



*Typical
home near
Coolshade*

One in a million

Sylvia Vetta meets Icolyn Smith – an inspirational woman who transforms the lives of everyone she meets

At 84, Icolyn Smith still feeds the homeless from her so-called soup kitchen in the Asian Cultural Centre on the Cowley Road. “So called” because although she does make delicious soups, the roast dinners she serves there could grace The Ivy or The Randolph.

Empathy drove her to start the soup kitchen 26 years ago – and she still has it in gallons. She said: “My heart goes out to young mothers I see trying to cope. They remind me of myself when I had three jobs, leaving the house without breakfast early in the morning grabbing a slice of toast to eat on my way to work.”

Food of one kind or another runs through her story and the most interesting food stories come from the place of her birth Coolshade in Jamaica.

Coolshade is only 20 miles from the bustle of Kingston, but Andrew Bax, in his recently published biography of Icolyn, ‘From

Coolshade to Cowley Road writes: “In the 1930s, when her story began it was a rural self-sufficient community of scattered single-storey timber houses with wattle walls and roofs made from thatch or corrugated iron.”

Icolyn told me about her first day at school. “I was seven and my older sister took me on the long walk to school. I was so small that the teacher picked me up and sat me down at the front of the class.”

Icolyn had five brothers and four sisters and they all worked on the smallholding before leaving for school.

“My work was to pick up the eggs. We fed the chickens with corn every morning but then they scattered into the Blue Mountains. They roosted in the bamboo near the house and the rooster would wake us up early in the morning. They laid their eggs among the pineapples so it was not easy collecting them without being scratched by the pineapple prickles. My next job was to collect water from the springs between the rocks. We stored it in clay pots

with lids which kept it icy cold.

“We had to be at school for 9am or we were in trouble: that often meant running there to avoid losing our playtime. Teachers were well respected.”

Icolyn does not look her age and she has the energy of a much younger woman.

She said: “All the fresh and natural food we ate as children has made us healthy. We grew our own coffee, cocoa beans, peas, beans, yam and sweet potato. We kept goats, pigs and cattle and all of them thrived on the lush vegetation. We grew rice in the lower streams among the rocks but it involved a lot of work for a little rice.”

Given her reputation as a chef, I wondered when she learned to cook.

“My mother taught me when I was six or seven. She taught me how to season meat from herbs and spices we grew ourselves. We marinated meat overnight. We never re-used food. Any leftovers were fed to the pigs. Everything we ate was freshly picked and

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Icolyn Smith

freshly cooked and delicious. I taught my daughters to cook and they can all improvise and produce a healthy meal from a few good ingredients. A lot of young mothers in Cowley have not been taught and don't really know how to cook. I can make a good meal for five Toten people for £5.”

Icolyn was a bright girl but her education was cut short when she was needed to help with the child care of her sister's child Monica and a younger sibling, Enid. She left Coolshade to live with her sister Mary in Kingston when she was 18.

Icolyn said “I was young and loved the bright lights and the music and dancing. The music was not electronic but with saxophones, guitars and drums. But what shocked me greatly was that I had to buy food, especially fruit. I was used to picking it off the trees and now I had to use my hard earned money to buy it.”

Icolyn married Eric Smith in 1953 and the whole neighbourhood celebrated into the small hours of the morning. Life was tough, but Eric and Icolyn worked hard, him as a carpenter and her in domestic service. They were eventually able to buy a two bedroomed bungalow in Waterhouse where they brought up four children, Norman, George, Pamela and Paulette.

Kingston became an edgy and dangerous place to live in the 1960s. In 1966, Icolyn's brother Colin worked as a barber in Kingston and was attacked on his way home and died of stab wounds.

But when that happened Icolyn and Eric were 4,500 miles away in Oxford. They had become concerned for the future of their children. Eric came here first by sea and lived with his sister Gertrude in London. In 1960, he responded to a call for skilled workers at the new Atomic Energy Establishment at Harwell and that is how he came to settle in Oxford.

When, in 1965, he sent for Icolyn she flew here and their first rented home was in Chilswell Road, South Oxford. The children were sent to Coolshade with their grandparents until the Smiths could raise the money for their fares. I asked Icolyn about her first impressions of England.

