Katie Newell’s ability to dig a trench and put up a tent hadn’t been tested until she became a Somerset Federation trustee and secured a coveted spot for a WI tea tent at Glastonbury in 2015, and again this year. The goal was to promote the WI’s unique charms to a new audience of 200,000 music lovers via the traditional medium of tea and cake.

A rousing chorus of Jerusalem from Katie and her seven-strong team every morning was followed by a nine-hour shift with up to 1,000 slices of cake sold a day. An army of bakers and deliverers from around the federation ensured it was a real team effort.

Katie says: ‘The WI has an older demographic and this is a positive way of introducing ourselves to a younger crowd. It’s that lovely juxtaposition of it being the biggest, trendiest festival in Europe and the WI tent packed full of people having tea and cake.’ They endured the muddiest festival in its history. ‘One day I dug a trench from the back of the marquee to let the water run out. I felt like GI Jane.’

I learn about the kind of commitment demonstrated by trustees – who are unpaid volunteers – when I attend a training day at Somerset Federation’s headquarters. Vice-Chairman Sandra Ford updates me on her plans for an Abba-themed Save Denman party. ‘The venue holds 300 but we’ll sell out,’ she says. National Trainer Jenny Coates is here to broaden the trustees’ knowledge of topics that include governance, strategic planning, financial responsibilities and fraud awareness, on an intensive one-day course.

Her advice to would-be trustees is ‘to think about what you’ve got to offer and the time you have available’. She says: ‘The ideal Board is made up of people with different experiences who want to play a part. For many, the appeal is the enjoyment of being involved in a larger organisation, while for some it’s the opportunity to get on to NFWI committees.’

Typically, candidates tend to be retired and would like to give back to the organisation that has given them so much, but younger members are increasingly stepping up. Somerset’s 13 trustees are primarily retired women with a mix of skills who put their all into their roles.

Julia Statton, Somerset’s Chairman, says: ‘It would be good to have younger members coming through because we need their energy and advice as to what suits their age group.’

Other federations agree. Christine Hounslow, the Wiltshire Federation trustee who launched the Save Denman appeal says: ‘Retired people bring a lot of experience but sometimes it doesn’t give a good image of the WI to younger members – so if you want to encourage them you have to give them a chance to participate. I keep going on about evening or Saturday meetings so younger women can take part. The idea of giving them the opportunity to be a trustee but not necessarily attend every month is good – although they may not be at every working mums, such as Glastonbury veteran Katie, who has 10-year-old twins and runs her own cleaning company. She says: ‘Hopefully, my being here will encourage younger women to think about taking up trustee positions.’

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meeting that doesn’t stop them contributing.'
Daphne Atkinson, another Wiltshire trustee, brings the drive and energy she applied as a division sales manager for Avon to her role on the Events Committee.
She says: ‘It’s enabled me to continue using the skills I developed at work. I love being busy and I get a tremendous buzz when the event is popular with members. I didn’t realise joining the WI could mean so much.’
Sara Carter, Lincolnshire North Federation’s treasurer and enterprise officer, has used her experience in senior management at retail giant Next to generate healthy sales of gifts and stationery at Federation HQ and by members at various meetings.
‘We have increased our profit year-on-year and our members love it. Taking on the role of treasurer was a massive learning curve but I have slowly introduced new systems, such as online banking and accounting.’
Sue Simpson, Chairman of Tessaide Federation, combines her WI life and career, thanks to a supportive boss. She works three days a week for a charity and says: ‘My employer allows me to work half an hour every day so I can have the first Wednesday of the month off to attend my Board meeting. I do a lot by email with my federation secretary.

It’s a two-way process: work benefits from me being in the WI and the WI benefits from my working experience. I bring different skills to the Board than those who are retired, it’s good to have a mixture.’
Surrey Federation trustee Angela Poole used annual and unpaid leave to meet her WI commitments when she was working full time as a payroll administrator.
She says the role has definitely changed her: ‘It’s helped me with my confidence – I never used to be able to have a conversation without going red and I was no good at small talk.’

Angela Poole, Federation Trustee

Ingrid House, South Yorkshire Federation’s Treasurer was a primary school headteacher but had to retire early after experiencing workplace stress and depression.
She says: ‘I feel a lot more confident in myself than I did when I first joined the WI. It’s the biggest team there is.
‘It has taught me a lot about myself, like I’m not always right and that there’s nothing wrong with apologising when something goes wrong if you’ve done it with the best of intentions.’

Heather Ross, Vice-Chairman of West Yorkshire Federation, says the role was a lifeline after suffering bereavement. She says: ‘It has been an enlightening experience for me. Having something to get my teeth into kept me going.
‘It gives you a better insight into the WI – a lot of people just don’t realise how much work goes into running the federation.’

Her view is echoed by Heather Dunlop, Press Officer for Pembrokeeshire Federation, who runs her own marketing company.
‘For me it’s been a big eye opener. I would never have believed how much work there is to be done, whether it’s dealing with members’ enquiries, financial reports, reviewing NFWI materials and sub-committee reports, planning for our annual meetings, health and safety issues, Denman…’

For Annette Smith, Chairman of Kent-West Kent Federation, 2016 is an exciting time. ‘I’ve got a very lively group of trustees who show enthusiasm for change as well as being very conscious of preserving what’s best in the WI. We have reduced the number of committees and amalgamated two, and are endeavouring to get our meetings down to three hours.

‘We’re growing rapidly with more than 7,000 members and new WIs are springing up in South London, which have very different requirements from our country WIs. We can make a difference and that in itself is exciting.’

As Lynne Andrews, chair of the Training Committee says: With a demographic changing towards working women, the challenge facing Boards of Trustees is to reconsider how, when and where they meet. There need be no single way. Our working members have so much to offer, so we must make it possible for them to contribute at all levels of the WI.

FIND OUT MORE
You don’t have to be a superwoman to be a federation trustee – you just need enthusiasm, common sense and a desire to get involved in the running of your federation.
Trustees are volunteers.
Federations have elections every two or three years and also have the power to co-opt additional members.

There’s no rule on length of service required.

Boards typically meet once a month, but sub-committees meet separately and report back to them.

Trustees usually sit on the Board and a sub-committee, and they also play a role in federation events.

Ask your Federation Secretary if you can observe a Board meeting to see if it’s for you.

Many federations run a trustee mentor scheme when newbies are paired up with old hands at meetings and guided through the process.

Federations can apply to Val Andrews at the NFWI Unit to request the one-day trustee training course, taught by one of the national training team who will devise an action plan.

Contact NFWI Moodle Administrator Elaine Smith to register E: e.smith@nfwi-unit.org.uk T: 01865 391788 ext. 277.

Discover more about becoming a trustee on the WI Moodle: www.witraining.org.uk.