

# ENCORE! How great speakers can change lives

Members who hear our selected experts feel inspired with a fresh confidence, even taking up new careers

Interviews by LUCY COLLINS Illustration by ELISA CUNNINGHAM

Speakers are at the heart of the WI experience – one of the ways our organisation promotes learning. Every month more than 224,000 members develop their knowledge in a spirit of fun and friendship that has the power to change lives – inspiring them to rethink careers or take up new hobbies.

Members of Mancetter WI, Warwickshire Federation, recently visited Beijing to learn more about tai chi, an ancient Chinese exercise, but their journey began 18 months earlier when a talk on the subject inspired them to set up a weekly class.

Treasurer Jeanette Guslov says tai chi has improved her health: 'I used to have major problems with one of my knees and now I can run down the stairs. People leave class energised and relaxed – it's all about breathing and posture, it's not about going for the burn. For the less mobile you can do it sitting down and get just as much benefit and I like the fact that it's inclusive.'

Jeanette and four other members made the journey in September, where they practised in the park under the supervision of a tai chi master. 'Everyone found it inspiring – the way you can bring tai chi into your everyday life without it feeling like you're doing an exercise regime. You can do it wherever you are. It's not a chore, that's what the trip emphasised and we all

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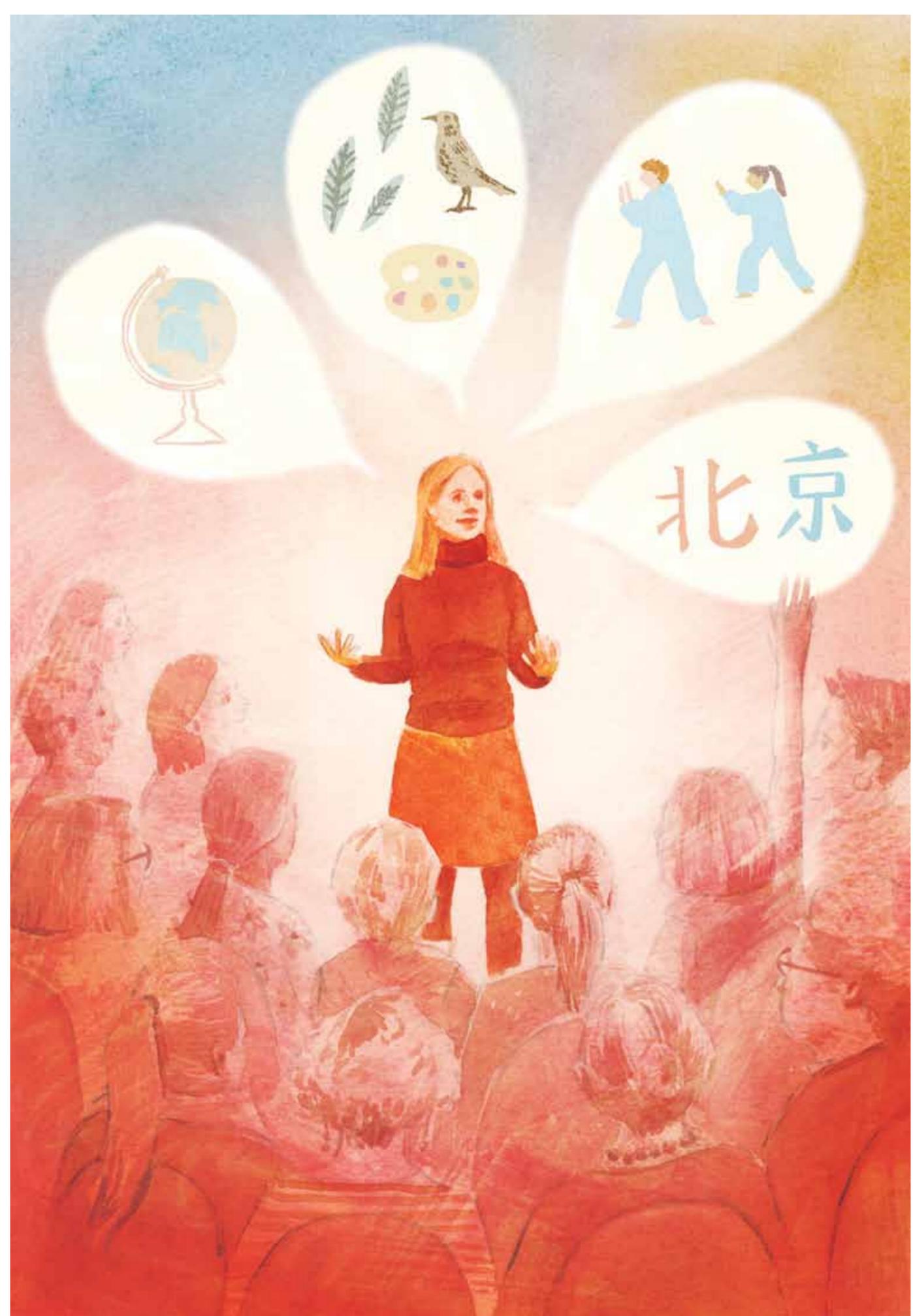
**'Sarah', a former member of Bronzefield WI, Surrey Federation**

enjoyed the cultural experience. We did workshops on Chinese medicine, calligraphy and brush painting and went on the bullet train to Xi'an to see the Terracotta Warriors.'

The speaker who inspired them is Adrian Young of Midlands Tai Chi Ch'uan. He says: 'I got them to try the thinking bear stance, a standing pose designed to work the ankles, knees and pelvic area. I think that's where the enthusiasm came from to take it to the next stage because several people said they felt tingly sensations in their hands, which means you've got the circulation moving.'

