



Sky's the limit

They may be juggling busy lives but our members under 40 are passionate about shaping the modern WI. Here, five of 'Generation WI' share their hopes and dreams for the future

Interviews by SARAH DREW JONES, LUCY COLLINS and HATTIE PARISH

'I've learnt that age doesn't matter'

Amanda Franklin, 35, is a member of Baking, Making and Shaking WI, Gloucestershire Federation

I'd always loved the idea of joining the WI but thought I would be deemed 'too young'. (I couldn't have been more wrong.) When I was 32, a friend invited me to her new 'alternative' WI in our village, and I jumped at the chance to join.

Sarah, our President, along with five other founding members of the group came up with the name 'Baking Making and Shaking' as a way to incorporate the traditional values of the WI with a twist.

We didn't want to be geographically bound, so looked to other 'new wave' WIs for inspiration, such as Buns and Roses, New City Girls and The Treacle Tarts.

Baking and making obviously refer to the traditional cakes and craft, but shaking is about changing the image: modernising to appeal to younger women and shaking our booty, as we've done several times with

burlesque, Bollywood and belly dancing.

We have a varied programme, including wine-tasting, life-drawing and cocktail making, and loads of subgroups. We do a lot of things in our community – with local WIs we yarnbombed our parish gardens for the Queen's Jubilee and made a lifesize version of the Queen, complete with handbag and corgi.

I've tried so many new things: one of our members makes cards as a business so I've taken that up. I thought skittles was just a pub game but now I'm on the team and we won the county cup in our first year.

Although we may be seen to have a 'young' mindset, that doesn't necessarily relate only to younger people. You can be in your 60s or 80s and still feel young at heart. Our members range in age from their 30s to 60s, but I've learnt that age doesn't matter.

When I told my friends I'd joined the WI

their reaction was 'Isn't that for old ladies?' and 'I can't make jam'. I've convinced them that it's for *all* women – I couldn't make jam when I joined and still can't! We're all like-minded and get on so well. There's a bar in our meeting room and it's a great night out.

I work part-time and have a six-year old and a three-year old, so I'm very busy. The modern WI can work for young working mums, but some things still need to diversify – more events should be held over weekends, for instance. We've adapted by adding 'Vices' to our committee: I'm Vice Secretary. Most members juggle work and children – being on the committee can be a full-time responsibility, so we help shoulder that with Vice positions, giving greater input to our talks and outings.

I think the WI should do more online: My WI is a starting point. Social media is key and a great way of attracting new members. I hope the WI carries on as it is and doesn't change too dramatically, but we need a greater cross-section of women – young, old or of different cultures. It's good to have a get-together with women once a month.

Photograph: JENNY STEWART



‘The WI gives a voice to women’
Grace Shotbolt, 27, is a member of Hackney Wicked Women WI, Essex Federation

At the age of 21, I was living in Paris. I’d hoped it would be romantic, but I experienced so much sexual harassment

that I began thinking about women’s equality. On the streets of Paris and, to a degree, in London, I wasn’t seen as equal.

I came back from France and started working in finance in the City, where I put up with sexist language, objectification and my complaints not being taken seriously. I’d like to think that if it happened now I could do more about it, but I was young and vulnerable then.

I decided to focus on my personal life and my local area – to provide the women of Hackney Wick with a place to meet others who cared about equality. Founding a WI covered both my aims, so when I was 23, Hackney Wicked Women WI was born.

The WI has strong links to empowerment. It gives a voice to women and a place for us to talk about, and act on, important issues. Initially, I wanted to find ways of being involved in related campaigns – for instance, we’ve worked with Luminary Bakery, which helps refugee and migrant women gain employability skills.

We’re trying to help older people in the area who are largely being ignored by the gentrification in Hackney. By holding a tea dance, we hope we will let some of them in the community know about our WI, as we want to serve all ages.

