

Bert Jones 1935-2006.



Bert Jones was an individual full of vitality and optimism, someone with a strong cultural background as he acknowledged it in his deep roots and in his appreciation for Welsh culture as an English speaking south-Walian. He was resilient because despite being hurt deeply by, for example, his sudden departure from NEWI in 1999 or by the closure of the Wales Youth Agency in 2005, he was able to continue to fight for what he had believed in for all of his professional working life. That is, the value and potential of all the young people of Wales and the need for a particular style of intervention by adults that enabled young people to discover for themselves the characteristics they needed to lead a life worth living.

Bert was, above all else, an inspirational lecturer who enthused many students on professional qualifying programmes at NEWI and UWIC for almost 30 years. During the same time he was involved in delivering a range of Youth and Community work programmes to large numbers of students involved in the old 'Bessey' courses which became part of the Coherent Route of Training in Wales. In particular he developed a long term link with West Wales and became a regular visitor to the Ferryside Training Centre where he encouraged part-time workers into both thoughtful ways of working with young people and the possibility of developing a career in the Youth Service. His style of teaching reflected his personality and as a consequence it was informed, passionate, creative and often inspirational. Sometimes it lost its focus as he concentrated on a particular argument with an individual or small group among the students he was teaching, promising to come back to the main topic as soon as he had sorted out some particular argument. Bert's ability to become distracted, or perhaps refocused on a new priority, was perhaps most obvious during a national committee meeting of some importance when Bert, incensed by what he considered an inappropriate remark, shot to his feet, red in the face, veins throbbing in his neck to pound the table demanding the Chair of the meeting allow him to speak. After some confusion he was gently reminded that he was the Chair. However, his work as a teacher was above all else underpinned by an immense knowledge and love of his subject. There was little he could not recall from his reading and his discussion with colleagues both in Wales, the UK or the wider Europe.

Bert could also be identified by his great energy which often spilled over in the most inappropriate ways. When he was driving for example he would change gear with increasing frequency dependent on how agitated he became during a conversation with his passengers. This was not a comfortable position, with one passenger arriving at a meeting in mid-Wales white and shaking following a car journey from Wrexham with frequent gear changes made worse by the claim that he was in a hire car with an automatic gearbox. Another example of the excitement of driving with Bert was experienced by a nervous passenger who had been offered a lift to the History Conference in Durham on a particularly bleak week-end. Driving up the M6 in sleet, snow and a biting wind he would, it was claimed by his passenger, slow down in the fast lane from 60 miles an hour to a sedate 30 miles an hour so that he could read the road signs and not miss his exit. This excess of energy forced his students at NEWI to develop a range of strategies to slow him down in his seemingly constant flight around the campus at Cartrefle. As a consequence it was not unusual to find small groups of them lurking at a crossroad of paths waiting to waylay him with a well placed question or request as he came flying past from one brief meeting on his way to another.

Bert had a great ability to make those he had taught or worked with feel good about themselves. If he had to introduce someone at a conference or some other event he would always be fulsome in his praise of their achievements always able to find some significant achievement in their past, always able to describe their potential for the future. Achievements by his students would be magnified by his eloquence as would their promotion which was always underpinned by a great belief that at last the right people would be in position to take the Youth Service forward. He was a great socialiser given the right circumstances, always happy to meet colleagues for a beer or, depending on the time of day, a glass of whisky. He saw these times as an opportunity to discuss a wide range of issues with whoever was about. The state of Welsh rugby, which had never improved in his opinion from the golden years of the 60s and 70s, the new players with their yet to be revealed potential; and above all else an abiding wish to see England beaten by traditional Welsh inventiveness. It was also a time to voice his concerns about the Welsh language becoming an elitist language which would disadvantage those who were unable to speak it and his support for becoming part of the wider Europe where he had many friends and colleagues.

Bert was born in 1935 and raised in Llanover Road, Pontypridd. The youngest son of Gladys and William Jones he was educated at Pontypridd Grammar school until he served in the RAF. On completion of his National Service in 1956 he attended St Paul's College Cheltenham where he obtained his Teacher's Certificate. His first teaching position was in Barking, Essex where he also made a name playing rugby at scrum half for the Ford Motor company. In 1958 he married Peggy (Brown) and lived in Chadwell Heath, Essex until 1959 when he returned to Wales to take up a teaching post at Twyn School Caerphilly where he continued his rugby playing with Taffs Well. During the following years he started his part-time youth work at Pentyrch

before taking up a full-time Youth Tutor post at Penarth which proved highly successful with the club winning the Glamorgan Youth Eisteddfod Shield for a number of years. Whilst at Penarth he studied for an Open University Degree as one of its first students. He was seconded to Manchester University where he gained an M.Ed Degree.

