

RICHARD ROBINSON:

***‘CHARITY
WORK IS
REWARDING
...AND EYE-
OPENING’***



The CEO of elder abuse charity Hourglass tells Danielle Lett about the challenges the sector faces... but also how much he gets out of supporting and helping others at their time of need

Some people are inherently altruistic, and born with a strong desire to help others. This can certainly be said about Richard Robinson.

The current CEO of Suffolk-based national charity Hourglass, Richard works tirelessly to help raise awareness of and stamp out abuse of older people.

Both hardworking and caring, Richard loves what he does, and puts his all into it.

Originally from Bletchley, he moved to Suffolk when he was a child in 1978. He attended Hadleigh High School and Ipswich's Chantry Sixth Form before studying journalism at the University for the Creative Arts.

Upon graduating, Richard recalls that his first graduate job was working as a press officer for Suffolk County Council, an experience which he describes as 'a real eye-opener when he saw the relationship between a local authority and the media.

"Back in those days, there were only two of us in the press office for the whole of Suffolk, and it was a really interesting job," he says.

"I also worked in Northern Ireland where I came face-to-face with some of the political issues that faced the country at the time. I'd say I had a good grounding in journalism, public affairs and politics from a pretty early stage in my career."

Explaining what drew him towards the charity sector, Richard says: "I had a job at Otley College in the early 2000s, and they were funding for a food skills centre. It was to be the first of its kind in agriculture, and I got roped into some of the fundraising.

"That whole experience really threw me into charity work, and it wasn't too long before I was raising significant funds for Gainsborough's House in Sudbury."

Richard managed to raise over £1m for the renovation of Weaver's Cottage and garden, which was subsequently turned into an education centre and café.

With an appetite for the charity sector, it wasn't long before he became the director of fundraising for the East Anglian Air Ambulance, overseeing Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire, alongside parts of south Lincolnshire and Peterborough.

However, he eventually had to leave the role due to a period of ill health.

"I didn't want to leave - I loved

it," he says.

"But when I recovered, I wanted a new challenge. So I took on a role working for an international development in India, and it was during that period where I reassessed what I wanted from life. That eventually led to me to applying for a job as director of development at what ended up becoming the Olympic Park charity in the run up to the 2012 London Olympics."

Richard was in that role for a total period for five years, and it didn't take him long to be offered the role of chief executive. "It was a fantastic period of time. We had to raise huge amounts of funds for the regeneration of East London during the Olympics. This included arts, dance, and creative projects, as well as capital projects. I worked closely with the Mayor of London at that time, and it gave me a lot of profile because of who I was working with at that time."

Fast forward to 2018, and Richard fancied a change of pace - and something closer to home.

"2018 was a difficult year for me. Both of my parents were unwell and lived with me for a period of time. I had to give up work to look after mum and dad. I was a carer for them for 18 months, which is what essentially spurred me to apply for the role of chief executive of what was then Action on Elder Abuse.

"Action on Elder Abuse (now Hourglass) has been around since 1993, and seeing my dad struggling in hospice, with a lack of carers and trained staff, as well as a lack of understanding of his condition led to me applying for that job."

Today, Richard is the CEO of Hourglass - and working so closely to help tackle abuse of older people has really opened his eyes to the struggles the older generation faces.

Elder abuse is the abuse of someone over the age of 65, and comes in many forms including psychological, physical, emotional, financial or sexual.

"Every year, 2.5 million people are affected by abuse of older people, and we get around 15,000 calls a year. We're a UK-based charity, even though we're based in Sudbury, and have people working for us across England, Scotland, Wales,

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ABOVE: Richard Robinson, CEO of Hourglass



LEFT: Richard Robinson and his mum Jean, whom he cares for

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and Northern Ireland,” he explains.

One of the biggest tasks he faces on a regular basis is tackling myths surrounding abuse.

“Most people would’ve watched Panorama, where they uncover cases of abuse against older people and the vulnerable by carers in care homes and mental health institutions. And while it’s shocking, the majority of cases we see are actually familial abuse – in other words, abuse committed by a family member.