I’m really proud of our involvement with Hackney Wick football club. We invited them to teach us some football skills, and they had never considered women’s football before that. Now they have a great women’s side that meets every week and competes in Hackney, so I’m very proud that we inspired them.

Mainly, we’ve just established a nice group of women who support important causes, we learn something new every month and empower each other. Our members teach others their skills, and I’ve watched people’s confidence grow.

I’m excited about the End Plastic Soup resolution. I went to the Annual Meeting in Liverpool and was astonished at the outpouring of passion in the debate. I’d love the WI to get involved in the ‘period poverty’ issue: we should have a voice in ensuring that all women have access to affordable sanitary wear. It’s outrageous that it’s not happening – it would be brilliant for the WI to lead the fight.

Photograph: LIZ GREGG



‘I believe the WI is relevant to everyone’
Ruby Love, 24, is President of Peckham WI, Kent-West Kent Federation

I founded Peckham WI when I was 22 and was amazed by how many women of all ages turned up and wanted it to happen. We meet in the back room of a pub but it’s not a drinking session. At every meeting, we take part in a fun activity or have an interesting speaker, so I really feel like I am learning a lot of new skills.

Being President has been good for me, because I suffer from anxiety and it affects my day-to-day life in that I don’t use public transport or go on holiday. It makes me feel very trapped and I think that’s why I’ve tried to carve out a wider life in inner-city London by setting up the WI and running my pop-up ice cream shack, Ruby’s.

As an organisation, we’re quite misunderstood. When I tell people I’m President they ask me if I’m religious; they think it’s a Christian, right-wing, conservative organisation and I have to explain we’re apolitical and secular and

Photograph: LOUISE HAYWOOD-SCHIEFER

that it’s a positive, social way for women to build a community and make friends.

I want the WI to lose its stigma of being seen as only for older women who knit and bake. At 24, I’m the youngest person in my WI and we’re keen on craft and cooking but prefer a practical session to a demonstration. Our craft meetings are the most sociable because people have the freedom to move around and it brings them out of their shell.

For me, the WI has been a really happy place to make new friends. Nationally, I’d like to see it work on attracting a more diverse membership. Peckham is a very multicultural area with a big African population, but we’ve found it hard to attract people who aren’t white.

We’ve posted in Afro hair shops and fabric shops and we’ve chatted to the women in the hairdressers and they just didn’t know what the WI was. It’s

so inherently British, but perhaps if you move to London where the WI is not so entrenched, you just don’t know about it.

Our organisation is important because London can be really lonely and the WI does a lot to combat that – it provides a safe space, entertainment and friendship, and that’s relevant to everyone.

At NFWI and federation meetings all the members on stage are great but they’re older, white women. You’re not going to appeal to younger women and people from different ethnic minorities unless you have someone representing them higher up. Knowing how to get involved at top level needs to be more accessible.

It was never my intention to be President of a WI and I couldn’t do it without a great committee, but I love it. I want members to feel like they have a community in the WI, especially if they don’t think that they have one elsewhere.

My mum always raved about her WI, Newport Central, Gwent Federation, but I thought the WI wasn't for me. I had a preconception that it was jam-making and *Jerusalem* with meetings of older women.

Then a friend said that she was starting a new WI because she was feeling disassociated from her community. That made sense to me. From the first meeting of Beechwood WI in 2015, I felt at home. The women were so enthusiastic and happy. I stepped up as Secretary and I have loved every minute of it.

When I was younger, I was often anxious socially but, through the WI, I've realised that I'm good at connecting people and putting them at ease. It's a transferable skill I didn't know I had and I'm enjoying developing it. In fact, I'm now considering a career change, perhaps a move into a community role.

I've discovered I love networking, too. At our first planning meeting, suggestions came thick and fast, ie: 'Who wants to try belly dancing?' I realised I had contacts for every idea, or knew how to make things happen. Someone said I had a knack for it, and my confidence grew.

