

ABOVE:  
Serena Hall (left) and Dani Church



# Why Suffolk friendships are the best

Walberswick ferry operator Dani Church and Southwold artist and gallery owner Serena Hall have been best friends most of their lives. They tell Mike Trippitt how Suffolk bound them together...

WORDS: Mike Trippitt ♦ PHOTOS: Marc Brown

**D**ani Church well remembers first meeting Serena Hall. “It was like, ‘Wow, there’s this crazy blonde thing turned up from London,’” says ferrywoman Dani from the little ferry she plies across the River Blyth.

Enjoying the sunshine of Southwold Harbour, and sitting in the same boat, artist Serena Hall smiles, then both dissolve into laughter. The lifelong friends, now in their forties, catch-up several times a week down at the river, and laughter is never far away.

“Serena was pretty cool at school,” says Dani, recalling the days when an 11-year-old Serena Hall arrived at Reydon High School following her family’s move to Suffolk from southwest London.

“I was a bit more streetwise coming from London, I suppose,” laughs Serena. But the move, from the bustle of a 3,000-pupil Wimbledon school to one of just 200, suited Serena. She was at home immediately.

“I was welcomed with open arms,” she says gratefully. “They were so friendly and could not have been kinder. We had a good strong female group. There are a lot of us who have stayed really good friends.”

Dani Church and Serena Hall both enjoyed happy childhoods that laid the foundation for their fondness for Southwold and Walberswick. When each returned from university educations, neither had any intention of leaving. Their mutual love of the town, the village, the marshes and the river bonded a lasting friendship.

The parallels in the two friends’ lives are striking — their appreciation of the landscape, their values, their happiness and sense of fun. They have shared tragedy too, Dani losing her father and Serena losing both parents long before they were ready.

But it was a sense of destiny that gripped them both. Serena painted rich, vibrant images of her Southwold, and founded the Serena Hall Gallery on Queen Street whilst, in 2001, Dani took over the famous ferry service when her father died.

“When we both finished college neither of us had a job,” Dani says

to Serena. “But you knew then exactly what you wanted to do.”

Serena agrees. “I had tunnel vision. I knew exactly what I wanted. Turning down employment as a commercial artist, she set up her own studio and set about painting the town she loved in big, brightly coloured brush strokes. It is a style now synonymous with her gallery and work.

Meanwhile, her friend Dani, who would become the fifth generation of her family to run the Walberswick ferry, had embarked on a career at the Environment Agency.

“I felt I was going to take the ferry on after my career. I knew I would do it eventually, but I embraced my job at the Environment Agency and probably would have still been doing that had I not had to take this over from Dad.

“Having said that, when Dad was taken ill the first time I did go part-time so I could work with him. I knew I was on my way to

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doing it. I did always know that this would be my vocation, albeit not quite as young as I was.”

Although their perfect working days are very different – Dani’s at the oars in the open, salty air, and Serena’s in the quiet solitude of her studio outside Southwold – both recognise the similarities in what they do. Their businesses are their own. Every decision is theirs and every problem theirs to solve.

“We have to make decisions all the time and that can be hard,” says Serena. “We are both very independent. I don’t have a family, so I tend not to ask anyone else. I tend to figure things out for myself and try to make the best decision.” She turns to Dani. “I think you are similar?”

Dani agrees. “We are both quite headstrong. We do talk about things and give each other advice, and then we probably do what we were going to do anyway! But it is good to talk things out with someone who understands. Not many people understand about making big business decisions.”

Serena says: “In a way, I think it suits us. Although we are different personalities, and neither of us care about money, we are ambitious to succeed in what we do, and do right in our businesses. Success for me is

**ABOVE:**  
Serena and Dani  
have been friends  
since childhood

getting up everyday and being able to go into my studio and be able to paint, and have the materials to do that and to not have to worry about it. And to be able to live here and stay here.”

“And I would add to that, making people happy,” says Dani. “We both like to make people happy with our businesses. The main aim of my business is to make people enjoy what they are doing. When I see people happy and smiling and talking nicely about the ferry that makes me happy.”

“That is really important to both of us,” says Serena. “We care about our customers. They are core to our businesses, and we know that. That’s why we think about what is right for our

customers all the time. What is right for our customers is right for Southwold.”

As the years have passed, Serena Hall and Dani Church have watched Southwold transition from a local working community to a dormitory town of holiday homes. They see both the advantages and disadvantages to Suffolk life.

“Southwold has always been a holiday destination,” Serena says. “People here have always been dependent on income from tourists. It’s just that the balance has tipped, but it is the same as so many other seaside towns in the UK.”

“It’s been in the last 20 years that there has been that tip,” says Dani. “I remember when I first

**BELOW:**  
Dani and Serena  
ask each other for  
advice - although  
they don’t always  
listen!



took over the ferry often people would say that they had bought a house here, and I would feel so angry. They were holiday makers, but we could not afford to live here." Now she is sanguine, and recognises the balance between the local community and the need for tourism. Undeniably, the fabric of Southwold and Walberswick remains intact.

"A lot of it has stayed the same," says Serena. "Walking on my own during lockdown took me right back to being 12 or 13 again, walking down here when there was no-one around. Physically it has not changed that much."

As Coronavirus lockdown measures are relaxed, both women have re-opened their businesses, and both have had to adjust to a new way of life.

"As soon as we shut I felt purposeless," says Dani. "But once I knew non-essential

## *Serena and Dani have watched Southwold transition from a local working community to a dormitory town of holiday homes.*

businesses could re-open it suddenly changed my whole headspace. I knew I could plan and could look forward to it.

"We only have four on this boat now, not 12. They have to be of the same family. I can't take two couples, as they would be too close together. We also use our motorboat as well, as we will be able to get up to eight on that and keep two metres apart. Every handrail has to be wiped with disinfectant after every trip. We had a staff meeting to run through the procedures. It has changed things dramatically."

The Serena Hall Gallery is also working in a different way.

**BELOW:**  
Dani and Serena have both had to adapt to the challenges of lockdown

Within a week of closing, Serena had created an online store attracting both existing and new customers. She felt it was what she had to do.

"I have a responsibility to 40 or 50 other artists in my gallery, so as soon as I knew I had to close they were my first priority. We have a lot of loyal customers and followers and they are buying from us online. I do not know how I will manage the online enquiries, the open gallery and my own work, but it is a good problem to have. We will work through it."

That positive outlook, shared by Dani, is driving Serena and her business forward. With social distancing measures in place and with a maximum of six in the gallery at a time, Serena Hall Gallery is open once more.

"I'm having an exhibition called The Happiness Project. All our artists are producing new work on the theme of happiness. I wanted to open up and give everybody a happy show, because this has been such a dreadful time for so many people. I thought the least I can do is to try to create as much cheerful work as possible."

And she says that local shop owners are working hard and working together to make Southwold a cheerful place for people to return to. "That is important. We want to welcome people back, we really do."

As they bid each other farewell until the next time, and reflect on the modest dreams they have ("We just want enough to keep us doing what we are doing"), the friends take nothing for granted – not Southwold and Walberswick, not the little harbour or the river, nor each other.

"My lovely friend is always there for me," says Dani. "We are always there for each other, and have been for 30 years now."

"Absolutely," says Serena thoughtfully. "We are lucky. Very, very lucky." ♦

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