Deb Winter (Storyteller)

Could you tell us a little bit about yourself / what life was like before you got involved in the project?

I've been in Wales for 11 years, and Pembrokeshire because my auntie had a farm here. So as a child, it was happy farm holidays all the time, so I was keen to get back. I started storytelling 12 years ago having had a pretty heavy-duty role in the voluntary sector, which is why it's good to have linked with People Speak Up. I had a 40-year career in the voluntary sector – I have a background in working with lots of different organisations. I enjoyed the communication aspect of the work: working with volunteers and service users who'd been crushed in some way – helping people with their communication skills and confidence building. I loved that side of it, helping people with being able to tell their stories. Then when I was 50, I discovered this thing called storytelling! Martin Maudsley telling Weyland the Smith with Ailsa on the cello. I rushed up to him and asked, "what is this and how can I get into it?" and he told me to just watch as many storytellers as I can and tell to as many different audiences. I won the Bristol Story slam a couple of years after starting which launched me, really, so I think I've put my 10,000 hours in now. So, I suppose I've got 2 sides – the creation for the joy of it, the artistic side of it, but then I felt I kept getting drawn back into storytelling for mental health and wellbeing because I have the skillset.

How did you get involved in the project, what did you hope might happen as a result of getting involved?

When Eleanor and I started the joint project (PSU and Fishguard Storytelling) we were looking for some funding stream to tap into because we wanted to expand PSUs input into Pembrokeshire. So, I'll answer with my bid writer's hat on: We attract people from across the county, which is why we're called Straeon Sir Benfro, I wanted to expand the work we were doing – I trust People Speak Up as partners. Our values, our ethos, our approach to diversity, and a sort of informality in working, with real meetings where people can, you know, bring their dogs in! That style I appreciate – there's a simplicity and honesty to it. We're a small organisation, so marrying the larger policy and safeguarding background of PSU really makes it a good marriage. We could have carried on with 6 or 7 events a year, but with PSU, we could expand the offering across the county, for the benefit of the people of Pembrokeshire. There's lots of people who

could benefit from this, and PSU have a relationship with referring bodies, where we have the local knowledge.

What do you think has been the most significant change?

Being able to be paid for the time I was putting into running Straeon Sir Benfro has been the biggest change for me in practical terms: I was about to pack in, unable to afford to put so much voluntary time in due to austerity and the cost of living rising, so this has enable the group to continue. We've also expanded our reach, in going up to Dinas Cross and Newport and down to St Davids and over to South Pembs, because it has been quite Fishguard-based until now. We've been able to work in different venues, which has improved our knowledge beyond Fishguard. Kitty is always really keen to listen to stories, so I take whatever I'm working on. She gives great feedback too, and she writes, so she can bring me stories! I dress up, because she enjoys that. With another client, she shares her own creative things, so I listened to a play she wrote for 2 hours. It was very good, and she wanted critical feedback. With my writing background, I think she found it valuable. But there's so much in value with her work – a lot to celebrate! It's about being sensitive to a person's needs – do they want entertainment, or to be listened to. It's about being empathic. And it's creative too because, well, not many of my sessions have had anyone with any ambition to be storytellers themselves, but it's about bringing the power of story to them. With workshops I'm developing people's storytelling skills, but these sessions haven't often had anyone who are in a time in their life where they want to do that. During the pandemic there was a lot of practical help – do you need anyone to pick up your prescriptions, get your shopping – and that looked after the body, but didn't do anything for the soul. That's the value of this kind of creative project.

If you were to tell other people about People Speak Up & Straeon Sir Benfro, what would you say?

A really caring organisation that understands the power of the arts to change lives, and very inclusive and down-to-earth. Very kind, and approachable. I have a lot of time for Eleanor and the whole team. We're a small but equal partner too. (Straeon Sir Benfro are a) Very friendly and open to all. We say at events "welcome to the storytelling family" and that's the ethos. What people comment on is that they really missed it when we didn't put things on during the pandemic. Whenever I'd bump into people in Fishguard they'd ask, "when are you putting it on again, we really missed it", and I know they really appreciate, not just the quality of the tellers we invite in, but they really appreciate how inclusive it is – the floor spots available to all. We purposely set it up with a half hour interval where people can mingle and are always greeted and introduced to each other.

What title would you give your story?

I'm going to use a terrible cliché but "We're Stronger Together". It's what the project is all about, from the partnership with PSU, to the work we've all done.