

News

Doris Thorne (1941 – 2011)

Doris Thorne, who died on 3rd September 2011, aged 70, worked with members of the SHLD group to tell her life story ('Goodbye All the Nurses') and to recall her songs of resistance from her institutional days. The obituary is by her friend and advocate, Jane Pettingell.



Obituary

Doris Thorne was an extraordinary woman who lived an extraordinary life. Her life was made extraordinary by circumstances and by dint of her own personality and spirit – she was a very likeable person with a smile that lit up her face.

She was born Doris Patricia Thorne in Croydon on 16th May 1941, the 8th of a large family of children. It is known that seven of the siblings including Doris were admitted to institutions. Doris talked about her childhood at home but the records show she was probably in care from the age of 18 months and spent most of her childhood in children's homes. Aged just 10 years old she moved from Croydon to Birmingham to St Francis Residential School; it was probably here that she learned to read and, I suspect, it was here where she learned her impeccable manners which were to stand her in good stead throughout her life.

Doris was admitted to St Ebba's Hospital in 1955 for observation and later that year was moved to St Lawrence's Hospital and admitted under section 6 of the Mental Deficiency Act. She was discharged from that order in 1962 but remained at St Lawrence's. In 1964 whilst still resident at St Lawrence's she started work at a sweet factory in Croydon. Between 1966 and 1985 Doris was discharged and readmitted to St Lawrence's up to seven times and during that

time she had several jobs and lived with a number of different people some of whom she maintained contact with.

Following what was to be her last discharge from the long stay hospital Doris found herself in a hostel in Croydon and reacquainted herself with two old friends from St Lawrence's Gloria and Mabel. Gloria and Mabel introduced her to Isabel and Doris eventually moved into Foxley Lane and formed a strong and enduring bond with Isabel and Isabel's family. It was while she was at Foxley Lane that I met Doris. From Foxley Lane Doris moved to Russell Hill and from there to The Grange. Moving to The Grange and having her own flat was a huge step for Doris and it meant such a lot to her to have the key to her own front door. She was tremendously house proud and kept the flat spotlessly clean and impossibly tidy. Last Christmas she was welcomed into Heatherwood Nursing Home where she was cared for until she died.

It was Doris who was able to make her life special by her determination to make her own way in the world, be her own person and to connect with other people. Doris was not a saint but she was as generous and loving as she was impossible and exasperating. She rewarded those she liked with her generosity showering us with her love and her gifts. She remembered our birthdays and loved to send Isabel flowers on mother's day. If she bought you a card she had spent hours choosing it reading the words in countless cards until she found the one that expressed the right sentiment for you. She has been known to spend so long choosing the right card that she was asked to leave a shop so that they could lock up – any card you got from Doris was chosen very especially just for you. She sent Christmas cards good and early and always sent postcards and brought back gifts from her holidays. She also liked to receive cards and gifts.

Doris had a great sense of humour and a wicked laugh. Doris liked to smoke, and to drink a nice cold pint of lager. She liked to spend money both on herself and on other people. She loved to be helpful and was happy to work and to be asked to do jobs. Contrary to the impression she often gave, Doris liked to eat. She was a sociable person and liked to go out for a curry with friends or for a pub lunch or to sit around the table and enjoy a meal in the home of friends. She loved to go to Brighton and enjoyed her annual holidays with The Rangers. She liked to come to church.

Doris was determined to reach the milestone of her 70th birthday and some of us were able to join her in May this year to celebrate the occasion albeit that it had to be a quiet party as it was held in a hospital ward.

Doris has written her life story from her own perspective. Although she was proud of this achievement I am not sure that she was fully aware of how important her telling her story has been. I recently heard from Professor Dorothy Atkinson, who helped Doris and others to tell their stories. She said: "Doris' story has featured in Open University Courses as a means of teaching present day students about past practices and how they impacted on people's lives – and teaching the importance of giving people a voice. This is a wonderful legacy from Doris who was brave enough to tell her story – it is influencing tens of thousands of people in their everyday practice. She was a model of resilience against oppressive forces – and her songs of resistance show her at her indomitable best." Doris' songs of resistance were, according to her, composed at times when she was secluded from other people, sometimes in a padded cell. The last line of one of the songs reads 'Goodbye all the nurses and jolly good riddance to you' and her life story is appropriately entitled 'Goodbye All the Nurses'.

Over 70 years Doris has touched many lives and, in the spirit of true friendship, has given as well as taken. She has been a teacher of patience and kindness and unconditional love. Her legacy is her own story of her unusual life and, that she leaves behind people that are the better for having known her and who will remember her fondly and talk about her often.

Jane Pettingell

Friend and Advocate

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