In 1977 he was appointed lecturer in Youth and Community at Cartrefle College Wrexham. On the transition to NEWI during reorganisation in 1977 he was appointed Principal Lecturer until his early retirement in 1999. During this time Bert developed a national role in Wales and was actively involved in many of the key developments affecting both the strategic and operational priorities of the Youth Service. Youth Information was a particular interest and he was part of the Canllaw/On Line initiative which produced the first information booklet for young people in 1985. He was an original member of the Board of the Wales Youth Agency following its formation in 1992 and he was instrumental in bringing the professional endorsement responsibility for Youth and Community Work training to Wales and was a founder member of the Education and Training Standards Committee which was formed as a sub-committee of the Wales Youth Agency in 1995. His work on behalf of this committee included a central involvement in the development of the Coherent Route of Training and the writing of A 'Code of Ethics for Youth Workers'

He was very active in the wider Europe and in 1991 became the vice president of the European Association of Training Centres for Socio-educational Care Work (FESET) and president in 1993. He was the first and only president of the association from the UK and was in his own energetic way very active in developing networks around social pedagogical work. As part of this interest Bert organised and managed a study visit to Vilnius in Lithuania to which he had invited key managers and practitioners from the Baltic States to meet with colleagues from the Youth Service in Wales in an attempt to share ideas around the concept of non-formal community based education.

In his 'spare' time he regularly volunteered to work with young people in a wide variety of settings including the innovative Heritage camp run in the 1980s by Alun Michael who became the First Minister in the National Assembly for Wales. He was also actively involved with the Adventure Playground in Wrexham where he performed the role of Father Christmas for many years. I have an endearing memory of Bert preparing for this role in a backroom of the 'Venture' where I had been called for a meeting about a particular development that had annoyed him. His transformation from College Lecturer to Father Christmas was meticulous and nothing was left to chance as he undressed from his work clothes and slowly became, through his costume and make-up, the figure that all the children in the room next door had come to see. Throughout the process he never stopped haranguing me about the failures of government, the need for collective action, the failures of Youth Service managers and practitioners to remember their history. The meeting concluded earlier than many I had enjoyed with Bert because his audience was waiting but he

finished resplendent in his assumed persona with a passionately delivered quotation from Paulo Friere before ringing his large brass bell and striding into a room packed with small children.

During his 'retirement' he worked with the Wales Youth Agency as a consultant and lectured part-time at University of Wales Institute Cardiff (UWIC) which required him to travel down from north Wales often before the sun rose to meet with students for a 9.30am start. This he considered a privilege because it allowed him to drive through what he considered to be the most beautiful country in the world and because it was taking him to do what he enjoyed doing most – teaching Youth and Community work students. In more recent years he assisted at ECTARC, Llangollen where his links and passion for young people and all things European were put to good use.

My last meeting with Bert was in a coffee shop in Llangollen when we spent a couple of hours debating and arguing about how the Youth Service was developing. He was concerned about its future, as he had been for some time because he believed that young people were being moved away from the centre of an agenda that he felt that had been hijacked by bureaucrats who did not see the value of the Youth Service. Despite a long period of despondency Bert had started to develop a new, more positive strategy which involved him in meeting those who had an influence on the Youth Service. This action had re-energised him and he was once again about to write to the Welsh Assembly Government to ask for more information about their thinking and their actions, which I am sure maintained their fondness for him. During that last meeting we also talked about an article we were writing together about the influence of the USA on Welsh youth culture. We had written collaboratively on a number of occasions and his approach was typical of his general approach to his work with young people and the Youth Service. It was grand, sweeping and visionary, full of *hwyl* and ready to challenge the establishment at every opportunity. It was rooted in a unique knowledge of the history of the Youth Service in Wales which included an in-depth recollection of people and events that had shaped it during the previous 40 years. During our last conversation he asked me what I thought of the last draft he had sent me. My reply was that the structure needed some work and the referencing was all over the place. When I made such comments he always used to pat me on the shoulder and say “you used to be my student you know”.

When we parted I expected my usual Sunday evening telephone call which always started with the words “John this is Bert” as if I wouldn't know who it was. Our conversations would often last for a couple of hours as we again discussed young people, the Youth Service the gap between what he believed politicians wanted and what was happening in the field. He would recommend books, he would quote from newspaper articles and he would ask me if I had read the *Western Mail* and seen the letter he had written about some subject that he felt had been ignored.

Bert was a modest man who did not fully recognise the impact he had made on the hundreds of students who had been fortunate enough to meet with him and to have been taught by him. This modesty was perhaps supported by the lack of any recognition from NEWI following his retirement where he had given so much of his time, commitment and energy. It was also supported by the lack of any recognition by the honours system despite his name being forwarded by the Wales Youth Agency. His lasting legacy is, however, the work with young people being carried out on a daily basis by those he trained and influenced. It is a significant legacy that will not diminish soon.

Bert will be an impossible act to follow because he had a combination of attributes that probably do not exist in their entirety in any other individual involved in the Youth Service in Wales. He had an energy that was focused on the Youth Service; he had a great understanding of its history and philosophy; and he was the conscience of those who worked in the Youth Service, always ready to remind those who he thought were undermining its principles and values of the error of their ways.

Bert will be sorely missed by all those who knew and cared for him