THIS WAS
TOMORROW

JUDE TISDALE

Resident at New Ground

In conversation with Enrico Policardo
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01 Who are you and what do you do here?

My name is Jude Tisdale. I live at New Ground in Barnet, in a two-bedroom flat - we have one, two and three-bedroom flats here. And what do I do here? A lot, actually. I'm very involved in this community. I run the communications group - everything from enquiries about how we did this to interviews for the press. I'm on the buildings team, which is a big team to be on, because we keep the communal areas going ourselves. And I'm on the management committee. I didn't think I'd be doing this kind of thing in my later years, but it's fantastic.

02 How did you end up here?

By pure chance. I wasn't one of the women who were involved over the years - and one of the things about New Ground is that the social architecture of the place matters as much as the buildings. The women created a community, and I wasn't part of that.

About eight months before they took possession of the site, there was a programme on Radio 4 about New Ground. They had one space left, because a woman who'd planned to move in had dropped out. Quite a few people responded, because they'd made it sound wonderful. So I went along with other people to hear Maria Brenton talk about it, and I just thought: God, these are strong women. This is what I'd like in my later life - to be around women who are committed to a way of living. I put in an application, I was invited for an interview, and I was offered the last flat.

And I did it on the spur of the moment. I was driving with my sister, and my phone went. We sound the same - we've both got what's left of an Irish accent after many years away from Ireland. I said, don't pick it up, I don't want to make a decision about this, it's only been a week since it came into my head.

She picked it up: hello, yes, oh thank you so much, I'm really interested, I'll get back to you tomorrow. I said, you've committed me to something! She said, just take the chance - you're looking for something new. Kids grow up, careers change. I was in my mid-sixties.

I've been the kind of person in my life where I'll do things. If they work, they work. If they don't, I change them. So I thought, let's do it. By the end of that week I'd been offered over the asking price for my place, so I thought, this is a sign. I hadn't even seen this place. My brothers said, are you crazy? You're going to live with women? You want to become a nun or something? I said, I have no idea what I'm doing, but it'll be fine.

I've moved around a lot. London has been my base since my early twenties, but I've gone to different places and come back. I've never stayed anywhere more than about seven years. So I came here thinking, if I don't like it, I'll move. And ten years later, it's been the best thing that ever happened to me. I moved in and didn't even know everybody's name. But I just embraced it.

03 What was your life like before?

[…] In Crouch End we met some people, and there were two houses for sale. We bought them between us and turned them into four flats. I remember we knocked down the fence between the gardens - we had these great parties while my daughter was growing up.

Then I moved to Devon for a while, because I had a dream of living by the sea. Friends of mine had moved down that way. I was down with them one weekend, we'd gone for lunch and had too much wine, I think, and I saw a house and thought, I'm going to buy it. Within two months I was down there. I didn't even do a survey - my God, it was a nightmare. But I don't regret it, because I got it out of my system. All the things that annoyed me about

London by then - at a crossroads somebody would come out with a rag and put dirty water all down your car. When I came back I thought: these are my people. Dirty my car, I don't care. I'm home. I'm an urban person.

04 Has work been a big part of your life?

Oh yes. I loved my work. I've fallen into so many things in my life, and I've been very fortunate. I started doing part-time work at a theatre school when my daughter was young, and I ended up deputy principal. Later in life I trained in the Alexander Technique, so I was on the teaching faculty as well. My background is English, but I've always loved theatre. That was about twenty-odd years of my working life.

At about 50 I decided I didn't want to work full-time any more. I loved that environment, but I thought, I could stay here till I'm 65, and then what do I do with my life? So I left and went freelance - some directing, Alexander Technique work. I travelled to Los Angeles and New York, but based here. It was probably financial suicide at the time - my brothers said, how are you going to survive without an income? But I jumped into it. I still get involved: I mentor new graduates going into the field, voluntarily. My daughter once said to me, you won the lottery of life when you chose the kind of work you did.

[…] Somewhere in the back of my mind I'd been thinking: I've got to let them go. How do I want to live as I grow old? And this opportunity came up. It all dovetailed.

05 What's great about being here, and what's hard?

When I first moved in, I wasn't part of the social fabric, and I'm quite a private person. I'm very outgoing, but I need private time to be able to do that. So the challenge in the beginning was huge: the balance between

privacy and community. I was very protective of friends and family coming in. That's softened over the years. Now everybody knows my family. My brother was here from Canada last week and people know him already. And I know everybody's family. So it's not just us - it's all our outside lives. What was a negative for me in the beginning has become a positive.

I know that if something dreadful happens to me, my family will have this community to support them. And if I become ill, they don't have to worry about me day to day. I was the sandwich generation - my daughter on one side, worrying about my parents on the other. They'll go through the emotional side of it, of course, but they'll never have to come and look after me in that way. That's very important to me: that they always have me as somebody they want to be with and have fun with, not, oh God, we've got to go and eat cake with the old bat this Sunday.

