

Discovering Stratford Village: Working Lives Working Community

Sue Perkins

Debbie Collins: Firstly please for the purposes of the tape can you tell us your name, your date of birth and your place of birth?

Sue Perkins: My name is Susan Perkins and I was born in Melbourne Australia and my date of birth is the 5th of the twelfth, 1947.

DC: So first of all we are going to talk about your working life Sue. What was your first job and how did you get into it, from school?

SP: From school was nursing but I actually worked for a year before I started because I failed my 'O' levels and I felt I should help my parents pay for my school fees and I worked as a nursing assistant in an old peoples home at weekends - Saturdays and Sundays. And that made me realise that this is what I wanted to do. So between that and my work starting, my father was then moved to London for his work, so I actually started training in Westminster Hospital.

DC: At what age?

SP: At eighteen in 1966 on the 18th of May, in fact almost 52 years ago.

DC: Whereabouts in London were you living?

SP: My parents were living in Surrey, Coulsdon in Surrey. I was living in a nurses' home in Westminster. So it was quite an experience to come from – a little girl from Melbourne to be in the heart of Westminster in one of the nurses' homes.

DC: Did that make you feel stronger in your vocation experiences training in London?

SP: Not necessarily no I don't think so I think I was there for the children, no matter where the children were going to be. I was there to look after them or learn how to nurse them.

DC: Was it always children's nursing that you wanted to do?

SP: Yes right from the early days. Then once when I started the course there was a course on offer, so it was four years (**in lint?**) but it added to your SRN as well, which meant that at the end of four years I had a double qualification, instead of just having one, after three. So I spend the first eighteen months at Westminster children's, then went to Westminster General for eighteen months. Took my SRN finals, came back for another year children's nursing, then took my children's finals and then after that I staffed in a children's surgical for about a year.

DC: Tell us something of what your training consisted of in those four years?

SP: OK, with the children, they wanted to give you a wide experience of nursing children which usually divided up between medical wards, surgical wards, then you did a stint on out patients and a bit in theatre. In those days you didn't do block experiences your whole training was in the wards and then you went out twice a year for 'a block' – where you went to the School of Nursing and did your theory there. That applied for the two and a half years of children's and the general as well. You did medical surgical wards as well and you did block trainings.

DC: Did you intend at the end of your training to go back to Australia, or was it always your intention...

SP: Yes it was my intention to go back, but I met my husband during the course of my training so I stayed behind and they all went back.

DC: Was he also a nurse?

SP: No, no, no. An Electrical Engineer, worked for BT. Nothing to do with a running off with a medical student.

DC: Doctor and nurse romance.

SP: Or a police man, nurses were always going out with police men. But I never managed to find a police man [laughs].

DC: So did you get married before the end of your training?

SP: No, I finished my training and I staffed for a year and got married after that. So that made me think about what I wanted to do now because with nursing in those days it was part-time was nine to five, because obviously nurses did shift work, night duty. And I decided to look for something I could do part-time full-day. So that's when I did Health Visiting. Then went to college for a year studied Health Visiting and came to work for the London Borough of Newham. They actually sponsored me because in those days they sponsored me at college to come and work for them for a year for them and [I] stayed eighteen.

DC: I was going to ask you about the financing of it. Were you paid a salary or were you ...?

SP: Paid a salary. It was presumably it was (I can't remember) possibly a Nurse Visitors salary or maybe slightly under that if you qualified you got the first year's Nurse Visitors salary (there's different bands), I can't remember.

DC: What attracted you to Nurse Visiting as a career?

SP: Good question, I suppose... I know I remember now, I was very much taken before I left Australia with what they called Infant Welfare Sisters. And they run baby clinics and I thought I quite liked the sound of that which took me back a bit to children's nursing. And when I looked at Health Visiting it was not only doing the clinic but it was supporting mothers with new babies. So we visited all new babies in our...because we were in geographical areas. So on my patch I was responsible to visiting all the new borns on the tenth day. And follow up visits if necessary and encourage them to come to see me at the clinic. And then you would visit all families with children at least once a year until they were they went to school. So yes, it was just the fact of having more hands on with children again.