“As I looked at all the grey buildings in London; most were belching smoke. I asked Eric if they were factories. He said ‘No they are houses.’ My mistake was because of the chimneys. In Jamaica the only buildings which had chimneys were factories.”

Icolyn wasted no time in finding a job. Two days after arriving she was working in the canteen at British Leyland car factory in Cowley.

“I remember the time exactly – it was 2pm when I looked out of the canteen window to see this white stuff falling.

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“What is it?” I asked. ‘Snow’ was the reply.

“Can you walk in it?” I enquired. But when I walked in it I didn't like it at all. There was ice everywhere. And it was cold. In those days we warmed our home with paraffin heaters.”

Icolyn and Eric's story follows a familiar pattern of immigration in those days. They worked industriously and were able to put down a deposit on a house in Randolph Street, off the Cowley Road. It was to this house that they

brought their four children.

The children had to travel unaccompanied due to the high cost of airfares relative to average income in those days. Icolyn and Eric grew anxious when the flight was delayed. As soon as they arrived at the terminal, their parents bundled their children into unfamiliar coats and other warm clothes.

Number 35 became their home for the next 21 years. Their spirit of

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generosity meant that the once spacious house overflowed. Icolyn began working as a home help. She said: "I got the impression that people don't care for other people."

That certainly wasn't the case at number 35. In that household shelter was extended to anyone in need; of any race or background. In his book Andrew writes: "However much Eric extended the house, it was always full. And so was the cooking pot."

Norman asked his mother if he could bring home a school friend for lunch. His friend Hilroy Burton was from Antiqua. Hilroy's home circumstances were unstable and regular lunches at Randolph Street extended until he moved in and lived with the Smiths.

Icolyn rescued a hungry family from a damp-ridden house nearby. They stayed with her until they were able to find suitable accommodation. That is just a sample of the welcome at number 35.

Icolyn said that because of discrimination life had not been easy for her children. "When they joined East Oxford School they were among only seven black children so there was a lot of name calling."

It is hard to believe the reaction of one mother. Icolyn snatched a boy from the path of a fast

approaching car in the Cowley Road only to be told by his mother "take your black hands off my boy."

Icolyn coped with prejudice with wit and humour – and her heart responds with love and not hate

Discrimination became a big problem for Norman. He was taken on as an apprentice electrician by local contractors Ileo.

Under the arrangement he was meant to be given a day off to attend the College of Further Education like all the other apprentices. The white apprentices did indeed attend college and so got their qualifications but Norman was kept back and made to work every day. It is good that Icolyn's grandchildren will not have memories of the Cowley Road barber who would not cut black people's hair, and of shop assistants who did nothing to hide their dislike of serving a black person.

Among Icolyn's happiest memories is the time starting in 1970 when she worked as a nurse at Cowley Road Hospital. She trained on the job under the watchful eye of Staff Nurse Holywell. Much of that happiness was due to the appreciation of the patients who enjoyed her sense of humour and encouragement.

Tragedy struck in 1975 when Eric became sick with a malignant



Icolyn pictured with her desert island choice – a watercolour of Oxford's colleges



tumour. Icolyn cared for Eric at home until his death in March 1976.

After this that Icolyn often juggled three jobs to make ends meet.

Eric and Icolyn's youngest son Gary had been born in Oxford and was still in primary school and her daughters were teenagers. She wanted to be at home for them at the end of the school day. So she applied to Oxford Social Services to become a care worker. That is the job she did for the next 24 years.

Icolyn said: "I liked my elderly clients and built up strong relationships with them but care workers are not valued by their employers."

That becomes obvious in the next part of Icolyn's story which is about the origin of the Oxford Community Soup Kitchen.

"One of my clients was Bishop George Appleton who lived in James Street. I finished work there at 6.30pm and was on my way to see my next client when I noticed a young man scavenging for food in concrete refuse bin. I was so shocked that emotions stirred in my mind. I stopped and prayed "Something has to be done, Lord. What can I do?" It was like a vision: the sunlight appeared brighter. I knew I had to do something."

What Icolyn did was to talk to her family and her church, The Church of God of Prophecy. She told them that she wanted to open a soup kitchen but had nowhere to do it and no money to fund it.