And I like being connected. Belonging. I never realised how much I needed it until I got older. As Anne said, it's like having relationships with 25 other people. In my flat everything's my choice - orange walls or white. But the communal areas we have to agree on, and I have a very clear idea of what I want, so sometimes I have to pull back. Like Hilary said, you choose your battles.

06 Do you feel responsible for this place's future?

I don't mind it at all. I can take lots on, and I'm also good at saying enough. The woman who started all this, Shirley Meredeen, saw that once I get into something I'm very passionate and I keep going. She said, you and the others have got to make this place work going forward. And that's not easy.

I think the next generation of women will find it harder. Many women who moved in here already had family homes - they'd been through the time when mortgages were available, they had equity. My daughter's coming up to 50

and she doesn't have the equity I had at 50, because it's so hard to pay rent and save. People are having children later, so they still have big commitments at 50. So we worked on mortgages - places like this used to be hard to get mortgages for, and UK Cohousing worked on this as well. Now people can get maybe 50% mortgages where they couldn't before, and that can be enough. That was a big thing for the future. And we do a lot of talking to different communities: getting people to think gently, earlier on, about how they want to live, so they can live that way. Like pensions - when you're young you close your ears and think it'll be all right.

07 Is this the future you were dreaming of?

I had no idea what my future was going to be. I never had a dream. I just trusted things and got on with it. I was always so busy living a life. But being here now, ten years on - if I'd had a dream, this would be as near to it as I could have dreamt. That's why I think it's important for young people to start thinking about this. I fell into it easily. It won't be like that for other people.

08 What would you tell people who want to start a version of this?

Have a sense of how you want to live in the future, and build a social network around it. Make plans with like-minded people, so there's a possibility. Start talking about it when you're younger. We had a photographer from the Times here yesterday, a woman in her forties with children: this is what I want in the future! Anyone who comes in here in their thirties or forties says that - even with their partners. I always think, the poor partners are waiting for a knife in the back so the women can move in.

We're living longer. Even if you stop the job that gave you most of your money at 60, you might have another 35 years. […] So have a whole new life in place for yourself, because it is the sweetest part of your life. I wish I'd

known when I was younger how wonderful it is just to sit and watch the buds come out in spring, and take time to nourish that. You don't, because you're working on relationships and children and careers. So embrace it and love it, but be prepared for it. Even with all the challenges of this world, which are huge at the moment, there are still things that feed your soul.

09 How does the place actually run?

We manage this really well. We have ownership of it, which is really important - we're answerable to ourselves. It's our home, but to make it sustainable it has to be run like a business. We have a management committee, a finance team, a buildings team, a communications team - everybody's involved with something, to the best of their skills, or you learn. We set our own service charges. One of the first things we did when we moved in was a ten-year maintenance plan, so the service charge covers compliance and upkeep, and also puts money into a reserve fund. We have to leave this ready for the next generation. You have to commit to making it work, and that takes time and effort. You don't get here and say, oh, it's done now. The real work starts when you get here.

10 And getting here in the first place?

We were so fortunate - it hasn't happened again. A housing association forward-funded the whole thing, and we bought it back from them when it was done. They got a site finder, because we'd been let down on so many sites. The Tudor Trust gave us £1.2 million towards the social flats, which was very important, because the women who started it were social activists. They didn't want an enclave for women with money. So one third of our flats are social flats, and every woman here, social or leasehold, has an equal say in everything. It's not like some developments where the social housing goes in round the back and your children aren't allowed in the playground. When I moved in I didn't know which flats were which, and it didn't matter.

I've learned so much from the women here, because we share an ethos but come from such varied backgrounds: Irish, Scottish, Welsh, Austrian, Iranian, South African. Some left school at 14, some have doctorates. Some are on housing benefit, some are very well off. Atheist, Christian, Jewish. And I've learned tolerance. I always thought I was tolerant - my daughter would roll her eyes at that. But here I've had to learn to step back and consider other people. That's been a learning curve, and a wonderful one.

I hate saying it, because I'm a woman of 75 and I'm privileged to live here. But I think what we've done shows there's a possibility of choice. It's not easy, but you can create the life you want. I didn't realise I was creating the future I wanted, but now I've got it, it's exactly what I needed. I was talking to my granddaughter last night and she said, I'm so proud of you, Nan. You're a beacon. Of course I started crying.

People come off the Tube, up a nice little high street, an ordinary street, and they open the door and come in here, and there's something so calming about this place. It gives you time to think. I didn't know I wanted it. I didn't know I needed it. But I have it.

This Was Tomorrow – Is This the Future We Were Dreaming Of?
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