

PART 1

BRAVER IN THE WORKPLACE

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BEING 10% BRAVER IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Dorothy Newbury-Birch

KEY POINTS

This chapter will show that:

- It was difficult but not impossible to break free of expectations;
- It should be easier to work with small children;
- I took leaps of faith when I wasn't sure what worked for me;
- I have worked with communities to make a difference to people's lives.



INTRODUCTION



I am a 54-year-old married woman with two children and two grandchildren. I come from the Meadow Well Estate in North Tyneside, north-east of England. The Meadow Well Estate is famous for the riots in 1991. It's a deprived area with huge problems and people with huge hearts. I've been told many times during my academic career that I shouldn't tell anyone that I am from the Meadow Well Estate. It's been suggested that coming from a lower working-class area would be bad for my career.

Furthermore, I am loud and opinionated, often seen as a negative for women but a positive for men. In some areas, academia is still very classist and sexist. However, there are people like me who are fighting against this. It's hard, but it's our place to *change* this and pave the way for women now and in the future.

This chapter tells you my story, a woman who worked hard and fought against barriers to become the woman (the professor) I am today.

FROM SCHOOL TO UNIVERSITY

I grew up in the 1970s and 1980s and the expectation was that I would work in an office. In fact, my year group was the final one where boys were automatically offered



an interview at Swan Hunters' shipbuilders and girls were offered an interview at the local government pension offices. I didn't take this up; instead, I worked in a wool shop. I married at 18, had my daughter at 21 and was divorced at 22. I suddenly realised that this would be really hard work. I'd grown up in a single-parent family and I knew I didn't want my children to grow up on benefits. I found out the hard way what it was like lying awake at night, often crying, wondering how I would pay the bills and feed my daughter. Little did I know that this would propel me to where I am today.

One day, almost on a whim, I decided that I would go to college to do some GCSEs. I realised that I needed to do something, to be braver, to reach the potential for me and my child:

'I was a single parent at the time, and I decided I wanted to go to college because I wanted to be a secretary or work in an office.' (Kelly, 2014, para 7)

This was the day that *changed* my life as a woman, a mother and a role model. It made me stronger and I realised that, although the roads can be long and tough, you can get along them.

I signed up for a GCSE in sociology and was very excited. I clutched the newspaper cutting that reported free childcare places for single parents who wanted to study. In the college, I started asking where I would sign up for this and no one knew. I was getting more frustrated and upset and my 1-year-old daughter was crying in my arms. Eventually I was told that there were no free childcare places. I started to cry, not gently but big, snotty tears and people didn't know what to do. A female lecturer took me into her office, made me a cup of tea and said the words that would *change* my life. She said, 'what are you going to do about it?' This was important – she didn't tell me what to do, she was clear that *I* had to do something. After looking through the telephone directory, I rang the local newspaper who ran the story the next day and, by the end of the day, I had a childcare place and, importantly, they reviewed the whole system for other single parents. This newspaper story was updated in 2014 when I became a professor (Kelly, 2014).

So, I was a college student doing a GCSE. The year after, I did a university access course without knowing what a university was. I just knew I was going to be there. I met my second husband and, by the time I went to Sunderland University to do my degree in social sciences, I was a married mother of two. I missed out on a first by a couple of points, but I had worked so hard and loved my degree.

Then the bombshell: I couldn't get a job. I worked at National Rail Enquiries and applied for jobs at night. I can still say 'Good morning, National Rail Enquiries, how can I help?' in a posh voice. The problem was I had focused on the idea of a job without thinking about what I wanted to do. As Frank Skinner said on 'Desert Island Discs', 'I was running away from something, not running towards something' (Skinner and Young, 2010). Then the most amazing thing happened: I was offered an interview at

Newcastle University for a part-time research assistant job around drug and alcohol use amongst medical students. At the interview, I was asked if I'd like to do the research as a PhD. Of course, I said 'yes' and got the studentship. What I didn't tell my supervisor for two years was that I had no idea what a PhD was. When I got home, I asked my husband if he knew; his reply was 'don't worry, Dot, you just need to write a book'. I thought I could do that and off I went.

What did I learn? I learnt that doing a social sciences PhD in a pharmacology department was hard. I learnt that to do this properly I'd have to treat it as a job and I did - I worked the hours I would expect to work (9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday). Year three was harder and took all seven days to finish, however, by then, I had an idea of what I was doing. I learnt that good friends who also study and those who have no idea about academia are imperative to success. I learnt that I loved it. The support from the *clarity* in which I was involved (at home and in academia) was amazing and helped me succeed.