DC: So a health visitor's responsibilities are for children from birth to age five, is that right?

SP: That's right.

DC: Is that still the case?

SP: As far as I know, although they seem to be taking more away from them. I don't really know enough to talk about it so I won't. Yes it was there to support the mothers and the babies, and a lot of mothers were new mums – frightened, scared and not knowing what to do. It was really a lovely job to have.

DC: You must have had to soothe a lot of mothers of their anxieties. At that stage did you have any children of yourself or did yours come along later?

SP: No, mine came along later.

DC: So the advice you were giving them...

SP: Was really what I had learnt or what I'd observed from other Health Visitors and how they responded to helping parents? I can't remember now ...1980...Yes it was probably a good ten years before I had Emily and Thomas.

DC: So did you always feel confident in passing on advice to the new mums from the beginning or is that something that had to come to you from experience?

SP: Yes, no I never remember feeling not sure. If there was ever a time I'd say 'I'm not quite sure, I'll find out for you'. It's the worst thing to tell someone something you're not sure about and find that you are wrong.

DC: Was the training you had (before you became a qualified Health Visitor) was it hands on with new babies and small children, how much of an element was that in your training?

SP: Yes, in my training we had one day a week when I was assigned to a clinic in Islington to a Health Visitor. I did lots of visits for her and then she would give me a new birth visit to do on my own. Of course I remember my first and I was very nervous, and I had a case load of families to work with so that's how I got the practical experience and the knowledge and things. But the practical experience is much more valuable. I know how everybody needs the knowledge, but how to speak to mums, and how to feel confident and reassure them you can only learn by watching someone else doing that.

DC: Did you have to visit mums who were of various different nationalities, spoke different languages?

SP: Yes, I certainly did when I was actually qualified. I can't remember...it was in Islington, Islington was very interesting because the area that she worked in was Canonbury so we had the Tony Blair residence and then we had tenement blocks, council blocks like you do everywhere. It was really extreme the types of families I was visiting. I don't remember [it being] particularly multi-cultural at that time. Certainly when I came to Newham I did. It was the time when the Ugandan Asians came to Newham so I had families from... Asians from Uganda.

DC: Did you sometimes need an interpreter with you?

SP: Yes we did. If I needed one the Health Authority had interpreters so we could just arrange a visit and they could come, but most of the time we managed without and that was with their command of English not mine. It was their knowledge of the language, so only occasionally interpreters.

DC: Were you in your early days a member of a union or professional body?

SP: Yes, there was the HVA the Health Visitors Association. The HVA was the union that we joined as students.

DC: Is it fully unionised, that profession?

SP: Yes because I remember later on in my career they were rebanding us and School Nurses were coming in on the same band as us and we were very angry about that because we were more qualified than school nurses. And I remember going to a meeting with our union reps and management. So yes, would be the answer to that.

DC: Is that still the union that represents Health Visitors? It not UNISON or ...

SP: No I think it's still the HVA. I don't have much to do with it now as it's nearly thirty years since I left there. I don't really keep in touch with that.

DC: So how did your career progress from there? You said you got a job in Newham. How did that come about?

SP: That's because they sponsored me – the London Borough of Newham. When I applied for a college place you had to apply to a London Borough, and I chose Newham because Albert lived in Popular...

DC: Your husband?

SP: And we were going to buy a flat in Newham and so I thought work near where you live. So yes, I wrote to them, I wrote to a lot of boroughs and Newham responded. So I went to have my interview at The Grove and they agreed and so once I finished college I started working for them and stayed with them for eighteen years. So it was probably money well invested by them [laughs].

DC: How did your career during those eighteen years change or progress?