Meetings leave me feeling reinvigorated, with my spirits lifted. I find being in the WI empowering and motivating, and I hope that I have helped pass on those feelings to others.

We have a wide age range – from 30 to 80 – and it's wonderful. Even though we're seen as a 'younger', less traditional WI, everyone's input is valued. There's something life-affirming about being friends with women of all ages.

We spent some of our funds on a project in our local park, Beechwood. We bought 1,000 double snowdrops (the WI colours) and rallied the community to help plant them. It was a great turnout, and fantastic to see our 80-year-old member planting alongside my children.

One of our members once said to me, 'I like that you challenge red tape and turn it into pink elastic'. That's a good way of putting it. I hope that the WI can continue to evolve its rules and regulations so that it works well for all of us.

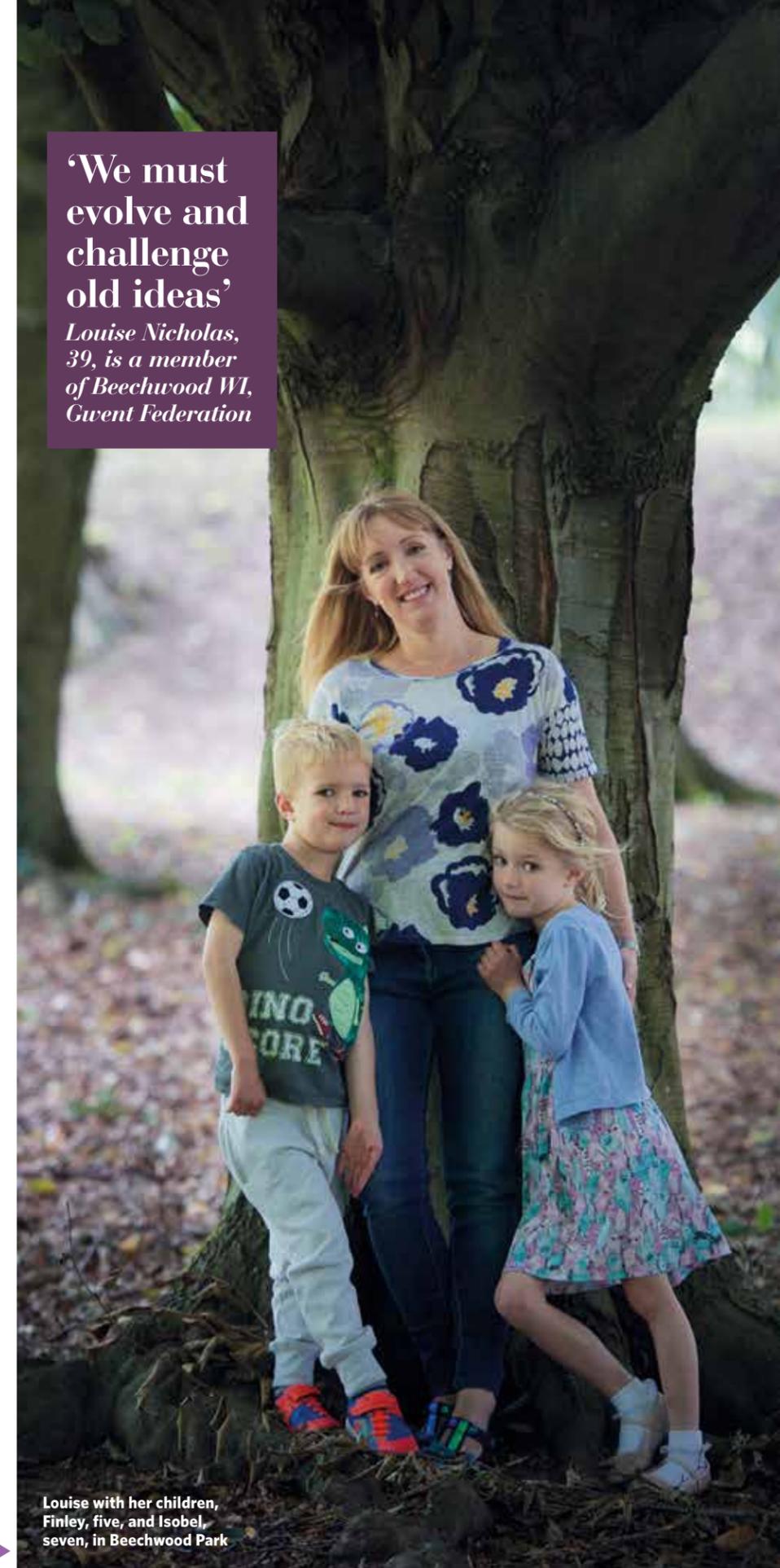
We have an 'anonymity box', so that anyone can complain or suggest things without feeling judged. We send out minutes of our meetings by email and also run social media. Our recruitment has been fantastic from the start.

