

Maureen  
Reynels  
Picture:  
CHARLOTTE  
BOND



Danielle Lett chats with the inspirational philanthropist and founder of FIND Ipswich about the power of giving

# MAUREEN REYNELS MBE: *'The generosity of people is incredible'*

**W**hen Maureen Reynels was growing up, never did she imagine how much of an impact she'd have on her community.

Maureen has spent much of her life in East Anglia, and three decades ago set up FIND Ipswich - a local charity which supports all those in need, regardless of faith or circumstance. Maureen is, inarguably, one of Suffolk's kindest and most philanthropic individuals, with a heart of gold.

But life hasn't always been so easy for her. "My mum died when I was 11, and when we were 12, dad moved us to Stowmarket," she explains.

Shortly after, she made the move to Norwich and lived with one of her sisters.

"I'm the youngest of seven children, and because life wasn't nice with my father and stepmum, I moved to Norwich to be with my sister who was married and had children."

Fast forward to adulthood, and Maureen returned to Ipswich, throwing herself into a life of caring for others and philanthropy. "By this point, I'd been fostering for 17 years. I was also a youth leader at my local church, and had a very busy life as I was also involved with the homeless families unit in Ipswich, where I did fundraising.

"And as part of my youth work I coordinated a youth-orientated restaurant as part of the Christmas Cracker Project. The idea of the restaurant was to raise money to go overseas to bore wells for people to have fresh water."

While working, Maureen would take the leftover food from the restaurant at the end of every shift and donate anything spare to the local women's refuge and homeless families unit.

"But when the restaurant ended at the start of January, I knew I had to carry on caring for people."

FIND Ipswich was founded by kind-hearted Maureen in 1990.

FIND - which stands for Families In Need - is a registered charity and helps those that are deprived of a minimum standard of living, whether they are single, families, lone parents, children, elderly, sick, disabled or homeless.

It does this by organising, delivering and sorting food parcels; as well as providing people with household objects and essentials in their time of need.

"When people left the homeless families unit, they'd be given somewhere to live but quite often had no furniture and nothing to sleep on. So I spent my time going around and gathering all these essential items such as pots and pans, and clothing for those who needed them."

Maureen spent the first three years doing all of this by herself before expanding and bringing in a team of volunteers to help.

"Social services then started using FIND, word got around and everything eventually got bigger. I had to acquire a van to move things, and needed trustees and a

charity number. I originally decided, because there was a recession on, I'd do that for three years then get on with my life but it hasn't worked out that way at all. I felt it was my calling to continue what I was doing, and that's what I've done."

Thirty-two years later Maureen remains tirelessly dedicated to her charity work, ensuring no one goes hungry, without something to open at Christmas, or a bed to sleep in. "I make sure food and gifts have gone out every year at Christmas, but one of my main missions is to make sure that every child has its own bed, as a place of safety," she says.

"I always wanted to know that every child is fed before going to school. You hear politicians talking about it, but I've been saying for years that every child must be fed in order to learn. Otherwise, they're sat at the back of the class and they're not able to attain what they're capable of."

Since setting up FIND, Maureen and her team have helped thousands of people - and she shows no signs of stopping.

"FIND has reached so many people over the years, and a lot of people get the help they need but don't actually realise where it's come from. Not all social services say where it's come from, so there's a lot of people who don't realise what we do. But I do get feedback and it's lovely. There's third generation families who I've helped, and I have people phoning me to say that without FIND they'd be stuck. What we do is so diverse, and if there's a genuine need, it's got to be sorted, and I'll pull out all the stops."

In 2009, Maureen was recognised for her altruism and hard work with an MBE.

"I thought it was a windup when I got the letter," she chuckles.

"But because it said you can't tell anyone, I didn't say anything - even to my husband. He didn't find out until it was officially announced. It was all a bit surreal really, I didn't feel like I deserved it. But it was a lovely day at the palace, and a great honour."

She was also made an Honorary Fellow at the University of Suffolk. "This meant so much to me, as I'd lost so much of my education. I actually received mine the day after Ed Sheeran, so I'm in good company," she says.

Throughout the years, Maureen hasn't faltered once. She even kept going during lockdown.

But as Britain is plunged into a cost of living crisis and another potential recession, she's noticed the need for her work more than ever right now. "I have referrals every day, and six days a week I've got volunteers who go out and deliver the food boxes. If there's anything on the seventh day that needs delivering and it's a real crisis, I'll cover it. As soon as someone is flagged as needing

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food, they are fed.”

Maureen estimates that she’s sending out anywhere between 130 and 150 food parcels every week - some for families, and some for individuals. It’s never-ending.

“Some of the saddest phone calls I get are from people who can’t get through to agencies to ask for referrals, so they call me instead. Just recently, I had a man in his 50s call me who hadn’t eaten for days who burst into tears on the phone.”

But Maureen adds she wouldn’t be where is today without her base of volunteers, who she dubs as “amazing”.

“No one gets paid, and I don’t have a wage. All I ask is that whenever someone volunteers, they give us their time, and they don’t judge.”

Being non-judgemental is key when working in the charity sector, and Maureen helps everyone who comes to her - regardless of backstory.

“Another part of what we do is help with referrals from probation from the prison service. I feel whatever someone has done, they don’t deserve to be out on the streets with nowhere to go. I’ve got my rough sleeper’s fund, and I have three places I contact so I can buy them a room in a hotel or guesthouse. They don’t come cheap, but it means I can get people off the street. Today, I got somebody off the streets, I had three off last week, and three the week before - all thanks to the generosity of people.”

As the old adage goes, “when times get tough, the tough get going” - and Maureen has noticed an influx in kindness and selflessness over the past few weeks.

“The generosity of people is incredible. I recently received 500 food boxes from the Brethren Church’s Rapid Relief Team. And over three evenings I had Ipswich Town Football Club come in for three consecutive evenings to help out, as I had 400 boxes to fill.

We’ve got basic food boxes ready to go out - and even if they don’t have turkey and all of the trimmings in them, there’s food in them so people do not need to go hungry.”

For Maureen, it costs her around £1,000 every week to purchase fresh fruit alone.

“I’m never worried about not having enough money though, because I feel as a Christian, if I’m doing what I should be doing, and caring for other people, the tools I need will be provided.”

With Christmas fast approaching, Maureen has spent much of the run-up to it getting lists from agencies, to finding out who needs support over the festive period.

“The main thing I’d like people to know though, is that even if you don’t know or even like your neighbour, still look out for them. They may be really struggling. Be a friend to that person, and care for one another.”

To find out more about FIND and the work Maureen does, visit [findipswich.org.uk](http://findipswich.org.uk)

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**LEFT AND ABOVE:**  
Maureen and a  
volunteer at FIND  
Ipswich

**RIGHT:**  
FIND Ipswich  
founder Maureen  
Reynels

Pictures:  
CHARLOTTE BOND