SP: I think it probably didn't change very much or progress because I just stayed as a Health Visitor. I didn't have any ambitions to become a nurse, because there were Health Visitors ... Oh I did progress a little bit as I became what was called a Field Work Teacher so I had a student. So I trained student Health Visitors. Yes, in that field I had to go on a course to do that. And every year I'd have a Health Visit and I'd do exactly what happened to me and they'd come out with you and you'd give them families to do visits on their own. But I'd just move around really. I was at Manor Park initially and moved to East Ham and then that was at the annex and I was there until we moved out of there into the lovely Health Centre at Shrewsbury Road which was Forest Gate really. My families were still in East Ham.

DC: So each Health Visitor had a particular beat did they – a part of the borough that they'd cover? Would there be one Health Visitor for that beat or more than one?

SP: Yes. Just one. You had 500 families to be responsible too, and that was increasing each week, because the new babies didn't always belong to the families you had on your case notes. So it was always increasing.

DC: So what if you were off sick or on holiday, did someone cover for you?

SP: No, the only work we'd get covered for would be new babies, or if you had a family that was in crisis and needed help or if a Social Worker was involved they'd notify the Social Worker that I was away, and they would take more responsibility. It was a bit difficult when there was a new face they don't know to be going in... if there was a new issue. So it was kept with the Social Worker until I came back. But new birth visits or any enquiries and my clinics would all be covered.

DC: So you'd have to work with Social Services if you thought there was maybe a safe guarding issue?

SP: Yes they used to call Health Visitors the 'girls on the frontline' because Health Visitors go into families with all children because you are in the perfect position to be able to [voice] any concerns you might have. If there was a Social Worker's concern you'd refer to Social Services you'd say 'Look I'm really worried' and they'd probably come and do a joint visit with you. And if a child wasn't going to school they had Educational Welfare Officers in those days (I don't know what they call them now) but you would work with them, with the family to try and get the children to go back to school.

Once you are in there with the little ones, once you have established a relationship with the families and they trust you. If they had any concerns (even if it's with their teenagers not going to school) and we were in the position to steer them in the right direction or arrange for someone like the EWO [Educational Welfare Officer] to come and see them, and be with them if they want you to be with them.

DC: That must have been quite challenging at times

SP: It can be and it was... I suppose we had a senior who we could go to, to discuss problems with. But I don't know if it was well covered with stress, as stress is covered now, it probably wasn't covered in those days. Luckily I had a very good Nursing Officer who was helpful when I needed to talk through things. And sometimes you could talk through things with each other – I found [it] helped a lot. That's why I think it's so important. Health Centres are so important for Health Visitors to be together. Some of them when I started were running clinics on their own and that must have been just so lonely, apart from not getting the support that you need. Whereas we had about eight of us in Shrewsbury Road and we were there with the Dental Nurses, Physios and everybody and we'd all have lunch together and it was really good for bonding and getting to know people. So if you needed any help you could just ask for it.

DC: Were there any really difficult situations, or would you rather not go into individual cases?

SP: To be honest I can't remember, but one I remember mostly was a young Asian family and she just had her third baby and she had a four to six year old who was going to school. And I was a bit concerned because she seemed very depressed and didn't speak English very well. But I felt she was, and the second visit I went there was an ad on television about a pizza or something and an Italian going off crazy in his language and the little girl turned to me and said 'That's what my mummy's like most of the time'. So I just thought this is it. So we also had police man on the beat and Eric was a police man in Manor Park and I knew him and I spoke to him and he knew the family and we got the Social Worker as well and we went to see them (I can't remember the details Debbie). But I remember the PC was brilliant cause I didn't have a car at the time and he happened to be around and I found him in one of the streets, and he came back to the clinic with me and contacted Social Services and got it all organised. I can't remember step by step but it was worrying especially as a mum with young children. And she did go to hospital and she did have post-natal depression, badly and she was in hospital for a while.

DC: So you did need to use your intuition and your common sense sometimes and listen to the children?