'I try to make my talks interactive to cater for different abilities. It sparked something because they went on to set up a class and it snowballed from there. I get great joy from people having a go.'

Public speaking can be terrifying but it was especially intimidating for a former member of Bronzefield WI, who was



invited to give a talk by Surrey Federation's Camberley Diamonds on how a WI works within a prison. 'Sarah' wrote in the federation newsletter: 'Before we arrived I'd convinced myself I'd be judged as an awful person – a prisoner – a criminal. My confidence and self-worth was in a dark place after being trodden down for years. I was petrified and so nervous.

'But I was so incredibly wrong. In fact, my words were heard, my presence was welcomed, my time was valued and I was, above all, honestly complimented. My nerves had faded and that evening really opened my eyes – these ladies had accepted me for me. I began to recognise being me was okay. I was going to be okay.'

Camberley Diamond's Press Officer Hilary Jorgensen says: 'Our members welcomed Sarah warmly and admired her bravery in speaking out about life in prison. We were really delighted to be able to support the women of Bronzefield WI who are trying to get their lives back together. We have since visited the group and provided equipment to encourage creative activities.'

I joined a Speakers' Selection Day at Wiltshire Federation to find out more. Among the speakers were a lawyer promoting a will-writing service, a weight-loss hypnotist and a woman advising on a time-management system.

## Members' votes count

I ask my neighbours for their thoughts. One woman tells me she's tired of family history and people promoting their business, while another states that people who don't use a microphone are infinitely more interesting. Why? 'Because they're more expressive.' Another likes artefacts being handed around, but someone else chips in that this interrupts the flow as people then start chatting among themselves.

I grab the 'try-outs' as they exit. Solicitor Graham Fuller tells me 'I always think WI members have their own minds and strong opinions. I'm pleased when they ask questions because I feel they've listened and engaged – for me that's the attraction.'

Time-management speaker Brenda Spenceley says: 'It's a superb audience base because the WI is unique in the range of topics and opportunities it gives to members.'

As Federation Treasurer Viv Penney of Kington St Michael WI, Wiltshire Federation, says: 'We run selection days up to four times a year and we try to get speakers who live locally. Members' votes do count – it doesn't matter how brilliant I think they are, they won't be accepted if everyone says no.'

'Our members like hands-on talks, things they can do and make, and they also go for a bit of humour. People who don't take themselves too seriously generally go down well.'

Both audience and speaker can benefit, including members who share their expertise. A session on aromatherapy encouraged Sarah Checketts of Baking, Making and Shaking WI, Gloucestershire Federation, to start a dual career. Sarah, a mum of two, says: 'It was something totally new at a time when I was considering what my role in teaching was going to be.'

The talk by fellow member Kerry Baxter included a quiz to identify different essential oils and the chance to produce your own blend. It led Sarah to enrol on an Indian head-massage course and go on to set up a business to deliver treatments in the workplace and also for children with special needs. Sarah, previously a full-time languages teacher, says: 'I used to be a head of department and decided that wasn't for me any more because my family balance wasn't right. I've gone part-time, so I have two days a week to devote to my business and my weekends aren't so packed with marking and planning. I've enjoyed learning new skills – as a teacher you neglect the fact that you can keep learning.'

'If it hadn't been for the original WI talk I don't think I would have gone in this direction, but I love the fact that I've added

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Pauline Dubelbeis of Clayton-le-Woods WI, Lancashire Federation

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an extra dimension to what I do.' Kerry says: 'I was genuinely surprised when Sarah suggested that my talk had given her the idea of changing her career. I received feedback that I came across as passionate – it came through, so the fact that Sarah wanted to do it herself is wonderful.'

'When I joined the WI, the committee asked if we had particular skills or interests. I'd set up Cheltenham School of Complementary Therapy and Beauty to teach people about aromatherapy and reflexology and I gave the talk to help my WI out.'

For speakers Pauline Dubelbeis and Sue Grubba, both of Clayton-le-Woods WI, Lancashire Federation, the fact they know the WI from the inside out gives them confidence when performing as the musical comedy duo, Senior Moments. The pair are so popular that they have advance bookings for the next two years from as far afield as Kent and Lincolnshire.

Pauline says: 'At the speakers' audition they all stood up and shouted "More, more". It was amazing because it gave us real confidence; when you get a reaction like that you know you're getting it right.'

Artist Tony Hinchliffe has enjoyed giving talks to Oxfordshire WIs: 'I do it because not everyone is aware of how an artist goes about their profession. It's great when someone approaches me, curious to explore their creativity, as there really is an artist in everyone. I have had a few members come along to one of the art groups I teach to have a go themselves.'

## Keep to the point

At the Wiltshire auditions, audience members offer their tips. Diane Dacam of Calne Morning WI, says: 'Speakers have to learn that confidence is a big thing. Sometimes they go on too long, which makes people drowsy.'

'For instance, a hectoring voice, saying: "I'm talking, you listen", isn't great. In our WI we look for a talk to last 45 minutes to an hour. It's "Leave 'em wanting more". We want light and educational, but it has to be interesting.'

Gladys Legg of Purton Evening WI says she's experienced some speakers who 'have got good subjects but they can't relate it', while for Beth Carrigan of Hook and District WI, no-nos include 'waffling and too many notes. Be enthusiastic but know when to stop.'

So what makes a great speaker? Jackie Gillam of Bushton & Clyffe Pypard WI, Wiltshire Federation, is clear: 'Someone who makes good eye contact, is competent about their subject, has an engaging voice and brings stuff for the audience to handle. Visual aids are important, as is not being condescending to the audience and it allows them to feel comfortable enough to ask questions.' **WI**