Hedydd Hughes (Storyteller)

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

Oh, well! We're sitting in Fishguard, and this is my little village. Though I haven't lived here since 1987 when I got married. My parents were born up the road, and I have family here, so this is the place I come back to—I'm a Fishguard girl! I try to keep the local dialect, and local history is important to me. I'm someone who quite likes being active in the local community—I've never gone for a seat on the council, and I don't want to be mayor—but things like language and history are important to me. As a mother, it made more sense to be a teacher than to work in a bank, so after I got married, I retrained as a teacher. I see my work as a teacher as something I've done as much as I want with a class of 30 kids! I'm looking for something else, to be of help in the community by doing some of the things that matter to me—language and local history.

One day I thought, "Wow, I can see my full-time work with young kids coming to an end—it drains you!— I wonder if I can do what people who tell stories to adults do?" I have to stand up in the chapel and speak publicly, so this was a way to improve those skills. People sometimes ask, "Would you be willing to come and talk to our group?" and I think, well, I don't have a history degree, I can't pretend to be a historian, but telling local stories, the ones that inspire me, in an interesting way is a craft. I remember listening to T. Llew Jones when I was a young child, among others, and that was the first experience I had of a good storyteller, and that's what drew me in.

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

I knew there were plenty of people tied to their homes, or in situations where they'd lost their driving license for instance, or their relatives lived too far away, and they were losing contact with the community. I was glad for the opportunity when People Speak Up suggested I could bring people together, because I saw it as easier to reach a larger number of people this way than visiting them at home. I could hold sessions with an open and welcoming atmosphere where people had the chance to talk and engage with the topics discussed. It's sad that people feel trapped in their homes.

We wanted somewhere central, and a place where people knew they'd be welcomed and could enjoy themselves. There's a strong maritime heritage in Dinas Cross village, and maybe that was

part of the reason for the choice. Mainly, there are a lot of retired people there. They're used to being very active in the community but have lost the ability to socialize in the community now. There's a sadness in that, isn't there?

What do you think has been the most significant change?

It's given me confidence that I can go out and organize something, and that people have accepted it, enjoyed it, and are asking for more. I'd love to be able to continue in the future. People turn up in their own time —no need to worry about being late—it's super informal! Those with greater needs due to their age get to choose where they sit. We then settle in, and gradually people start socializing. At some point, a hush falls, and I start telling stories. Sometimes just a couple of short stories during the session, but there's time between stories to discuss or have a cuppa—no pressure, because it's important for them (the participants) to have the chance to talk to each other and share their own personal stories too.

When you consider the age of the participants—94, 96, 89, 89—I don't want a group that's too big because I know hearing challenges make them dislike large groups. The project was designed for them, after all. One participant in a wheelchair only came to one session—maybe they would've liked a session at their own home. But there you go, I've learned from the experience, and if there's a chance to continue, that's something I'd like to look into: he's physically frail, but his mind is sharp as anything!

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

I heard about them two years ago, but I don't remember where! They've been easy to deal with. I know they're looking to expand their work in Pembrokeshire—their base is in Carmarthenshire—PSU is totally inclusive, wanting to give everyone a chance. It's great that they post on Facebook, which is a lot of help for someone like me who feels quite remote and has a bit to learn.

What title would you give your story?

Diolch am y cyfle/ Thanks for the opportunity