

INSPIRATIONAL PEOPLE

MAGGIE OLIVER

Maggie Oliver is best known as the former detective constable who resigned in 2012 to expose a major child abuse scandal in Rochdale, Greater Manchester. Maggie, 65, has four children with her late husband, Norman, and lives in Altrincham

TREAT EVERYONE AS YOUR EQUAL

● I was born in the Lancashire mill town of Bacup, where my dad was from. We moved to Sale, Cheshire, when I was five. My mum was born in Austria and emigrated to Bacup in the 1950s to work in the cotton mills. Being Austrian post-war, my family stood out, and I was acutely aware of being 'different'. We faced a lot of prejudice, which made me sensitive to anything that seemed unjust. I had a very strong sense of what was right and wrong from a young age.

A SOULMATE WILL HELP YOU TO FOLLOW YOUR DREAMS

● After grammar school, I wanted to travel, but my parents wanted me to be a typist, get married and have a family. I complied with their wishes until I met Norman, at 20. He was the love of my life, and we went travelling by bus to Marrakesh, the Atlas Mountains, the desert oasis of Meski. We worked in Cornwall, France and Germany. When I returned home, I went to work for my dad in his electrical business.

GET THE BALANCE RIGHT

● We had our first child, Steve, in 1981, when I was 26. I felt I'd found my niche in life. The thought of leaving my baby with a childminder to go back to work was mortifying, so when Norman got back from his work, I went to work for my dad. I adored being a mum, but by 37, and with four children, I decided to do something for myself and went back to university to do a degree in humanities.

YOU'RE NEVER TOO OLD

● I knew I wanted to do something in the community and help people and

I was all set to be a teacher – but the years at university opened my eyes to a different, wider world and I realised I wanted to be a police officer. Norman laughed when I first told him, but he supported me all the way. At 41, I joined Greater Manchester Police (GMP) – a life-changing move. I was to do a six-month residential course but after two nights I called my husband and said I couldn't stand being away from the kids. I did a long commute to the course instead. I was the oldest woman there by 15 years. Wearing full riot gear, or during the rigorous physical fitness training, I felt I was proving something for women over a certain age!

LIFE DEALS SOME PEOPLE

A BAD HAND ● I was posted to Moss Side, inner-city Manchester, which back then was known as 'Gunchester' – there were riots, shootings, drug dealings and gangs. It was a shock. However, it soon became clear that those involved would often have little choice other than to be dragged into that world of crime. I would be supporting families who had been bereaved, often mums who had lost their sons, and as a mum myself I think families found it easier to relate to me. I would invariably also be sent to allegations of rape or domestics, and I developed a reputation of being good with vulnerable people and victims. Moss Side was where I saw my first dead body – in a mortuary, not in the street. It was gruesome to see what happens to someone who has died unexpectedly.

LIFE EXPERIENCE IS PRICELESS

● I was good at my job because I'd had a life before the cops. I knew how to

talk to vulnerable kids. Put me in front of a computer and ask me to do analysis and I'm useless, but I know how to speak to people. The force recognised this and after my two years' probation, I was given a high-profile witness protection job, involving a major Manchester gang. I worked closely with victims' families, and I was also involved in rewriting the procedures for how the force deals with cases of kids and adults who have gone missing.

WE CAN ALL FIND A WAY TO LIVE WITH GRIEF

● In 2003, Norman got seriously ill, with stage-4 bowel cancer. I nursed him through two-and-a-half years of treatment and chemotherapy. We were both 49 when he died, at home, with me and the kids around him. I felt it was the end of me as a woman. I missed him so much my bones ached with grief. A nurse at Christie's, the cancer hospital where he was treated, saw how low I was and suggested I do a charity trek. I fundraised for bowel cancer research, undertaking a gruelling ten-day trek through the Borneo jungle and climbing Mount Kinabalu, the highest mountain in south-east Asia. I left a treasured picture of Norman and me at the top. I now wear a bracelet that says, "She believed she could, so she did" – with the right mindset, everything is possible.

IF YOU WANT SOMETHING DONE...

● Before Norman died, I trained as a detective, and a family liaison officer, becoming a homicide detective in the Major Incident Team (MIT) as part of the serious crime

division. While he was ill, I had begun work on 'Operation Augusta' – which had identified dozens of young victims and dozens of suspects of child abuse. I was on that job for a year and a half. It was a huge investigation. But when Norman's condition deteriorated, I had to take some time off, and by the time I came back three months later, the job had died a death. I was totally incredulous. Nobody could explain to me why the case had been dropped. It was as if it had never happened.

INJUSTICE SHOULD BE CHALLENGED

● In 2010, I was headhunted to join Operation Span, a major investigation set up by GMP into a case of long-term serious sexual abuse and exploitation of vulnerable white children by Pakistani men in Rochdale. The original investigation of the case in 2008 had been a car crash; the girls had been labelled unreliable witnesses and the CPS had decided not to prosecute. I was asked to regain the trust of these girls and I did so after being assured history would not repeat itself. But it did: after seven months of working with the victims, I was told one of them would 'not be used' in the case; in fact, she was accused of being involved in the grooming. It was outrageous – this vulnerable girl had been failed, basics such as recording each allegation of rape weren't being done. I felt a great injustice had been done and although I felt under huge stress, I couldn't stay silent.

THE HARDEST THINGS TO DO CAN ALSO BE THE BEST ● In October 2012, I resigned, so I could



Maggie was presented with a Pride of Manchester award for her work

"I WAS GOOD AT MY JOB BECAUSE I'D HAD A LIFE BEFORE THE COPS. I KNEW HOW TO SPEAK TO VULNERABLE KIDS"

speak out in public. It was the hardest thing I've done, but I couldn't have lived with myself if I hadn't given these children a voice. I exposed the now-infamous Rochdale grooming scandal and in turn this led to a Manchester public finding. After 15 years of fighting, an independent review in January 2020 confirmed that everything I said was true. GMP reopened Operation Augusta, which was renamed Operation Green Jacket.

TRUTH REALLY CAN BE STRANGER THAN FICTION

● After I went public, BBC Radio 4 covered the story. I was also brought in as a consultant when BBC1 made the TV miniseries *Three Girls*, based on the

AS TOLD TO BEVERLEY D'SILVA

true stories of the Rochdale victims, which won two major BAFTA awards. I convinced all the real people portrayed in it to allow their story to be told, and it was watched by more than nine million people. I felt the drama didn't go far enough – so I wrote my book, *Survivors*. I'm very proud of it – it's one my grandkids can read when I'm no longer here.

VICTIMS WILL ALWAYS NEED OUR SUPPORT

● I set up my charity, the Maggie Oliver Foundation, to help survivors of childhood sexual abuse and to address the continuing failures of the system to deal with sexual abuse properly. We've raised £55,000, but we desperately need more funds. My vision is that one day, we will have a centre like this in every city in the country, where survivors can come for help, support, kindness, and a non-judgemental listening ear.

BE OPEN TO NEW EXPERIENCES

● I loved doing *Celebrity Big Brother* in 2018. I was in the house for three weeks, and loved the role playing, and dressing up as 1950s workers. I made friends with Jess Impiazzi, who became like my house daughter, the footballer John Barnes and TV's Ashley James. I was evicted on day 18, the same day as the editor Rachel Johnson, Boris's sister. As to the future, I don't want to get married again but you never know, I may meet someone who is on my wavelength. I am young at heart and I'm not ready to sit at home just yet.

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