



Reunion brings back memories of Lee Jeans factory sit-in

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INSPIRATIONAL women who staged a historic sit-in to save their Greenock factory jobs were reunited at a special gathering in the Oak Mall. Former comrades from Lee Jeans were invited to the Poppins project to watch a screening of a BBC documentary about their 1981 campaign.

The get-together was prompted by the death of one of their workmates, Hilda Hagen, who was 55, last December. Hilda's sister, Janice Watt, was desperate to get a copy of the DVD and dropped in to Poppins to see if they had a copy.

Janice said: "I saw it on the TV years ago and I tried everything to get a copy – my son even emailed the BBC. "But I came into the Poppins shop and Andy Hunter of the staff showed it to me straight away." It was an emotional experience for Janice and her 81-year-old mother Jenny Queen. She said: "Andy sat down and talked to us – we just broke down, it was quite emotional. "I felt it was just as if it was my sister talking to me." Hilda's passing has been part of what's been a particularly traumatic time for the family.



Carole Smillie attends a screening with Helen Monaghan and her colleagues from 1980s Lee Jeans factory sit-in.

Janice said: "I lost my dad eight months before and we buried my aunt the day before Hilda died. "My mum lost her husband, her sister and daughter all within months of each other. "It was a sudden death which makes it more difficult to come to terms with."

Poppins staff were so moved by the family's story, and a visit by former firebrand Lee Jeans shop steward Helen Monaghan, that they decided to organise a reunion for the Lee Jeans ladies. Helen, 78, was the driving force behind the famous seven month sit-in, which was prompted by the news that American owners VT Corporation were going to close the factory and put the workforce on the dole.

The campaign caught the imagination of the nation and prompted visits of support from political big-hitters like Tony Benn and Michael Foot.

Helen said: "You forget the impact it had at the time." There was talk of a film being made at the time and, more recently, a play.

When asked who she would like to play her in a movie, Helen laughed: "Julie Walters!"

But it was no laughing matter back in 1981 when the Greenock grandmother instinctively sensed the death knell for their jobs. She said: "The company transferred the cutting room to Northern Ireland and sent some of the girls over there to train staff. "We knew the company was in cahoots because there were bigger subsidies in Northern Ireland and then we heard we were going to be made redundant.

"We offered to do a three-day week or job share to keep the factory in Greenock but they kept saying no to everything we suggested." It was then the idea of a sit-in was born.

Workers barricaded themselves in, fearing they would have been locked out if they left the building. But supplies were needed and two workers had to take drastic measures to feed the protesters by going onto the roof and through a skylight, then shinning down a drainpipe to collect an unusual order of 240 fish suppers.

The mainly female workforce organised themselves into shifts, machines were oiled and £1 million of jeans were secured. The sit-in has left a lasting impression on the women involved.

Patricia Arkley, who was only a teenager when she worked at the plant in Earnhill Road, said: "I was only 19 at the time, I was a wee lassie but it did have an impact later in life. It was an experience. "My dad Pat was in the Trades Council and he was a big Labour man. "I told all my nieces and nephews and great-nieces and great-nephews 'this is going to go down in history'."

The Poppins project aims to help older people embrace technology and uses the power of the internet to showcase Inverclyde's heritage. Staff invited popular television presenter Carol Smillie, who runs her own award-winning specialist underwear company, to meet the Lee Jeans ladies.

Just like the local ladies, the celebrity is proud to manufacture products in Scotland. Carol says the women showed remarkable strength in what they did. Carol told the Telegraph: "It's quite inspiring. It brought the best out in people in a time of crisis. "People pulled together for what they believed in and fought for it. They are a dying breed."

