



BoardBuilders



BIG ALLIANCE

CASE STUDY:

Trustee Jeff O'Brien

Partner at Davis Polk & Wardwell
London LLP and Trustee of
Manor Gardens Welfare Trust



Jeff O'Brien on holiday in Sri Lanka with his daughter

In May 2019 Jeff O'Brien, co-head of the European practice at Davis Polk & Wardwell London LLP, a large, international law firm, joined the board of Manor Gardens Welfare Trust based in Holloway. We caught up with him to find out about his experience of becoming a trustee.

WHAT ORIGINALLY MOTIVATED YOU TO WANT TO BE A TRUSTEE?

I wanted to give something back to the local community directly – giving my time (and I hope some expertise!) seemed the most impactful way I could do so. In addition, I wanted to expand my skill set to have more experience serving on an oversight body with members from all different industries and vocations – my day job is advising senior executives and boards on corporate transactions, and I thought it would be interesting to play a different role, in particular with a worthy organization delivering critical services to a local community.

HOW DID THE OPPORTUNITY COME ABOUT? HOW DID ELBA SUPPORT WITH GETTING THE ROLE?

I found out about the opportunity by attending one of ELBA's BoardMatch events, which was advertised at my law firm. At the BoardMatch event there were many organizations at which I could have seen myself as a trustee, but the energy and precision of the Manor Gardens Welfare Trust presentation was compelling. ELBA helped prepare me for the interviews and set the expectations for the interviews.

WHAT HAS YOUR EXPERIENCE BEEN LIKE SO FAR? WHAT HAVE YOU ACHIEVED?

It's now been a year since I became a trustee at Manor Gardens Welfare Trust. Within that year a lot has changed! For the first six months or so it was fairly standard Board level discussions regarding financial position, fundraising strategies, real estate matters (MGWT is a freeholder of property in Holloway) and compliance matters. Then MGWT embarked on a 360 review of their strategy, which involved a series of very detailed meetings and roundtables. More recently of course, Covid-19 has knocked all of us sideways and the Board's role has shifted again, to really be a sounding board for the senior leadership team as they work through how to direct or redirect their resource in the current environment. It's hard to contextualize the role now versus the role it was at the beginning, but the best I can do is to say it is now to be a humble servant to the senior leadership team as they seek to provide the critical services they provide (nursery to key workers' children, domestic abuse counseling, elder care) in a pandemic.

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNT ABOUT THE ORGANISATION, ISLINGTON, AND THE ISSUES THEY ARE FACING?

Manor Gardens Welfare Trust's mission is to deliver real solutions to urgent community issues and real benefits to those who need such benefits, at a time in which real funding for councils and other governmental organisations is declining. Currently, the trust offers support with early parenthood, friendships, stroke survivors, perinatal issues and physical and mental wellbeing. They also run two nurseries in the local area which offer a rich and vibrant learning environment where children are highly stimulated. Having a safe space that is open to all ages is so important, when needs are getting

ever greater and inequalities more stark – Islington is really lucky to have Manor Gardens Welfare Trust!

WHAT IMPACT IS THE ROLE HAVING ON YOU AND YOUR PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT?

Among other things, the role has made me just fundamentally grateful for all that my family and I have in our lives. The need in the local community is so profound that the energy and skill required of organizations like MGWT is absolutely critical to provide better outcomes for those who have the most need. And when I say energy, I mean energy not only to deliver the technical support and facilities and expertise, but to do it with more limited staffing than most organisations.

WHY SHOULD STAFF IN CORPORATE COMPANIES VOLUNTEER? WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

Being a trustee of a community organisation can help with professional development and personal wellbeing – while my contribution is small, it still makes me feel good and I am certainly expanding my skill set so even beyond altruism there are clear reasons to volunteer. All of this was true before Covid-19, but it is even truer now!



Local residents enjoy a Manor Gardens Welfare Trust event

CONTACT JONATHAN.TAIT@ELBA-1.ORG.UK FOR MORE INFORMATION