



Trailblazing Women: Cat Fletcher



TRAILBLAZERS: World War One's Inspirational Women

Location: Brighton and Hove

Occupation: Recycling pioneer. Co-founder of Freegle UK re-use and recycling organisation. Re-Use Manager, Brighton and Hove City Council, Brighton and Hove.

Why are they a Trailblazer?

Arriving in Britain from Australia for the first time, aged 29, Cat was “horrified” that there was no kerbside recycling, so she took matters into her own hands and drove around Brighton in her car picking up empty bottles and cans from her friends each week. In 2009 she co-founded Freegle, an organisation dedicated to increasing re-using and recycling by offering a free internet-based service where people can give things away as well as ask for things. Cat was also one of the key drivers behind the Brighton Waste House, Europe’s first permanent public building made almost entirely from material thrown away or not wanted. She is currently the Re-Use Manager for Brighton and Hove City Council which involves finding new homes for equipment and furniture.

What impact have they made on their community?

Brighton and Hove Freegle has almost 30,000 members. In March 2019 it was estimated that 5,321 kilos of unwanted items were given new homes via the site – that’s almost five and a half tons of waste saved from landfill. As Re-Use Manager for Brighton and Hove City Council, Cat helps the council to find new homes for furniture and equipment. In 2016 she oversaw the City Re-Use Project which masterminded the move of a 1000 staff from the Kings House site, finding ways to redistribute and re-use thousands of items – from office furniture to kitchen equipment - from the 100,000 square feet of office space. Over 300 charities, community groups, schools and hospitals benefited, and some of the innovative re-use ideas included filing cabinets becoming planters, trays being turned into sunglasses and a ceiling created entirely by ring-binders. This led to the council being awarded the National Recycling Award in 2018 and finding international recognition by being shortlisted for the EUROCITIES awards, which recognise outstanding

activities or practices that improve the quality of life for citizens. By championing recycling and re-use, Cat makes us think twice about what we throw away. As a person who gets her hands dirty and gets involved – as she says ‘I am kind of the real deal. I get my hands dirty and do it’ – she shows us that we can all do our bit to making our community more sustainable.

What connections are there between Cat and the Trailblazers of World War One?

Cat’s work could be seen as harking back to the work of thousands of ordinary women during the First World War. Often running the home single-handedly with breadwinning male partners away fighting, and against soaring prices and dwindling resources, the First World War woman had to live by the phrase ‘waste not want not’. As a result, re-using and recycling becoming second nature. Using old toothbrushes for household cleaning, making fire briquettes out of waste coal dust, unpicking woollen garments to make clothes are just a few of the examples of the ways women helped their families and communities to survive and keep the home-front strong. During the Second World War the government tapped into this instinct with its ‘Make Do and Mend’ campaign.

How do they inspire your class to be Trailblazers of the future?

Cat had a good idea and, even though she was considered unusual at the time for picking up friends’ bottles to recycle, she stuck with her beliefs and converted many people to the idea of recycling and re-using.



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