

Changing lives: Angela's root to recovery

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After working 34 years in the same factory, Angela found the confidence to start her own business thanks to an HLF-supported project at Cyfarthfa Castle.

Born and bred in Ebbw Vale, Blaenau Gwent and having worked for 34 years in the same factory making rubber-covered rollers for the printing industry, Angela Beacham's life revolved around her job and caring for her family.

But all this changed when her manager suddenly announced the factory was closing and that all its work was moving to Yorkshire.

[quote]"When you have worked somewhere for so long, you just accept it as your life and you're not prepared for anything different."[/quote]

Recently divorced single mum Angela suddenly found herself with no income to support her two children - or indeed herself. In her own words, her life seemed to take a nosedive and she wasn't sure how to pick herself up again: "When you have worked somewhere for so long, you just accept it as your life and you're not prepared for anything different. I was 50 years old and couldn't see myself doing anything else – I didn't even know if I could. So for the first time in my life, I went to the job centre."

But it was the advice she received there that helped change Angela's life and take it in a completely unexpected, new direction – and it was all thanks to National Lottery players.

Nothing to lose

During her interview at the job centre, Angela happened to mention her interest in gardening. She was advised to try Cyfarthfa Castle, as they were looking for volunteers to help with their grounds maintenance as part of an HLF-supported volunteer programme.

With nothing to lose, Angela took the advice and met with one of the gardeners at Cyfarthfa Castle who gave her some basic training. Over the coming weeks and months, Angela's confidence grew, as did her horticultural knowledge and practical skills.

Angela's new-found confidence saw her enrol in a Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) course at the Gwent College, Usk campus – and she hasn't looked back since.

"The course was fantastic – it suited my needs perfectly. I not only learnt heaps but it gave me the added incentive to think that I could do this as a business, that I was more able than I had thought.

"I was still volunteering at Cyfarthfa Castle and had another job on the side to make ends meet, but I started asking around to see if people needed help in their gardens. I couldn't believe the interest I was met with and my business just blossomed and bloomed from there!"

Beginning a new life

Looking back at how this second, fruitful chapter in her life kickstarted, Angela is convinced that reaching her lowest point and being forced to start from scratch was probably the best thing that could ever have happened to her - and she couldn't be happier: "Volunteering at Cyfarthfa was the beginning of my new life, with a 'new me' leading it.

[quote]"I really feel everyone should volunteer at some point in their lives as it's so fulfilling, and you can never know where it might take you."[/quote]

"If it hadn't been for this project funded by National Lottery players, I would probably have ended up doing something that I wasn't really interested in again, just to keep the money coming in – I would probably never have discovered my hidden talent or business know-how.

"Now, I spend my days working in and enjoying my customers' beautiful gardens, not to mention making new friends along the way – what's not to like about that?

"I really feel everyone should volunteer at some point in their lives as it's so fulfilling, and you can never know where it might take you. For me it's led to a completely new lease of life - my only regret is that I didn't do it sooner!"

Angela's business, Garden Thyme, has grown from a seed of an idea to a fully fledged business – and it all started with HLF and Cyfarthfa Castle, which is now managed by Merthyr Tydfil Leisure Trust and Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council.

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