

Life story of Sally Whelton

Sally Whelton is 46 years old, English by birth, and on the verge of an adventure. She has decided to make a fresh start in life – keeping the best from her life as it is, and looking forward to a different kind of experience.



Ms Sally Whelton. Photo Sue McPherson 2004

A potter, Sally is currently working part-time in an art gallery and teaching historical pottery at schools and museums, sometimes doing sculpture workshops – “it’s something different every day,” she says. When I spoke to her she had just finished a session at the local museum, making and painting medieval tiles with a group of children, in part to celebrate the recent discovery of a medieval tile in St Botolphs, Colchester. “I like using my hands,” she says, “and the biggest buzz I get is watching a child who’s just come in the

room and said, I really don’t want to do this, and then you can’t get them out the room because they love it so much. That gives me the adrenaline, I think, and the reward.”

She also enjoys her job at the art gallery, looking after the shop and taking in pieces from various artists to display and sell to the public. She started working there fourteen years ago, primarily to get away from the isolation of working at home, although she admits it is nice to know, when she dresses for her job there, that she will not be covered with clay when she goes home at the end of the day.

At college, after high school, Sally says she took foundation courses in art but settled in finally with the more constructive aspects of art, particularly with clay. The Art and Design programme (three-dimensional art) included a year in industry during which, under the tutelage of an expert potter, she learned her trade. In her last year of college, at age 24, she married her long-time boyfriend. Later, after having children, it seemed natural to teach other children, she says, and gradually her career interest turned in this direction, doing more workshops and teaching.

Recently, Sally’s life went through a time of great change – a turning point, it seems. She is still in transition, a recent relationship of several years duration now ended, and has been planning a different kind of future now that she is on her own. Her children, from her marriage earlier on, are in higher education and closer to their dad at this time. When she married, twenty years ago, it had been “for life,” she says. That it turned out to be for only ten years had been something of a shock to her. The expectations she had had of their marriage did not pan out, despite their marrying in what she considered to be the “proper” way – in church, after living together for a number of years. At this point, today, with another major relationship now in the past, she is a bit wary of getting deeply involved again. The idea of living with someone is a bit daunting, and marrying again is out of the question. So for now, she is content with “just a nice relationship . . . a friend.”

Sally’s physical health has also disrupted her sense of well-being at times. She has had one hip replacement and another one is forthcoming, repercussions from an accident she had as a

teenager in which she was hit by a car, landing her with two badly broken legs and a cracked hip. Stretches of time being off her feet completely, so that she could heal, may have given her more time to ponder on all that has happened.

In re-evaluating her life, Sally is making decisions on how to achieve what she wants, within the limits that are out of her control, while taking into account her family and friends. She says also, "I stopped dreaming about what I wanted to do with my life, and that's come back again now." She has done a bit of travelling, to places such as India – her father's favourite country, and to Holland, where her mother was born, and would like to do more. Her father died earlier this year, so the trip she took to India recently with her mother and two daughters held a special significance.

Until quite recently Sally was producing and selling her paintings and pottery. She has plans to set up a studio, eventually, when she is settled again, and perhaps once again begin painting portraits and sculpting people. The idea of living in France, where there are artists she knows who in many ways are like herself, is appealing to her, and getting to be a real possibility in her life. She has already lived in France, for two years before she was married, and is familiar with the language, so that would be one less challenge to contend with if she did live there.

During her lifetime, Sally has experienced a variety of dwellings and locations, from "rough places" to "nice houses," from living in London to living "in the middle of the beautiful countryside." She lives now in a mobile home on the English coast – overlooking the sea – and speaks enthusiastically about its advantages, economically and otherwise. While many of her belongings have to remain in storage, waiting for a place of more permanence, there is plenty of room in the caravan for her girls to come and stay.

Being an artist is a way of life for Sally and, since as an artist she is self-employed, the concept of retirement does not apply, at least to that area of her life. Whether she is at work away from home or working at home, "it doesn't stop," she says. One main influence on Sally's attitude towards work, and life in general, was her father's early retirement due to health problems. "It was almost twenty years before most people retire," she says:

He really fulfilled a lot of stuff that he wanted to do in that time. . . and I think that's where it rubbed off a bit on me. I'm not going to just work, work, work and then stop and vegetate. I'm just going to carry on, I think, though at a different level. Slow the level down. . . I've been there, done that, and I just want to be healthy and happy really, and content – and not bored. So that's part of it too – two homes as well. That will help, on that level. And there's always that thought, if you get fed up with living in France, well it's only two hours or so and you're back in England.

Sally shares her views on mandatory retirement, saying,

I think it's appalling, really. How can you fix an age, because everyone's an individual and the jobs that you do are individual. I think I'm very lucky, actually. I think any self-employed people are lucky, because it is slightly more up to you, I would have thought. There's no Big Brother saying, 'This is your 70th birthday. . .' Probably the more difficult thing about being self-employed is that you can't afford to retire. That's the other thing, isn't it,

because you've got to pay privately into things – you haven't relied on your company to contribute to your pension for so many years. I don't know how I'd feel, if I'd been nursing or something, and was told that I was at retirement age. Part of me—if I knew I'd be getting a good pension—would probably be quite pleased.

Life story of Sally Whelton written by Sue McPherson following interview in 2004.

Diversity in Retirement website: <http://DiversityinRetirement.homestead.com> 2004-05.

The Dilemma of Mandatory Retirement. Sue McPherson writer, website design