

Appearances can be Deceptive

by Lesley Dawson

Very few of us are what we seem. The person we see now is not necessarily the person they were in the past. I regard this old lady, using a walker, who is looking up at me with a wide smile and reminding me that we have met before. The atmosphere is not ideal for a conversation in depth. We are drinking coffee out of disposable cups at the back of church after the morning service and noisy conversations are going on all around us.

Inviting Sue, that is her name, to join us for lunch with the “girls” we sit down in the café and order fish and chips. Having placed our order, I try to filter out the other conversations going on and attempt to concentrate on where we have met before.

I am at a loss until Sue reminds me of my time working at the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, the professional body of physiotherapists in the UK. This focuses things a bit more. She must be a physio. That reduces the possible people from 103,000 plus people in Eastbourne to 65,000. However, I still need to reduce the numbers to make sense of who this woman is.

Eventually we settled on the Bristol School of Physiotherapy. The year was 1984 and I was the visiting Professional Advisor in Education who was there to help this hospital-based college get ready for the change from diploma to degree level education and transition to a polytechnic.

Sue was the student teacher on the staff there, working towards a diploma to teach healthcare students. To call her a student teacher was to reduce her to a twenty-something young physio when she was a mature woman in her 50s who had previously worked abroad in Africa. Now I remembered and we discussed the joys and problems of working out of the UK. She spoke of Idi Amin, who had been the President in Uganda at the time and asked me about living in Bethlehem during the First Intifada.

We didn't become close friends but were able to talk to each other about other things than bus routes in Eastbourne and train links with London. Until, that is, I was invited to assist an occupational therapist teaching a three-week course for allied health professionals and community-based rehabilitation workers in Uganda at a training centre on the road to Jinja.

Most of our participants were young physios, OTs and CBR workers but we were obviously the most exciting game in town, and we attracted more senior visitors. One of these ladies was the present Principal of the Physiotherapy School and the other a private practitioner, both of whom remembered Sue.

This was when I discovered that Sue had not only worked as a physio in the main hospital in Kampala but had been asked to set up physio education there. Not that she had much choice as the person asking was President Idi Amin.

Having coffee with these two ladies I was asked, "I know that the UK is a big place, but would you have met Sue Hunt?" I was delighted to tell them, "Not only am I in touch with her, but she lives in my town and is a member of my church."

They were equally delighted and spoke with great affection and respect about this lady who had modestly not told us the whole story about her time in Uganda. I suggested that they could write letters to her, and I would deliver them personally.

Next time we met in church I grinned at Sue.

"You will never guess who I met in Kampala?" I said producing the two letters. It became clear to other friends there that there was more to Sue than met the eye. I was especially impressed as she had taken on an educational role in Uganda with no teaching qualifications. She didn't get those until she eventually returned to the UK. Hence our meeting in Bristol.

Being rebuked by my lack of curiosity about Sue's background, I wondered how many people I had looked at all my life and never really seen.