



ALISON

## THE WI WANDERERS

Londoner Michelle Gordon and Mancunian Alison Peek have never met in person, but together they've built the WI Wanderers: an online hub where members can join the feast of virtual WI events

### THE WI disruptors

**Michelle:** My first WI meeting – with N1 WI, Middlesex Federation – was in February this year, and then we were in lockdown. In May I was in a virtual coffee morning with lots of women from around the country: some had already had daily calls with their WI, some hadn't heard from them for weeks, and others were talking about various virtual WI events they'd been to.

I wondered how someone like me, a new member who didn't have a ready-made network within the WI, would find out about these events. So we started a Facebook group to share online WI activities: the WI Wanderers. We could have asked our federations first – but if you just do it, all of a sudden you have a presence and you can't be ignored.

Now our group has 2,700 members. Each day we post an extensive list of WI meetings that are taking place online that day or week, including paid and free events, talks, book clubs, Denman At Home classes, virtual WI camps and much more. Members can then choose from the timetable the ones they want to join.


**Alison:** In the spring, the WI network moved online and many of us began thinking creatively. After my WI opened our virtual lockdown meetings to visitors, others started doing it too. Members who have special gifts and skills are sharing them freely, hosting cook-alongs, paint-alongs, presentations and craft workshops. It's been humbling to read some of the comments.

People say, 'I feel closer to the Wanderers than I do to my own WI,' or, 'I don't know what I would have done without this'. One member even said, 'The Wanderers has saved my sanity and my life because I now have something to do'.

**Michelle:** We wanted people to feel like they're part of a massive sisterhood. But there are a lot of WIs that don't have a social media presence or the skills to create it. I think potential members would be turned off by how difficult it is to find WIs. I'd like to run an initiative to ensure that every WI has a Facebook page, connected to the federation page, and an email address. The WI has so much to offer and I don't think we're tapping into half of our potential.

**Alison:** Some WIs do have a Facebook page or website but they don't use it to communicate with their members or to attract new



A woman with short dark hair, wearing a black dress with a red and green floral pattern, stands in a grassy park. She is holding a white sign with red cursive text. In the background, there are trees and a brick building.

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members. They have this wonderful tool at their disposal that they're not using because they don't understand how.

Michelle has hosted one-to-one meetings and small group tech support to teach WIs how to use Facebook over the last few months and it shows that there's a real need out there for some outreach and hands-on, practical advice. We've given people a safe environment to join in: they know they're not going to be asked for bank details or trolled. Now they're growing in confidence and applying it outside of the Wanderers, and that's really satisfying. One member of my WI celebrated her golden wedding with her family via Zoom after she learnt to use the technology by joining Wanderers events.

**Michelle:** I'm from an investment banking background and I've used Zoom at work for many years, so I find it funny that everyone's talking about it now like it's a new part of pop culture. I think it's absolutely brilliant that using it has become the norm, because after lockdown it's going to change everybody's lives.

**Alison:** We brought some UK WI members to a virtual meeting of Manitoba WI in Canada and when we all stayed afterwards to chat, a Canadian member who had been self-isolating started to cry: 'I cannot believe what a lovely visit this is,' she said. What the WI Wanderers has highlighted is just how many of our members are alone in one way or another. They don't always want to be entertained; they just want the opportunity for human interaction.

If we've been able to provide this, that's a huge box ticked for me – our Alleviating Loneliness campaign hasn't stopped because we've moved on to new resolutions: it's got to be for ever.

**Michelle:** The number one thing is ensuring that people have access to their WI. It's really important that we keep the information flowing, for instance, by checking in with members who currently have Covid-19. Talking to members who are self-isolating or chronically ill has opened up my eyes to accessibility issues I never thought about. One member said that everyone in her WI lives on the same road, apart from herself, and she's housebound. How isolating must that feel, when all this is happening but you're not included because you're not able to be where they are? There needs to be a virtual WI offering in the future.

**MICHELLE**

**Alison:** Now is the time for flexibility and generosity. We're amid an unprecedented set of circumstances, and we need to react quickly, or members and potential members will fall through the cracks. As an organisation that prides itself on being caring, responsive, lobbying and all-encompassing, we need to show that through our actions.

■ **Michelle Gordon is a member of N1 WI, Middlesex Federation, and Alison Peek is a member of Swinton WI, Lancashire Federation. Search 'WI Wanderers' on Facebook to find their group.**

In the October issue of *WI Life*, we'll be unveiling exciting new plans from NFWI and the Board of Trustees for the WI's future – the result of many months of consultation with members. WATCH THIS SPACE...