SP: Absolutely. Yes, yes.

DC: So you said you were in your job for eighteen years – what dates are we looking at?

SP: 1971 I was in college. 1972 – 1989 when I started nursery.

DC: So what gave you the idea of running your own nursery?

SP: Doing the clinic a lot of mothers would say they are going back to work can you recommend any nurseries? And there was no nurseries in Newham and one was just dreadful. I went there once to visit a child who was on my books and it was about eleven in the morning and they were just running wild. There was nothing and barely any toys. It was terrible. So that's when I thought oh that might be a career change. This is nothing to do with it but when I was ten I always wanted to have an orphanage because I loved children, and I thought well an orphanage is a bit old fashioned idea now.

That they don't have them. So I thought that's the next best thing – looking after other people's children while they went to work. Yes, and that's how it happened. I started making enquiries about making a nursery and ended up in Brickfields.

DC: So that's also running a business. Did you do some kind of business course?

SP: Oh no course I didn't. I went in blind.

DC: So how did you deal with the challenges of setting up your own business?

SP: I don't know really. I don't think I could do it now. I think that I probably did...I decided to do a nursery you've got to have A, B, and C if you are having so many children. No first of all I found a book 'Starting Your Own Day Nursery' a publication which was a very simple one which was easy but gave you an idea what equipment you needed, what staff you needed, what type of premises you needed and what money you would need. So first thing was to approach a bank manager. I can't remember but I think I borrowed £5,000 that's all at the time. And then I had to write to Newham as the Newham Social Services were the ones that gave out the licenses [for] Day Nurseries. And that was a battle too. From then to day one. I seem to have battles with everyone that I meet at the moment. But she was very difficult, the Social Worker that came with the attitude 'Oh well we only have Day Nurseries which I suppose are private and the parents will have to pay'. And I said 'Well they will, as you don't offer them any options as there's only one Day Nursery in this borough and parents will have to pay staff and pay the rent and blar, blar, blar'. Anyway we eventually got registered. There was an issue about numbers and I appealed against it, and we ended up at the Town Hall with an appeals session with the Social Worker and her three co-workers or whoever they were; and Rose who managed my area and my husband to present our case as to why. I can always remember it as they were so sure everything was going their way and in the end she said 'I expect you to support me because I am one of your officers'. Anyway in the end they didn't, they went in our favour.

DC: What numbers did they say you should have and what numbers did you think you should have?

SP: I think they said they wanted us to have twenty and we wanted thirty, because they wanted to reduce the number of two year olds we wanted to have. And we had enough staff for those two year olds and that was why we won it, as it's not as if we didn't have enough staff – there was enough staff to look after them. And there may have been some other issues but I can't remember but they are the main ones. So yes they were not very happy to say the least.

DC: Once you got past them what came next recruiting the staff or finding the premises?

SP: This all happened after. No so what did I do – found the premises first, and then recruited the staff.

DC: So the premises turned out to be Brickfields, the church building in Stratford Village. How did that come about?

SP: That's quite a nice story because my children... Brickfields every summer ran a play scheme and my children used to go there, and that's when I first met Lois who's the wife of David who was the minister. I had thought of Brickfields but I thought there was no point as they used to do play schemes so I couldn't.

DC: Were they privately run, paid for?