Good news came from The Asian Cultural Centre. The manager Jawaid Malik said the Asian dressmakers were no longer needed on Wednesdays so she could use it for her soup kitchen. Her first attempts at securing a grant failed but after the Bishop gave a

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**Icolyn pictured at
Harris Manchester
College, Oxford**

Photograph: Cliff Hide



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donation, then Tyndal House rang to say they had £1,500 unspent budget which she could use. The church members rallied around as volunteers and so the kitchen was soon up and running.

Icolyn said “Andy, the manager of Aldens butchers in Oxford offered fresh bones for boiling up as soup. I added vegetables and spices and a healthy soup has featured as a starter ever since. To begin with we had to use our own pots.”

Mr Malik kept the rent as low as possible and put notices in pubs, shops and hospitals and offers of help came in. The reason it had to be on a Wednesday was because Icolyn had contacted her supervisor and asked if she could reschedule her Wednesday clients so that she could have the day off to run the soup kitchen. They agreed to the day off but it was without pay.

The soup kitchen opened its doors on September 28, 1989.

Icolyn said: “On the first day nine men came along including the tattooed young man who I had seen scavenging. Anticipating more the next week, I bought two sacks of potatoes. Word got around and 60 people came.”

Most of them were white men who had been overcome by financial and marital problems and others had sunk under the influence of drink and drugs. Most of them had lost all hope and self-respect and they stank.

Icolyn said: “I wondered what to do about it. I encouraged them to use the centre’s wash hand basins, to discard their old clothes and put on ones from the second-hand clothes we collected. Sometimes it only takes a clean body in clean clothes to make a man without hope feel better.”

Icolyn gave them something most had not experienced for a long time.

She told me the story of Charlie.

“When I met Charlie he was young but you would think he was old. No shop in the Cowley Road would let him into their shops. He came to the soup kitchen and stood on the threshold his arms folded and his eyes glaring in an aggressive and angry pose. I went over to him and put a hand on his shoulder and said ‘It’s alright son.’ He started to cry. I gave him a hug and he looked at me and said ‘Will you be my mum?’

“That is all he needed... to feel a loving touch. Gradually he started to put his life in order and began to help in the kitchen. He got a place to study at Ruskin College and started to work at the Probation Centre to help young men who had got themselves into similar situations. He thanked me and said ‘Ma, no one but you could get the Charlie out of me.’

That is just one story of one of the lives Icolyn has turned around. Her generosity was recognised on November 13, 1998 when her name was on the New Year’s honours list.

Since then Icolyn became something of media star when, in November 2011, the soup kitchen was used as a venue for Channel 4’s *Secret Millionaire*. She thought they were filming a programme called *Food for Thought*.

Successful restaurant owner Arfan Razak was the secret millionaire. He admitted to Icolyn that he was likely to turn aside from homeless people thinking they might mug him. Icolyn took him to task, saying: “You have no right to judge anyone. It could be you.”

By this time Icolyn had moved to Kelburne Road and on the last day when, abandoning his

assumed name, Razak went to give her a cheque. He held her hand tightly. She asked why. He said “Because I’ve been lying to you and I’m afraid you might hit me!”

When she thanked him for his cheque she said, “The love of people is the best riches you will ever have. Live for others – life is for sharing.”

That is what Icolyn has done all her life providing a wonderful example to all of us of how to live a good life. As Razak said “Ma Smith is one in a million.”

She used his cheque to open the kitchen on Saturdays as well as Wednesdays.

It feels unkind to tear her away from her vibrant extended family to send her to Oxtopia. She said, “I must have my photograph albums and that way take my family with me and I can’t be without my Bible.”

I asked her if there was anything else she would like to take? I promised her that there is a copy of all the major holy books on the island.

“Can I take my watercolours? I love painting and maybe I’ll take a painting of the colleges to remind me of Oxford.” **LE**

• *If you would like to read more about Ma Smith then From Coolshade to Cowley Road by Andrew Bax is published by Bombus Books at £7.99. Order it from any bookseller, or post free from www.bombusbooks.co.uk. All proceeds are being donated to the Icolyn Smith Foundation. If you would like to donate to the Oxford Community Soup Kitchen it is now a charitable trust – The Icolyn Smith Foundation.*