

One man DID make a difference!

DONALD WILLIAM STEELE, born 14th March 1933 in Hackney, London, died 19th December 2009 at Hillingdon Hospital.

MANY OF THE PEOPLE who have benefited from Don's efforts are probably unaware of what he has done. They are the everyday members of the groups that he established; they are the men who now benefit from free prescriptions at age 60 years which achieved equality in this area with women of that age, and the now-universal transport concessions for over sixties; they are all the people with alcohol problems, poor heart health and problems of ageing who have benefited from his campaigning zeal down the years and from real services that he introduced or promoted. Don contributed to committees set up by government and there are many within the wider government organisation at Westminster who will have been aware of his influence.

Don was born in Hackney, North London and was only about 8 or 9 years old when, with his father on active service in Egypt, his mother died of tuberculosis. He was subsequently cared for by friends and relatives and was also evacuated from London to Cornwall for a time. Back in London he attended Parmiter's Grammar School in Bethnal Green and left at the age of 14 years. His first job was working as a 'hanging boy' for 25 shillings a week in Hackney. This involved taking thin wet sheets of transfer paper and hanging them across lengths of string to dry. These were later used to iron the designs on to materials for embroidering.

He did his National Service in the Royal Air Force during which time he was a member of the R.A.F. band that played in the procession for the coronation of H.M. Queen Elizabeth II. (A television programme recalled that event and included interviews with Don, in which he recounted memories of the procession).

He had become interested in the Salvation Army as a young man and after working for a while as a bookshop assistant he joined the Salvation Army Officer Training College. As a Salvation Army officer, Don was promoted to lead corps in various places, including Corby, Abingdon, Harrow and Dewsbury. In Dewsbury he encountered an ethnic minority community at a time when this was still relatively unusual and long before any equality legislation. He worked notably with the Asian residents. He was believed to be the youngest Captain and later the youngest Major ever in the S.A. He wrote regularly for the S.A. newspaper, the *War Cry* prior to 1973 and was clearly an exceptional contributor. Don ended his career as a Salvationist in



Liverpool, where he had taken the post of head of youth development in the north.

Thereafter Don worked as a community development officer in the London Borough of Brent. He then joined the National Council of Voluntary Organisations but soon moved on to a senior position with the Federation of Alcohol Rehabilitation Establishments and he quickly made his mark. His awareness of the problems of alcohol dependency, gained in the Salvation Army, led to his committed approach in that field.

In relation to alcohol problems, Don's work focused upon the welfare of people recovering from alcohol addiction and on campaigning in the wider field of the alcohol industry and government policy relating to it. He was instrumental in publishing a national directory of rehabilitation establishments, which enhanced access for those in need of it. Don broadcast regularly and has often been interviewed in connection with his causes when they have been topical in the national news. A Radio 4 interview when the budget had not treated alcohol duty in the way that his organisation had promoted comes to mind. His grasp of all the relevant facts and figures about the costs of alcohol abuse, and his ability to convey them in a short radio spot was remarkable.

He was a magistrate based at Willesden Court for 20 years. In the early 1980's he led the organisation Action on Alcohol Abuse.

His campaigning activities brought him into contact with politicians of all parties but he was politically inclined towards the Labour party and stood on one occasion as a Labour candidate in local elections in his home area of Hayes.

As Director of the Family Heart Association until 1990

his work focussed on promoting healthy lifestyles and providing heart health education, and also on those people living with heart problems by advising about ways of dealing with the impact on family life. He ran the first national campaign focussing on cholesterol levels and was effective in recruiting the support of food manufacturers to promote heart health.

In 1992 he noticed an advert in a newsagent's window about the Association of Retired and Persons Over Fifty (ARP/O50) and was sent a copy of their magazine. He volunteered to campaign and within six months was appointed Director of Social Policy. He worked 14 years with ARP, which was a great organisation in many ways but too generous with its benefits – which he felt caused its eventual financial problems. Members were demanding local social groups and over 200 Friendship Centres were set-up across Great Britain.

During this period Don appeared weekly on a phone-in/chat show on LBC, the London commercial talk radio station, giving advice to callers and commenting on the political scene as it affected seniors. Thursday mornings had the highest listening figures of the week!

Television producers soon found they always had a brief and pithy comment from Don.

He founded and was Secretary of the Lifespan Trust (UK), primarily funded by a 1% levy on members' subscriptions. This was set up to undertake research into the special problems of ageing and age discrimination and to publish the results of such research; to advance public education on all matters concerning age and age discrimination; to preserve and protect the health and relieve the disabilities of people aged fifty or more.

One of Don's campaigns was the promotion of a series of meetings (organised with the local Friendship Centres) entitled *Health After Fifty*, which included a panel with local doctors, and Community Health Councils. Over the next two years these were rolled out across the country.

Don led another campaign by ARP/O50 resulting in free National Health Service prescriptions for over 60s. Behind the scenes he was researching into travel concessions across Great Britain leading to a published report, *Who Goes Free?* which in turn led to the eventual nationwide bus pass for pensioners.

ARP/O50's problems came to a head in 2000 when it was eventually sold by Norwich Union to Age Concern for £1. In 2006 the latter organisation set up an organisation called Heyday, which was to encompass the former Friendship Centres. Don had agreed to work with Heyday for ten months to try to incorporate the Friendship Centres but it didn't take long for him to conclude that this was not working. Age Concern did not appear to him to be interested in the Friendship Centres and as a consequence he felt unable to continue his relationship with the organisation.

In July 2007 a new organisation was formed by those Friendship Centres who had become disillusioned with Heyday. The embryo Friendship Centre Federation invited Don to be its chairman – a position he filled with enthusiasm and vigour, despite being hampered by ill health.

Heyday ceased operating (Spring 2009) and a very critical Charity Commissioners' report slammed the cost of running Heyday (which amounted to a £22 million deficit). Don felt that he had been vindicated in his decision to decline further involvement with that organisation but this had been a very difficult episode in his career when he had to stand firmly by his principles against a very large and influential organisation, but he was no stranger to such challenges.

Don has a son, Graham who is a successful chemist with a senior position in an American company and lives with his wife and two daughters in the USA. Don and his wife, Jean, adopted six-year-old Mercedes who now is a social worker in childcare and the holder of two university degrees.

In June 2009 Don was very happy to be able to make the journey to Northern Italy for his daughter's wedding. In spite of having been critically ill with an adverse reaction to chemo-therapy just ten days before and having all but completely lost his voice he managed to give his speech and make his daughter's day. On his return he was immediately back into hospital for more chemo-therapy, again coming out with a day to spare before a further wedding reception in England, where again he managed his speech against all the odds.

Don leaves his wife Jean, son Graham and daughter Mercedes, grandchildren Laura and Emma and half-siblings Jim, Bill, Ted and Rosemary and their 90-year-old mother Edith.

Campaigning to the very end.

This was one of the last messages from Don. "One little nice piece of news to-day. When I joined the Day Treatment Unit in Hillingdon Hospital two years ago I was surprised to find it in such run-down and unsatisfactory condition.

I joked with the staff that before they kicked me out they would have a new Unit; there was great hilarity.

I started one of my little campaigns and two years' later the Chief Executive of the Trust and I correspond on first name terms about a range of issues – but especially the Unit. The news to-day is that a refurbishment and relocation process starts in two weeks time!" He passed away less than three weeks later.

DONATIONS IN MEMORY of **Don W. Steele** should be made payable to: **Hillingdon Hospital Haematology Day Clinic** and sent to A. V. Smith Funeral Directors, Royal Lane, Hillingdon UB8 3QP.