

Focus

The pursuit of happiness

David Clensy meets the married couple who are hoping to spread a little happiness across the city

I HAD half expected to find Ken Dodd, sitting behind a desk with a pair of tickling sticks shouting "happiness for everyone!" But in fact, when I arrived at 77 Stokes Croft, the headquarters of the "Happy City" initiative, I was actually met by a plumbers' merchant.

Sinks, showers, pipes, plugs, u-bends – the range of their stock was impressive, but not much sign of the "happiness" I had been promised to find here.

After a quick phone call, I realised my mistake – the Happy City HQ was upstairs – but surreally, you have to walk through the bathroom/heating centre to find it.

It's like Mr Ben, with cisterns. "It's not entirely irrelevant," Liz Zeidler says when I finally arrive at the first floor office. "When it comes to happiness there are two types of people – radiators and drains."

I sense it has become a well-used quip.

Married couple Mike and Liz Zeidler founded Happy City three years ago, following on from a grow-

ing interest among politicians internationally in finding a new way of measuring the "happiness" of a population beyond simple financial GDP figures.

The couple, who between them have a diverse background in sustainability, international development work, cultural projects and, in Mike's case, six years on the Bristol Chamber of Commerce, felt a calling to do something to lift all our spirits – they have gone on to build the initiative by working with community groups around the city to discuss what makes people happy, and how happiness levels can be lifted without relying entirely on money to bring contentment.

"We're not saying we're able to make everyone happy, or that everyone can be happy all the time," Liz says. "After all, if we never had any sadness in our lives, we wouldn't understand the concept of happiness. But we just want to help Bristol to be a city where success is measured in ways other than purely financially."

Mike adds: "Certainly 'happiness' is a difficult word, because it's clearly

subjective. We could have used another phrase, like well-being, but we believe that actually, as humans, what we're all constantly searching for is happiness. But with the single exception of the tiny nation of Bhutan, countries all over the world base happiness levels purely on wealth – and as we know, money alone doesn't necessarily make you happy."

Sitting on the sofa at the Happy HQ, Mike, Liz and I go on to have an hour-long, deeply philosophical, but perfectly happy conversation about happiness – what is happiness? Can we ever be happy? Are we essentially unhappy animals? Could we have evolved without a constant drive to be more happy? What role does religion/secularism have in our happiness and our resilience towards sadness?

But I'll spare you having to read about it here – after all, it's so subjective a debate, you may as well just have the conversation for yourselves. And as Liz and Mike tell me – it's not really about them – their dream is that within five years the Happy City initiative will take on a life of its own,

with Bristol leading the way ahead of other cities having the debate, such as Santa Monica and Derby (an unlikely pairing) where similar initiatives are also stepping out on the path to civic bliss.

But the real reason I'm here at the happy factory is to find out about Mike and Liz's latest project – a Happiness List for Bristol, designed to counter the annual display of unadulterated greed, envy and avarice that is the *Sunday Times*' Rich List.

"Every year, on the third Sunday in April the *Sunday Times* publishes this list of the top 100 wealthiest people," Mike explains. "It's based entirely on celebrating these individuals on the basis of how much money they have in their bank, not on the value of their work or their sense of fulfilment."

"A couple of years ago the *Independent on Sunday* launched a national Happy List to counter it. We thought it was such a good idea, that we should do the same thing for Bristol."

They are calling for nominations from members of the public for people they know who do good, selfless work



● Mike and Liz Zeidler at Happy City

for their communities. "We want to cover a wide range of people doing good work," Liz says. "As long as we get enough nominations, it would be nice to create a Top 100 happiness champions for the city each year, which we would publish on the same weekend as the *Sunday Times*' Rich List.

"We want to celebrate what they're doing by including them in the list, but we also want to ask them to an-

swer a series of set questions, so that we can try to understand if, as we suspect, that their selflessness, their devotion to making other people happy, also makes them happy and contented with their lives.

"Hopefully we'll be able to spread some of that happiness even further by sharing their wisdom."

The *Post* is to regularly publish some of the responses that come back from nominees, before finally pub-

Picture: Jon Kent BRJK20130311B-002_C

lishing the full list of happiness champions for the city in April. Our first Happiness Champion is Marian Liebmann, see panel right.

But I have just one more question for Mike and Liz about their admirable, worthy if somewhat ambitious project – does it make them happy?

"Yes," they both say simultaneously, before erupting into laughter.

"Well," Liz adds, leaving a pregnant pause, "most of the time."

Our first Happiness Champion, **Marian Liebmann**, 70, of Westbury Park, volunteers in art therapy, mediation and restorative justice

I work part-time as an art therapist with adults who have mental health problems. I am also a volunteer mediator with Bristol Mediation, and a trainer and consultant in restorative justice. I have been helping with Restorative Bristol, an initiative to make Bristol a restorative city, where mediation and dialogue are the preferred ways of sorting out conflicts and crime.

I run workshops on art therapy with anger and conflict issues.

I've also done a lot of work overseas, training people in mediation and running art therapy workshops - in places like Serbia and Russia, five countries in Africa, many countries in Europe.

I've lived in Bristol for 45 years - I came for a job and never left, as I love living here. I have a husband, a daughter and two grandchildren.

I'm a Quaker and belong to the Redland Meeting. My favourite way of getting round the city is on my bike.

"I also like walking, swimming, badminton, going to the theatre and seeing my friends."

How to nominate a happiness champion

Anyone wishing to nominate somebody for the honour, should email happylist@happycity.org.uk. For more information on the Happy City initiative visit their website at www.happycity.org

Question and answer

What are the most important ingredients for living a happy life? Good health, happy family, good friends, healthy environment, physical exercise, worthwhile work, helping others.

What's your top tip for boosting happiness in the everyday? Talking to people.

You have inspired and motivated others. What motivates and inspires you?

Other people making progress despite difficulties, for example, my mother and other Jewish refugees escaping and starting again in a strange country.

What's your favourite quote or saying? A 1,000 mile walk starts with one step.

What makes you smile about Bristol? The wacky things people get up to.

What do you love about the area where you live? Trees and their shapes, in all the seasons.

If someone had just moved to the city, what hidden gem would you share with them? Henleaze Lake.

What group, project or idea in



Bristol has made you think 'Wow!'. City of Sanctuary
If you could make one big positive change in Bristol, what would it be? A good cheap public transport system.

What gives you hope? Working with young people. My daughter.
What three things that cost no money do you value most? Good health, my friends, going for walks.

What's made you laugh loudest in the past month? Satirical humour helps keep me sane.

You've answered our questions - what great question would you ask us to make us think? What would you like to teach or pass on to the next generation?

