

Deirdre Battista (b.1943)

‘Bringing people together’



“Human relationships are the most important things to me. I feel we are all one spirit, in different bodies, and that’s why I constantly try to bring people together, and this is what guides me.”

Deirdre Elaine Battista is someone who has striven to promote care and consideration for the environment and people of all backgrounds. This is evident in her early involvement in the MK Green Town movement during the 70s¹, her co-ordination of the UK leg of the Milton Keynes to Moscow Sacred Run for Land and Life in 1990² and most especially through driving the production of the One World Quilt project and management of the building of the Medicine Wheel at North Willen Lakeside. These are the legacies of an eco-activist with a concern for Peace, Global Unity and the environmental and spiritual health of our city.



Born in Wendover, Deirdre came to Bletchley in 1967 with her husband who had taken up a post as a ‘traffic cop’ on the newly-opened M1, living in a house in Warwick Place until moving to Yardley Gobion in the ‘70s. She became interested in yoga and meditation, and this led her to visit a group of Buddhist monks and nuns living in a bungalow at Newlands farm, Willen, whilst they planned the building of a Japanese Peace Pagoda (the first in the western world) on the site of an old rubbish dump. In turn, Deirdre learned of their respect for, and relationship with the Native Americans of the Six Nations³, who were campaigning to secure and maintain their tribal lands. In about 1978 Deirdre moved to Olney (*“pronounced locally to rhyme with pony!”*) following a

¹ At one time a group of about 120 people were active. The Green Town movement petered out but many of those activists continued living in or near Milton Keynes and supporting projects that promoted ‘sustainable living’.

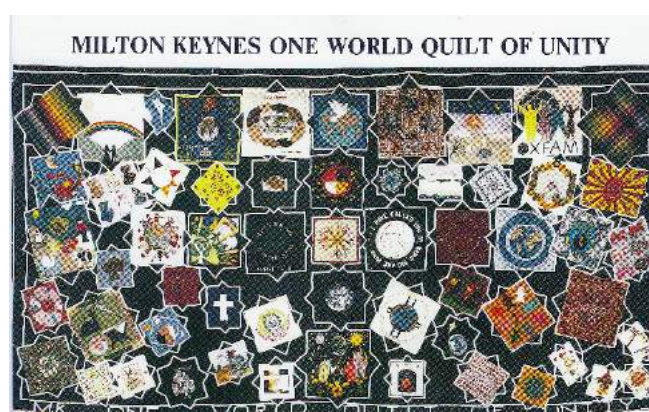
² A 7000km Run which involved over 100 Native Americans, Japanese Ainu and European runners travelling through 12 different countries, some of them newly ‘open’ to foreigners after the Cold War.

³ Also known as the Iroquois Confederacy, a confederation of native American Indian tribes from the area known as the Upper New York state. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Iroquois-Confederacy>.

divorce. At this time the Green Town movement was active and over a period of about ten years Deirdre took part in the discussions, research and planning that fuelled the aspiration for the development of a sustainable, eco-friendly neighbourhood, within the boundary of the new city of Milton Keynes.

Through her involvement with the Buddhists at Willen, Deirdre met architect and town planner Tom Hancock, who became her second husband, and eventually they moved into Clock House, Weston Underwood. This was where two chiefs of the Onondaga tribe, Chief Shenandoah and Chief Oren Lyons, visited in the early 1980s, and Deirdre agreed to host a Lacrosse team from the Six Nations, who played matches across the country publicising their campaign for Land Rights. It was also from Clock House that she co-ordinated the UK leg of the Sacred Run for Life and Land⁴ in 1990. The runners and their teams, with many local people, walked from the Peace Pagoda to the official start at Secklow Mound Milton Keynes. The run traversed France and many of the newly-accessible countries of Eastern Europe, ending in Red Square, Moscow.

Leading up to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro⁵ Deirdre came up with the idea of a One World Quilt as a way to raise awareness of this important conference and enable people, particularly women, young people and ethnic minority groups⁶ to feel *“involved in a celebration of life, and express the responsibility we all share to change the world.”* Every group was asked to produce a panel 12” x 12” capturing their hopes for One World, but the panels ended up as different sizes, so it was quite a challenge to stitch them together and to back the quilt. Deirdre says that for all the groups, *“the panels were like a meditation”*. On completion the quilt was hung in the Guildhall in Christ the Cornerstone, Central Milton Keynes.



The word spread and Deirdre was invited to tour Ireland in 1993 using the Milton Keynes One World Quilt as a catalyst for ice-breaker workshops in communities across the whole island, and supporting the creation of area quilts. An All-Ireland quilt was pieced together with contributions from fifty-nine groups, including traveller women and women from communities affected by the Northern Ireland Troubles. The One World Quilt had been displayed in the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin as part of the tour, and the museum continued its support following the unveiling of the All-Ireland quilt by President Mary Robinson in November 1993, so that the One World Quilt could go on tour and continue to engage communities in development education.