I would love to serve at federation or national level in the future. As a busy mum with a part-time job I may not have the time to dedicate to it until I retire: that preconception again, that the WI is only for older women. But what is age these days? It's becoming meaningless. I want to be part of smashing outdated stereotypes.

Photograph: DAVID HURST

'We must evolve and challenge old ideas'

Louise Nicholas, 39, is a member of Beechwood WI, Gwent Federation



Louise with her children, Finley, five, and Isobel, seven, in Beechwood Park



Since joining the WI, Rachael has gained confidence and loves being known as a person in her own right, rather than just 'Samuel's (shown) mum'

'It's important for women to have something of their own'

Rachael Lampard, 32, is a member of Kelham Island WI, South Yorkshire Federation

My doctor encouraged me to join the WI when I mooted the idea and, after 18 happy months as a member, I'm so glad I did. I think the WI should be on prescription. I had a tough year in 2015 – my mum died unexpectedly from ovarian cancer and I had postnatal depression after having my son, Samuel.

I became introverted and withdrawn and my social life dried up. My GP suggested exercise but it's not much fun, so she said I should try something sociable. My mum's friend, Tracey Higginson, had joined Kelham Island WI in Sheffield and told me about the kinds of activities they did – it sounded great, so I went along as a guest.

I had to push myself to do it but as soon as I joined I felt confident. Everyone was

supportive and it was as if I'd known them all my life. You feel like you can sit with anyone.

Being part of a group has taken my mind off my situation and feeling lonely. It's given me another purpose. I needed to meet new people and I've succeeded. We're quite traditional in the sense that we do arts and crafts, which is why I wanted to join, but there's rock climbing and gin tasting, too.

We're a real mix, from students to new grandmothers, but everyone is so vibrant, whatever their age. We all gel and no one sits back, refusing to get involved. We are just glad to be together. Now that more and more people meet and chat online, especially younger people, I think it's even more important to communicate in person.

I've come in for some teasing from family and friends. They think it's all about

knitting and that I'm old before my time, but I've become addicted to knitting – I've discovered that being 'middle-aged' doesn't mean that you're boring at all.

We go to a local Christmas fair to promote the WI but I think we should also be at university open days and events, such as freshers' week. For students, it's a great alternative to drinking – something I didn't do as a teenager because my dad's a vicar – so the WI would have been perfect for me.

There needs to be more fun WIs like us. I'd like to bring local groups together more, or for younger members to go into older WIs and help them to attract new people.

In 20 years' time, I'd love to see most women knowing what the WI is about and for every woman to have an opportunity to join. I know we've got 226,000 members but we should be even bigger. It's important for us to have something of our own.

Joining the WI has brought me out of my slump. People know me as *me*, not as Samuel's mum. I feel so great and I want to inspire other women of all ages to come and see what the WI is like, to meet new people and learn new skills.

Photograph: LAURA RHIAN