

I've found my purpose

SATCoL* charity shop manager Jo Stringer (East Grinstead) shares her story

I've really grown to love The Salvation Army, I think for its ethos more than anything else. At times I've needed the Army more than I've needed my wits about me and my strength.

I worked in the charity sector for more than ten years, but gave up on each organisation due to a lack of transparency about their aims and values. I didn't feel like I fitted in or was appreciated in any way that mattered. I've now been the charity shop manager at East Grinstead for about a year and a half, and it's become my life's work – I love it!

The shop has undergone huge transformations. When I arrived in 2018 I saw that it needed to be better structured and more welcoming. Lisa Lebborn, my area sales manager, knew I had a lot of experience, so she left me to it. I started in the store room – that's where all the magic happens – and worked my way forwards.

I've always been creative. I have an eye for detail and have always been keen on window displays. I went through quite a traumatic experience ten years ago and ended up in a women's refuge with my children after fleeing domestic violence. I think when you suffer trauma of some kind, it can manifest itself in the form of creativity. I find I am most inspired when something is bothering me, if I'm upset or I can't figure something out. It usually comes out visually in the shop.

My fiancé and full-time volunteer, James, processes the two tonnes of clothing we receive each week from the main hub in Kettering. We have been blessed with some amazing clothing, including items from Gucci, Valentino, Stone Island, Armani and YSL. Now, we're one of four SATCoL boutiques. This means price-wise, we're a little bit more expensive because of the quality of our clothing.

Most of the shop now rolls into two themes: designer or vintage, with added glam in the more expensive areas of the



store. We also have a wedding department with vintage dresses to match all our customers' needs.

I'm grateful for the support we receive. When Lisa, Regional Manager Salvador Fernandez, SATCoL Managing Director Trevor Caffull and Head of Retail Chris Jestic visited the store last summer, their response was so positive. It just gave me confirmation that what I'm doing is right.

To date, the shop is doing amazingly well. We receive positive comments from customers daily. A lot of our success is down to hard work, passion and vision. But most of it is thanks to the customers, who are thrilled with their purchases and keep coming back week in, week out. All the shop's changes reflect their experiences – how they feel inside the store and what makes them want to stay longer. We want them to have an enjoyable experience as a whole.

I have a way of connecting with older people when they've experienced the loss of a loved one. I see this as one of my gifts.

My confidence and self-esteem have soared and it's exactly the same for

James. He suffers with anxiety – although not so much now – so for him to be able to hold down conversations with random customers is a huge step. He's made many good friends and that's allowed him to talk about things in the past that he couldn't discuss before because they were too painful.

I'm on my own faith journey too. I think becoming a Salvationist is going to be the next step for me. It's hard to describe, but it's happening. Christianity has run through my family ever since I was little. As an adult, I wouldn't say I've ever really had a faith as such but it's always come into my life when I've needed a bit of strength. There's a right time for everything. It's not about pushing faith down people's throats – there's an easy, gentle way to go about it.

I've learnt a lot this past year. I have been at the bottom of the bottom and seen the worst of how a human being can feel, but there is light.

I've found my purpose and of all the places it could be it's with The Salvation Army, the one thing I tried to get away from as a child with my mum being close to the church. She's so proud because that's all she's ever wanted for me.

The shop has given me the freedom to be my best self and has helped me grow as a person. It has become mine and James's second home, and Salvador, Trevor, Chris, Lisa and all the volunteers have all become a family.



*Salvation Army Trading Company Ltd