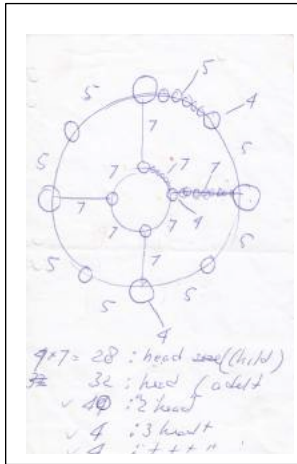
⁴ Running has long been a part of the traditional Native American way of life, as a way of connecting with Mother Earth through one's body, mind, and spirit.

⁵ The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, also known as the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit, Rio Summit, Rio Conference, and Earth Summit, was a major United Nations conference held in Rio de Janeiro from 3 to 14 June 1992.

⁶ Thirty-four groups from across Milton Keynes contributed.

The One World Quilt was the only community piece of art in the Right To Hope⁷ exhibition which, during 1995, toured war torn areas, including Belfast, Sarajevo and South Africa, as a stimulus for discussion and a contribution to peace and reconciliation in war-weary areas of the world. This tour was part of the commemorations of the 50th anniversary of the United Nations and UNESCO.

At the end of the '90s Deirdre and a group of colleagues (mostly ex Green Towners!) set up a not-for-profit company to work with schools and community groups from Glasgow to London promoting the Agenda 21 action plan that had come out of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, through making their own quilts to express their dreams and aspirations for 'their' world.



In about 1999 Roy Little sun, an adopted son of a Hopi elder, visited the Japanese Buddhist Temple at Willen. His mission was to travel the world promoting 'Medicine Wheels for Peace' for the Millennium and after speaking with the nuns and monks, Deirdre was asked to co-ordinate a project to construct one in Milton Keynes. She called together a group of people at the temple, which eventually grew to over 30. One, a lawyer, helped her put together a proposal to raise funds for a 'Millennium Landscape Sculpture', based on Roy Little sun's basic drawing of a wheel, and £10,000 was raised.

Deirdre knew of a stone quarry at Weston Underwood on farmland owned by the Goss family, and after discussions with the family it was agreed that the stones could be quarried from there. Deirdre felt this was as it should be; the quarry had been on the route of a large circular walk that Chief Shenandoah and Chief Oren Lyons had undertaken, smoking their pipes of peace as they went, when they stayed at the Clock House. A local Landscape Architect, Neil Higson, drew up detailed plans, which were successfully submitted to the Parks Trust. Unusually on Parks Trust land, a fire pit was also allowed.



Sylvia Goss, from the Goss family, marks out the spot for the fire pit.

The selection of stones was important, as Deirdre comments:

"A group of us went to choose the stones with Neil and one of the nuns and a monk. We have one stone that is the shape of Africa, which is special as people say that when Africa is healed, the world will be healed. We found a 'needle' stone which is in line with the East Gate and is on the same ley line as the Tree Cathedral and Midsummer Boulevard."

As word spread many people got involved with the project and it seemed that those with particular skills arrived at just the right moment. One man, who had stone-laying skills, noticed an 'ad' on the temple noticeboard one day and came along the next day just as the stones around

⁷ "The overriding aim of the Right to Hope project is to show how art can counteract assumptions and prejudice and communicate across cultures to promote values for survival and peace." The Right to Hope: Global Problems, Global Vision, Earthscan Publications, 1995.

the centre of the wheel needed placing; not easy to get the exact configuration but he had the knowledge. Machinery had to be hired for some tasks but mostly it was people-power.

On the day of the inauguration, 10th September 2000, Roy LittleSun smoked a sacred pipe at every gate and invited a woman to come forward, who then invited another woman until eight were ready to light the Sacred Fire, which symbolised the Spirit within each of us. Deirdre was one of the women. As she commented: *“He said it was the time for women to step forward and tell the truth, leading the building of communities.”* There were people from many backgrounds, and many faiths and none, at the inauguration, including two Kalahari Bush-people who had constructed a Medicine Wheel in their homeland.



Deirdre lays a fire in the fire pit

The Medicine Wheel at Willen Lake is an integral part of a special and peaceful area. Deirdre notes: *“There have been marriages in the Wheel and people go to honour the Equinoxes and light the Fire, and we know that people go when they have lost someone or if they are not well.”*

Deirdre has also run her own (veggie) catering business and worked at the Open University in the Business School where she supported the Bring Your Daughter to Work initiative. In retirement she spends much of the year in Puglia, Italy but returns to Milton Keynes to run her Green Town business of producing natural soaps and plant based non-toxic candles perfumed with 100% essential oils.

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