

# City resident speaks up on her homeless experiences

**BY KELLY WICKHAM**

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A BUSINESSWOMAN who was awarded a civic award by Chichester City Council last month has opened up about her experiences at being homeless.

Donna Ockenden, who set up and runs The Chichester Four Streets Project – a charity which helps the homeless in the city – has spoken about her own personal struggle living without a permanent home.

With around 26 volunteers, the charity distributes food, water, hot soup and any other necessities homeless people might need, such as dry socks, sleeping bags and toiletries.

On Monday, February 4, Donna was given a civic award by the council for her tireless work which also includes the Community Coat Rack, run during the winter to give free coats to those in need.

At only 18, Donna found herself homeless and with full responsibility for her four siblings aged four to 16 in Bristol in 1985.

The only solution available to Bristol City Council was 'emergency bed and breakfast' accommodation.

The family got used to meeting drug users, drunks and recent discharges from the local psychiatric hospitals.

All the bathrooms and toilets were shared, there was one canteen style

facility to serve breakfast. After that, residents were expected to leave the house until 5pm.

Donna said: "I should tell you that just like every homeless, hungry and vulnerably housed person we meet on the Four Streets Project we had hopes and dreams for the future.

"We had an interesting life, once, living very comfortably in a big house, in Abu Dhabi, Iran and Nigeria through our parents' work and we had gone to private school.

"Our parents had a spiteful and nasty divorce, spent huge amounts on legal fees, lost the first house and failed to recognise that the most important thing to achieve out of the divorce should have been the welfare of their children.

"Homelessness, however long ago, is never forgotten – it leaves a scar, it leaves a fear. That fear never goes away. Many of the people we see remain on a download spiral.

"My homelessness was something that was caused by actions of others and was outside my control. Many of the people we help will have had a similar set of circumstances imposed upon them, the difference is that I managed to pull myself and my family out of where we landed – they have not.

"My plea then is that rather than think of the people we help as an inconvenience who make Chichester look untidy, who are someone to walk past hurriedly, remember that they too will have a

'back story', they will be cold, they will be hungry, they will be frightened. Remember this – and be kind."

For more information on the Four Streets Project, visit: [facebook.com/fourstreetsproject/](http://facebook.com/fourstreetsproject/)



▶ Donna at the Community Coat Rack