After Sue was diagnosed with vascular dementia, Sheila supported her in her drive to protect her health. Sue took up running, then entered a half marathon. And from there, decided she wanted to take her fitness a step further and sign up to a marathon. Sheila was by Sue's side from the moment she signed up to run the 2018 London Marathon for Alzheimer's Research UK. At first it meant supporting Sue through her marathon training and fundraising. Then culminated in Sheila cheering her on around the streets of central London."

Hilary Evans-Newton, Chief Executive, Alzheimer's Research UK

"I was able to persuade Sheila to be a Trustee and eventually to chair the Trustee Board of Herefordshire Carers Support. Clearly it was a topic that she lived and she brought her own experience and empathy and combined it with her wisdom and analytical brain. She was an enormous support to me in leading the organisation, I knew she had my back."

Jacqui Molloy, Herefordshire Carers Support





Highlighting creativity

Open to experience at all levels and passionate about capturing and sharing it, Sheila took a highly creative approach to both life and work.

"For both Sheila and myself, one of the things about painting is that you look at things differently. You don't just glance at them and say – that's a tree. You really notice where you are and what you're looking at, and the aesthetics of it; and you notice shapes and colours and how to translate them on to a page. On our painting expeditions, I would usually take photos; but, when she could, Sheila would go back to the real thing."

Roma Iskander

"With Sheila there were always interesting conversations about art, literature, politics and football – all the important things in life. In work, this effortless ability to put people at their ease meant she could offer challenge, encouraging our clients to find their solutions and always keeping them focussed on who and what is really important. Putting users/patients/carers at the centre, wasn't a strapline for Sheila, it was heartfelt and true; but not earnest and po-faced, because Sheila laughed and smiled a lot and that too was infectious."

Suzanne Tyler



"Sheila's contributions to the Resi/Dance project were truly invaluable. I particularly remember how her video presentation of the Resi/Dance Final Evaluation brought the report to life. Her passion and dedication were evident, and she uniquely connected with the audience, making complex findings accessible and engaging. This presentation will remain a testament to her talent and commitment."
Duncan Bedson, Dance United Yorkshire

"On one occasion I arranged for her to come and work with me in Australia, and she accompanied Maureen, my partner, and me to the Outback where we took a memorable, silent, predawn walk around Uluru, a site sacred to the Aborigines. I have a vivid memory of Sheila walking ahead of me as the sun rose over the rock, walking persistently and serenely despite the flies, the heat, and the arrival of the tourist buses."
Maria Duggan

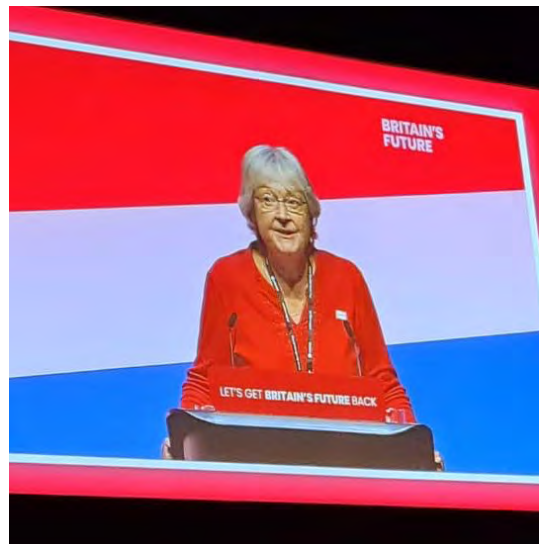


Living multi-level politics

As advocated in second wave feminism, the personal was indeed the political with Sheila – and vice versa.

"Sheila always had the right words, and this also showed itself in the work she did with the Labour Party as we relied on her as wordsmith to draft the two motions that we put forward to the Annual Conference – we await the outcome of the second (for this year's Conference) but the first was accepted. She campaigned hard for the past election and spent many hours traipsing around the villages making as many people as possible aware that the Party was a serious contender. She had been the Policy Officer for the Constituency Labour Party and recently volunteered to take on the Treasurer's role. She is going to be so missed, how she calmly and kindly put her views across, mixed with thought-through rationale and evidence for what she stood for."

Jacqui Molloy, Herefordshire Constituency Labour Party





"The incredible support Sue and Sheila gave to Alzheimer's Research UK has seen them raise tens of thousands of pounds for research, as well as raising much-needed awareness. Sheila not only kept Sue in check – as Sue would often joke – but she also used her voice to represent those impacted by dementia across the UK. Her fighting spirit was reflected in the way she fiercely campaigned to improve the lives of those around her. She was passionate about raising awareness of the cause and showing that everyone experiences the condition differently. She also represented the interests of carers and loved ones of those living with dementia."



"Sheila's tireless efforts were recently marked by her becoming an Ambassador for Alzheimer's Research UK alongside Sue, and she was looking forward to using her role to further the charity's cause. The charity is so very grateful for everything Sheila did during her time supporting the cause and her legacy will live on in so many different areas of its work."
Hilary Evans-Newton, Chief Executive, Alzheimer's Research UK



Paintings by Sheila
(top to bottom; left to right)

- Sunset light
- Bathers in the Wye
- One tree, four seasons
- Sudden storm
- River Findhorn, Moray