

'A doctorate and MBE in six months ... a bit of me still pinches myself'

Barbara Gale, chief executive of St Nicholas Hospice Care which turns 35 this year, tells Barbara Eeles about her life and career

When Barbara Gale became a nurse she never dreamed she would go into management – let alone earn two masters' degrees, a PhD, and an MBE.

Barbara has been chief executive of St Nicholas Hospice Care for 12 years.

She spearheads the team of 190 staff and 600-plus volunteers that supports people with life-limiting conditions, and their families, through illness and bereavement.

But she says she was not brilliant at school. She only began to build up her formidable academic qualifications after a break from work to look after her children.

Barbara, 60, was awarded an MBE in the 2019 New Year's Honours – shortly after getting her PhD which took more than six years of study while working full time.

Her chief executive role covers services, staff and income generation. "It's a very complex organisation," she says.

Care and counselling is provided at the hospice in Bury St Edmunds but the vast majority is now delivered in the community, allowing people to spend their final days at home.

Innovations during Barbara's time in charge include two new volunteer schemes – Nicky's Way for bereaved children, and Hospice Neighbours – both of which won Queen's Awards.

She has also put on flashing bunny ears to take part in the Girls' Night Out sponsored walk, one of many fund-raising events that help towards the £6.9 million annual cost of running the services.

Barbara spent her childhood in Eastbourne. "I felt I was more practical than academic," she says. "I was okay at school but wouldn't say I was very bright.

"I started working in a local hospital and really did love it. There's something about being able to care for someone having a difficult time and putting them at their ease."

She decided on a nursing career and trained at Guy's Hospital in London in the 1970s, then moved to Oxford to work on a critical care ward.

"I was always interested in what we called 'terminal care', the care of people who were dying.

"A local hospice, Sir Michael Sobell House, had a vacancy for a registered nurse so I went to join them. It was one of the pioneering hospices.

"A lot of people think hospices are sad places, and sad things do happen. But it's a privilege to help at that time in people's lives."

Barbara went on to be a Macmillan community nurse before moving to the Arthur Rank Hospice near Cambridge, where she got involved in teaching nurses and GPs.

She trained as a family therapist helping the children of hospice patients and thought that was going to be her career.

Then, she "slipped into management" after being appointed acting matron. "You could have knocked me over with a feather when I became a matron, then a chief executive," she says. "It wasn't a plan."

She came to St Nicholas as clinical services director in 2005.

Her academic qualifications have been gained in the past 15 years – a masters' degree in family therapy, another in hospice leadership, then

"I'm lucky because I love my job. It's in my blood. I've done it for such a long time. It's a privilege to help at that time in people's lives"

Barbara Gale

a PhD in palliative care which she received last year.

She thinks her late father, who died when she was 19, would have been proud of her achievements.

"He worked his way up from a teaboy with Massey Ferguson to being their managing director in Canada.

"I think he'd be really proud of the way I've worked my way up.

"To get a doctorate and an MBE within six months ... I'm really chuffed. There's a bit of me that still pinches myself.

"The MBE was an amazing surprise. I got home one evening in November and there was this letter. Then you have to keep it quiet until the official announcement.

"It was real pride for me but also recognition of all the work we have been doing at St Nicholas Hospice Care. To me, it's a team award."

Barbara was presented with her award at the beginning of March. Daughter Kathryn, son Tristan, and his fiancée Sarah were there to see the presentation by the Prince of Wales.

"I was really proud, and a little nervous," she says. "It was lovely to have my family with me to share the experience, and I felt so honoured to be there representing everyone at St Nicholas Hospice Care."

Kathryn, who supports people



Barbara Gale, chief executive of St Nicholas Hospice Care, with her MBE

doing work-based learning, and Tristan, a photographer, have both stayed in the Bury area.

"My children live 15 minutes either side of me. I do a lot of dog sitting for them and bring the dogs into work. You can't work full time and have a dog, so borrowing them is best.

"I've worked a lot of my children's lives. I had a little time off when they were young, and went back to work in 1995. I started studying after that.

"I just loved the learning, having space to learn and grow. I enjoyed it so much more than when I was at school.

"It took me six and a half years to do the PhD. My thesis was 40,000 words on the experiences of community hospice volunteers. I spoke to our hospice neighbours, and others."

She feels it is vital to get to know

her staff and build relationships inside and outside the hospice. That includes having a strong marketing team.

"I'm a visible chief executive. I meet all the new staff. Everyone has half an hour with me.

"Leadership sometimes is about challenging, asking the right questions, and being prepared to take risks.

"We were very privileged that Richard Norburn, our founder, was so supportive about changing to develop and grow. He said organisations have to develop, adapt and do things differently."

She is social media-savvy and believes in its growing importance in both fund-raising and supporting patients and families in such a rural area.

"I do Twitter – I'm quite tech-y, and also have a blog," she says.

"I'm lucky because I love my job.

It's in my blood. I have done it for so long.

"The only time I switch off is on holiday. I've just been walking with a friend in Norfolk."

The country break gave her plenty of chances to experiment with the camera her son gave her for Christmas. She also paints.

"We had a really rainy day and went bird watching. I think I could get quite hooked on that.

"Having quite a challenging working life, with what can be a stressful job, you have to look after yourself and get a balance.

"I love being outdoors. I know I need to be out in the fresh air. I also go to the gym a few times a week."

Knitting is another favourite way to relax. "I'm doing an Arran jumper for my son at the moment," she says.

She also enjoys travelling and often speaks at conferences abroad.