SP: I have no idea, I can't even remember if I paid anything or not for it. I was working as a Health Visitor in Shrewsbury Road and came in one day from visiting and I went in and it felt really strange and I thought shall I go upstairs and I thought no, no, no, and I went into the front office for something. And Lois was there so I hummed and haaed in my mind and asked her if she would like a cup of tea and I took her back to the staff room and had a cup of tea and a chat, and that resulted in me telling her what my plans were. That I was trying to find somewhere and she said straight away 'Well what about Brickfields?' And she said the play scheme wasn't set in stone probably it was good for the church to get finance in as well. So yes, we all had a meeting with David and we all decided 'Yes' and then it was a matter of they decorated, I think they may have decorated...no I think it was decorated already in pale yellow with green rugs and I said that's Australian colours so that's what my uniform will be yellow and green. So Rose and I we advertised in Nursery World, the local paper and had lots of candidates in those times and we just interviewed and got our first five members of staff. The mistake I made which I would not do now is employ them all which you won't do – silly me! You would have Rose and I or all three of us (because we only started off with six, seven children it was a bit slow) three of us would have been plenty but I had all five of them plus me. But anyway it proved to be OK for the children. We had an open day of course before we started at Brickfields of course. I took the nursery up and had a few people from that but then after that it was just word of mouth and we probably filled up quite quickly by September. So I reckoned by March we were on the way to being full. Good job I had a husband because I had no income coming in. [Laughs] Your money goes to the staff first you take what's left, and the rent.

DC: We are going to do a separate interview about Brickfields so we will focus on your working career there and how it came to an end and you moved elsewhere.

SP: Good.

DC: You got the nursery up and running so what was your capacity, how many children did you have?

SP: Thirty and six staff and most of them half of them stayed with me for the first two years, and some of them stayed with me right till the end. And it just grew it just got bigger. At one time...when we first started I remember we only had the main hall (they called it the church hall) and there was an old school that was on the corner that we had those (you will see them) the big yellow doors that were locked, the school room was behind there. So we only just had that and they then...we didn't have use of that but we had use of the new hall – now I'm getting you confused – it's the church and the hall was an 'L' shaped so we had use of both, but there was a tiny kitchen in what was a double cupboard or store room but it had a window hatch out to the nursery. So Sharon who was my first cook used to cook in a tiny area, and how she managed to make these beautiful meals for thirty children and six staff but she did. And that was one of my fondest memories of starting the nursery was the lovely aroma of her meal for around about 11 o'clock wafting through the nursery and the children would say 'What's for dinner?' So then we were probably like that for about five years. Then the old school (they must have got some money) so they knocked the inside out and built a new kitchen area and upstairs were rooms they used to rent out for meetings. So that was lovely as it meant that we had a brand new spanking kitchen. We had a good working relationship with David and Lois, then they moved about two years later, they moved on and we had another David (and I can't remember his wife's name) and he was around for a couple of years and then we had Derick Wensley who was there for a good ten years I think.

DC: What was he the Rector?

SP: The Minister. He was there for the longest time. And he left just before we had to leave and a new Minister came in.

DC: At what point did you realise that you had achieved your ambition – that your nursery was a successful business?

SP: I guess after the first year when it was stable and we were up to capacity and the parents were happy and the children settled and we just loved our jobs. I had great staff then and they all seemed to really love their job. I remember one of the children saying (we were having lunch at the table with them) and they said to Rose... Rose must've said something about payment and they said: 'You don't get paid to look after us' and Rose said 'Well Susan pays us, so why wouldn't Susan pay us?' they said 'because you look after us because you love us' – How sweet.

DC: You don't need money.

[both laugh]

SP: Another time they said 'you don't have legs' because they all used to wear jogging bottoms and because Rose didn't wear a shirt they didn't think she had legs that was another comment. There were so many I just wish I'd written them down at the time because you'd think you would remember and you don't, you don't.

DC: So you started an after school club and a holiday play scheme when did those begin?

SP: It's a good job you're remembering because I'm not.

DC: My children were on them, both of them at the nursery.

SP: Yes, no right. I know we are only talking about Brickfields

DC: We are going to do Brickfields later. Don't tell me so much about Brickfields we're saving that for later.

SP: After two years I then opened a new nursery in Plaistow, so I had two going. Then the after school came. And why the after school started was because a lot of our first children were leaving parents were anxious (it was almost like a repetition of me being a Health Visitor and no-one having nursery places). Children were going to school and no-one's got after school care. So I thought huh so St Francis was my church so I approached them to run an after school club, and that was quite successful for about six years. I think that a lot of after school clubs were just starting off and can't remember why, maybe they were a bit cheaper than us and they were filling up quite rapidly. So the after school club after five years we moved over to Brickfields because there was only about six children. Jay was at St. Francis, I know.