FROM UNIVERSITY STUDENT TO PROFESSOR

Those 24 years taught me a lot about being a woman, a mother, a role model and an academic. Some members of my family and some friends stopped talking to me as I'd gone against what I should be doing. I should have known that being from Meadow Well came with expectations of what I should and shouldn't do. This was extremely hard for me.

USING #WOMENED'S VALUES

I draw on my learning from this time to shape me as an academic leader and much of the learning relates to #WomenEd's values.

Clarity

When I started in academia, I didn't understand my role; I didn't know what academia was. There were few female role models at that time for me. In hindsight, this enabled me to ask questions at all levels and I suggest we should all ask questions continually, so we understand our situation and environment in both our personal and professional lives. However, over time, I've also learned that it's important to understand the rules that apply to the environment in which we are working. Also, I had to find the right university for me. Teesside University gave me the opportunity to be the professor I wanted to be, to work to my own agenda, with everyone from the vice chancellor to the junior researchers interested in my work. My overall aim is to make *change* at a population level.

Confidence

My *confidence* grew as I climbed the ranks. Others would say that I was always confident and that's been good for me when I was uncertain about decisions I made. *Confidence* (or perceived *confidence*) is fundamental to everything. As a leader, this is the most important thing to pass on to early career researchers.

Communication

One of my main strengths, which has also been identified as a weakness, is that I am heard. I have a voice and I use it. Whilst a student and an early career academic, I attended all conferences, talks and meetings that I could. This enabled me to learn from the best and develop my own style for talking to different groups of people in differing situations. It's my job as a senior academic to ensure my early career researchers and students develop their own voices.

Connection

Evidence shows that statistically significant positive relationships exist between the number of employer contacts, such as careers talks or work experience, a young person experiences in school between 14 and 19 years of age, and their reported *confidence* at the age of 19–24; the likelihood of whether (at 19–24) they are Not in Education or Training (NEET) or non-NEET; and their earnings if salaried (Mann, 2015). I'm now working with my second group of young people from the school I attended. This school was, and is, at the bottom of all league tables. I find this work fascinating and rewarding. The young people choose a research topic and I help them bring it to fruition over two years. The first group wrote a chapter for my book (Newbury-Birch and Allan, 2019).

Collaboration

We are lucky in that researchers don't need to be in the office 9am to 5pm every day. I tell my students and staff that children are a fact and they don't have to make excuses when their children are sick or on holiday. I don't care when my team do their work; it's fine to work at night and during weekends at home. Where possible, we all work at home for the school summer holidays. Plans are made and everyone fits work in around childcare and sunshine. We have a team away-day during the summer to which children are welcome. After the summer, we've all finished a journal article, report or bid which is great.

Challenge

It would have been impossible for me at the beginning of my career to envisage that I would become a professor. Being 10% braver means looking towards the next step; the whole journey is often too scary to start. Take small steps and work as hard as you can today.

Change

I am very scared of *change*; however, it's when I've taken a step off the precipice that great things have happened. An example of this was leaving Newcastle University as a lecturer and joining Teesside University as a professor. This was scary but was the right thing to do. I hadn't realised how ready I was for this *change* and I suggest that *change* is a positive thing. If you're not ready to make the big jump, then make a small *change*; join a strategic group, get involved in writing a journal article or be involved in a bid.

So, what happened to the daughter I had when I started my journey and the one I had along the way? The oldest daughter is now doing her PhD in my team (she knows what a PhD is!) and leading the way for the next generation. The second daughter works for British Airways' cabin crew and is travelling the world doing what she wants to do.

I have learnt that everyone's path is different and leads us to a different ending. I have cried tears of sadness, frustration and happiness writing this chapter. We need to give women the *confidence* and the support to make their own paths by being 10% braver.

Passing on being 10% braver

- As women, let us support each other. Make time to involve other women in the work that you do.
- In academia, long hours are the norm, but they don't have to be. Show a good example by practising what you preach. I'm trying hard to do this.
- Find a female mentor. Don't go for someone who is great in the field but someone with whom you can share experiences easily.
- Be approachable. We all know professors and leaders who are difficult to engage with. Do not be one of those people.

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