

Interview summary: Chris O’Kane, worked at Manor Gardens preschool for thirty-five years.

Interviewer: Emma Marshall

Interviewee: Chris O’Kane

Interview summariser: Ben Hadley

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[00:00:00-00:12:07] (Tags: introductions; relationship with the centre; staff training; past and present)

Chris O’ Kane was born in Enniskillen, Northern Ireland in 1951. After moving to North London from Germany, she saw a leaflet for Manor Gardens and began taking her eldest daughter to the centre. She helped with nursery sessions and fundraising activities before becoming a paid employee.

Chris started work at the centre in 1978, becoming Deputy Manager of the preschool in 1986, and retired after thirty-five years, aged 61.

She discusses how the preschool has changed over the years and says that the emphasis has shifted from a play environment to providing more structured learning programmes. Chris also mentions the introduction of OFSTED inspections and enhanced staff training and qualifications. Chris sees this as a positive change, helping children to achieve their full potential.

Chris says a great sense of community was achieved by the centre, with all the children living locally. She also speaks about parents’ involvement in activities such as jumble sales.

[00:11:40-00:21:04] (Tags: activities and outings; special events).

Chris mentions that she’s still in contact with many of the centre’s staff. She shares memories of co-workers and parents surprising her on her sixtieth birthday. Chris was overwhelmed to be greeted by parents of children that she had taught in years passed.

She speaks about the annual seaside outings arranged by the centre and how these provided a bonding opportunity for children and parents, as well as giving disadvantaged families the chance to have a trip outside London.

[00:21:04-00:27:41] (Tags: past and present; equality and diversity)

Chris speaks about local authority and OFSTED inspections and the gradual formalisation of procedures. She feels that these changes have benefited staff - providing them with more training - and parents - who have become more involved in their children’s development. She speaks about the support that available for parents and children during her years at the centre.

Chris feels that the multi-cultural nature of the Holloway community was well represented in the centre, as were children with special needs. She says that having children from a variety of backgrounds encouraged a healthy sense of community and fostered understanding. Chris says the centre had a good reputation for its provision of services for children with disabilities.

[00:27:41-00:33:52] (Tags: centre leadership; past and present; technology)

Chris has seen many different directors pass through the centre and has seen many changes. She remembers Brian Earle and discusses the positive changes he effected, including organising foreign exchanges, and bringing in other organisations to help improve the centre.

Chris remembers the introduction of computers being another major change. Chris had to receive some training herself before she helped the children. The children learned very quickly, however, and she was amazed by their quick progress.

[00:33:52-00:40:32] (Tags: past and present; learning methods)

Chris speaks about how the centre continues to utilise traditional approaches in combination with new methods, to help children learn through play. She mentions creative activities, including sandpit play, book corners, and playdough, which are still considered integral to children's development.

She says that staff would coordinate the use of computers and play areas, and make sure that children would use the resources most beneficial to their needs.

[00:40:32-00:45:43] (Tags: current relationship with the centre; Queen Mother's visit; key events)

Chris was always very happy at the centre, and misses working there, although she is still in touch with people there.

She fondly remembers when the Queen Mother came to visit the centre although it was very nerve racking! There was a great deal of preparation by security officials, who checked the centre beforehand, and blocked off the roads. She will never forget appearing on the ten o'clock news, singing nursery rhymes with the Queen Mother!

[00:45:43-00:49:25] (Tags: reputation of the centre)

The centre built up a good reputation over the years through word of mouth, with former attendees bringing their own children along. Many people from other boroughs began attending the centre, and they were eventually oversubscribed.

When the NHS left the building, this created space for more groups to join and provide a wider variety of activities for the local community.

[00:49:25-00:59:26] (Tags: personal achievements; centre improvements)

The centre has been a huge part of Chris's life, and helped her to become part of the community when she first arrived. She feels that it is a very welcoming place.

When she arrived the OFSTED report for the pre-school was 'satisfactory'. By the time she left it was 'outstanding'. She put all her efforts into improving the centre and making sure that the standards were high.

She is very complimentary about her co-workers, and thinks that they will be able to provide an excellent service into the future.

(Edited by TZ May 2016)