DC: You picked him up after school at Park School

SP: So maybe I took him to St. Francis.

DC: We are talking about Francis church in the middle of Stratford.

SP: It was called Stepping Stones After School Club. And then for whatever reason we moved to the nursery and numbers were dropping with more opening. I think they were probably cheaper. So with the few I had, I think it was about ten we decided to run it from Brickfields and we were able to use the kitchen. They sat at the table in the kitchen and they had their dinner and they had the main hall they could play in afterward as the nursery children had the main hall so it worked out alright,

but eventually that came to an end too. But I think it was mainly for not getting any more customers for the after school club.

DC: When did that come to an end can you remember?

SP: Probably a couple of years after Jay and Issa left¹.

DC: And what about the holiday play scheme was that at the same time?

SP: I didn't run the holiday club moved to Stratford we didn't run the play scheme any more, we stopped that. The holiday play scheme, I got quite a lot of funding – an organisation in Newham funded it...in the big blue building in Stratford...Department.

DC: I know what you mean Department of Education I think.

SP: Next to it.

DC: Social Services

SP: That's how it started they wanted an after school club for their employees and they approached me because they heard about us. So we were able to run one they had about ten to fifteen children and that enabled us to offer an after school club to our own children. So that probably petered out and lasted a three or four years.

36:45

DC: So how did your time at Brickfields come to an end?

SP: Sadly, that was sad. It probably needn't of happened but Derek left and then another minister came whose name escapes me (as it did when we were having coffee I can find out though) and they decided that the United Reformed Church was not going to fund them anymore, it was too expensive and they needed to sell it for the land.

DC: When was this?

SP: 2011, yes because we moved out in December of 2011. They gave us a year to find somewhere so we found a somewhere. So we found a place - St Nicholas in Manor Park so then we moved there. But it was a shame, and I'd lost - that was my down fall for a while because a lot of parents understandably ... couldn't get to Manor Park. We only went with about eight children and it was almost like starting over again. Then they did nothing with it for ages, and they didn't sell it either. Well, they may have done now – do we think they've sold it now to this company? We don't know, but we don't know. But what they did do was refurbish the whole hall that we were using for our nursery, polished the floors, painted it and let the church have it that was with us and I was a bit upset because they didn't even ask – they could have increased the rent that might have covered it but they didn't even ask. So it was quite hurtful in a way. To think that we had been there for twenty-three years and we worked quite happily with the church. Another denomination was using the church hall in the morning and late, in the evenings and we were really accommodating of that, it wasn't even a problem and I don't know why they didn't ask for more rent – they said they had to sell the building.

¹ The interviewer's children.

DC: So you moved to Manor Park – that ended your association with Brickfields. So if we can just sum-up in a few sentences what you have been doing since then (that's probably outside the remit). Yes, just to tell us very quickly what you've been doing?

SP: I had a nursery in Forest Gate - St Bonaventure School, so I had two of them running and the Brickfields children (I still call them Brickfields children) went to St Anthony in Manor Park and unfortunately in under two years I had to move from there because they were...they also couldn't get the money and it's been closed ever since. I had to make some staff redundant and those left moved over to St Bons. Then finishing from there in another two years we had to leave there and we're now in Leytonstone for coming up to three years now and hopefully staying there. And it's running very well, and very successful. Again with the original nursery at St Bons we started with six and now we're over twenty, but we are only allowed to take twenty-six. So everything in the garden's lovely.

DC: You're semi-retired now?

SP: Yes, I am I'm still involved I've actually stepped out from working in the nursery last week, so this is my first week of being free of the nursery. So yes I just pop in and do cover. I'm the employer and provider.

