

‘I met women who *believed in me*’

WENDY MORRIS is a dual member of Fulshaw WI and Cale Green WI, both Cheshire Federation

It's a shame I don't know the name of the woman who introduced me to the WI at a county show in South Wales seven years ago because she changed my life. I've had so many opportunities since then.

I joined Fulshaw WI with my best friend, who had 'Join the WI' on her bucket list. She only managed a couple of meetings before she died. Most people didn't know what I was going through, but the comfort of being with women is wonderful. It just felt like I was at home.

At the WI, I'm not a mum or an accountant: I'm just Wendy. Our then president took me under her wing even though she barely knew me and encouraged me to become president. All

along, I've met women who believed in me, whereas I never believed in myself.

I've been very nervous speaking to 500 women at federation events, but it's not like a business forum where people might want to do better than you. I know those women don't want me to fail – they're willing me to do well.

I'm now on the Cheshire Federation Board of Trustees, managing its website and social media. I am also an admin on the member-run Unofficial Women's Institute Facebook group.

As Covid has made digital meetings more commonplace, I want whatever happens in the future to be a collaboration of women from all over the country. I'd also like our WIs to reflect our community.

For instance, many people have no idea that the WI is not a religious organisation. I think the future is about smashing that perception and showing that we are open to all.

‘I have a sense of *community*’

YVETTE RATHBONE is a member of Stroud Green WI and Gothic Valley WI, both Middlesex Federation, and a WI Adviser

I was searching for a sense of community when I joined the WI. I'd lived in North London for 12 years and only knew a couple of people locally. Now I can pop out and bump into someone I know and it makes me feel connected to my area. It's a real joy. I wouldn't have had the times I've had, with the people I've met, without the WI.

I was part of the team in the WI marquee in Battersea Park for the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in 2012. I baked throughout the night and a TV crew filmed us. My Cyril the Corgi cake even made the BBC News.

That same year, my WI took part in a TV programme relating to the transport to the Olympics venue. I was followed by a camera crew and bumped into a friend, who wondered what on earth I was doing. The most surreal things happen to you when you join the WI.

I belong to two urban WIs: Stroud Green WI is the more traditional one. We might do burlesque but we'll knit our nipple tassels. With Gothic Valley WI I've toured a cemetery and

learnt about Victorian mourning practices.

Being a WI Adviser has been a great way to get stuck into the life of the WI. People come to Advisers when there's a problem but we're also there for the good times. Having a birthday party? Send us an invitation. We're there for all members, not just committees.

Lockdown has shown you can take part in a meeting in London by dialling in from your home and it would be great if the WI would take advantage of this to broaden participation in federation and national committee meetings.

In five years' time I'd like the WI to be more reflective of society. There needs to be more outreach. Ethnicity, race, religion and sexual orientation is no bar, we welcome all women, including trans women.

Jerusalem is still our anthem and we do make jam and love crafting, but that's not all we are. When the WI is in the news, it's always something that confounds our image. We confound it every single day.