“Sixty per cent of the calls we receive is abuse caused by someone’s son, daughter, nephew, niece, or even their partner. And the saddest thing is that the majority of our cases ultimately lead to death.”

Keeping an eye out for abuse of older people is important – but what are the signs?

“The signs aren’t always obvious. You may see it from a financial perspective, where someone in your family has money they didn’t have before, or an older relative is withdrawn or confused or concerned about money suddenly. Another high risk factor is when an older person has family move in suddenly. That doesn’t mean that’s always the case – the majority of people are trustworthy – but the problem is that so few people are aware of Hourglass’ existence so they wouldn’t know where to turn to if they suspect abuse.

“We work closely with safeguarding services across every county and nation, and we try to ensure that we follow something that we call ‘the safer ageing journey’, so people can age safely and independently in their own environment. When we can, we try to use the term ‘safer ageing’ rather elder abuse, so we’re not just talking about victims or survivors, we’re talking about education and prevention.”

Hourglass has a 24/7 hotline, an app, a chatbot, and a free and confidential SMS service, as well as caseworkers across the UK who build tailored plans for victims of abuse.

“There are many ways people can get in touch if they have concerns. We also lobby the government and the four parliaments of the UK for legislative change to protect older people. We’ve written an open letter to the Prime Minister and we’ve asked politicians of all political persuasions to help provide better funding for older people who are at risk of abuse. As things stand, we’ve received over 200 political parliamentary signatures.”

Richard is in the middle of launching the ‘Every Victim Equal’ campaign, which he says will help the government try and understand that everyone deserves the same care when they’re a victim survivor – whether they’re young or old, male or female, regardless of their background or orientation.

“We’ll be working hard to try and campaign for a level playing field for older victims of abuse. We’re also working on the Safer Ageing Index, which will be a

ranked index showing where it’s safest to grow old in the UK by county, and hopefully constituency too.

“In this part of East Anglia, there are higher populations of older people, so we want to continue working closely with Suffolk County Council to see what services we can build to ensure that older people can grow old safely in Suffolk and surrounding counties.”

However, to continue doing the work he does, Richard needs funding – and his sector unfortunately remains incredibly underfunded.

“To put it into perspective, one of the biggest child abuse charities in the UK receives £14m worth of government funding a year. One of the biggest animal abuse charities receives £5m per year from the government. Meanwhile we’re the UK’s only elder abuse charity and we receive less than £300,000 per year.

“It’s astonishing that we as a charity are so underfunded, especially as there is undoubtedly an epidemic of abuse. Case numbers were at 4,000 between 2017-18, but it’s now hit the 15,000. I think a lot of that is due to the pressure cooker environment we saw during the pandemic. That, paired with the current economic situation where children are sadly looking to their parents for funding and in not a very nice way.”

Reflecting on his position, Richard describes it as “rewarding but eye-opening.”

“It’s the most challenging role I’ve had had, due to the horrific imbalance around funding, and it saddens me that people don’t understand how horrid the abuse older people face really is. This job has lovely volunteers, and a fantastic and committed team, but it can be a real challenge.”

When he’s not putting all of his efforts into Hourglass and helping others, Richard winds down by getting creative, or getting out on the pitch.

“I’ve just written a book, which is due out this April. When my father died in October 2020, I just wanted something to focus on that wasn’t work, and I had half an idea for a story I wanted to write.”

Entitled *Topaz*, Richard’s debut novel is a spy fiction thriller set in Northern Ireland in the 90s.

“It focusses on a young communications expert who finds himself involved in international espionage as he weaves between coming-of-age and a new career while getting involved in dangerous challenges amid harsh political realities. It’s been a rollercoaster journey and I’m now in the midst of continuing with book two.

“I also run a men’s football team called Boxford Rovers, which I’ve done so for many years. It’s an Essex-Suffolk Border League team, and it’s a great way to take my mind off such a challenging role.”

To find out more about Richard and the work he does, visit wearehourglass.org