

Recycler Rico is still a Basildon lad

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RICO Daniels looks rough. What else would you expect from a former Hells Angel? But he still comes home to visit his mum.

Brought up in Basildon, Rico now lives in France, where he films his Discovery Real Time series, the Salvager, using his eccentric take on recycling to transform unwanted goods and rubbish into furniture.

Some of his past creations include a coffee table constructed from concrete and 30 tea caddies, plus a TV cabinet scavenged out of a galvanised water tank and two Fifties fire extinguishers. Despite his small screen fame, the bald 56-year-old, with the bushy, grey, handlebar moustache, loves nothing more than a trip back to his roots.

“Basildon is home. My mum Doris still lives in Pitsea and my sister Deba is in Vange,” says Rico.

“I come back to the town to visit them and the other old faces still kicking about. Basildon used to be a rough place, really dangerous after dark. I’ll always remember the time I saw some poor bloke get a horrible kicking at the taxi rank.

“But that was the past. Basildon has changed and is safer now.

“Some things are exactly the same though. I can still walk into a boozier and find the same old people sitting in the same places they were years ago.”

Rico decided early in life that conforming to the norm wasn’t for him.

“As a teenager I started working in Southend, as a civil servant at the telecommunications office, but I couldn’t stand it and only lasted six months,” he smiles.

“I’m not the sort of person who likes sitting behind a window wearing a suit. And I’ve always had a real problem with doffing my cap to people.”

But Rico soon got the taste of freedom he craved by joining the most notorious biker gang in the world, the Hells Angels.

“I was 18 and it was very exciting,” recalls Rico.

“We would hang out at the old Tower Cafe, Vange, and I would drive around on my 650 Panther.

“It was just like being part of a big club and we would meet up and go out on rides together.

"I know there is a lot of controversy in some circles regarding the group, but it works under its own constraints like any other. There is a strong presence in this area to this day, with the Essex Angels still up and running."

It was while in the biker fraternity Rico answered another calling, signing up for a three-year stint in the red beret-wearing Guardian Angels, an American founded volunteer organisation who tried to aid potential victims of street crime.

"The Guardian Angels recruited from organisations like the Hells Angels. They needed people who knew what it was like out there and could deal with it," he says.

"They needed recruits who could relate to the people committing the offences by talking to them on their level. These were tough people to deal with, street gangs and criminals, you needed to know what you were doing.

"It all started in New York at the end of the Seventies, making unarmed patrols, just trying to make people feel safer by offering a visible presence.

"I joined in 1989 and had stints in both London and New York during my term. There was one night in King's Cross when we were at the scene of a nasty stabbing incident, but we helped the police by getting hold of the people who did it.

"Some people didn't agree with the patrols, but it was a worthwhile cause. Getting on a late night tube train and seeing the face of a woman riding alone light up, knowing she was safe, was the best reward you could ask for."

Away from the world of violent crime and street gangs, Rico's concern turns to the future of mankind.

A keen believer in living life in its most natural form, he used to play cowboys and indians for real. He claims it opened his eyes to the world's problems.

"I would go off to camps in England and Germany and live as an Indian for the week, dressed up in all the gear and sleeping in a tipi with a fire," he says. They were re-enactment camps, but all the fine details were so real, from people eating bear meat on a stick to drunks thrown in a Western-style jail overnight, until they sobered up.

"Doing this sort of thing gives you a feel for getting back to basics. It seems we have forgotten our old life skills and I'm pretty sure the world is heading towards a point where we will need to remember them.

"All it takes is somebody like the Russians to cut off the gas supply and the world could be thrown into chaos.

"If we lose the electricity as well, then all the fridges in the shops won't work and the food will be ruined. Then what will people do? The majority won't have a clue.

"We need to become self sufficient again and I've already started storing food in glass jars to preserve it. I've got a bit of land in France and I'm looking at growing vegetables, plus buying some chickens and a pig. I'm getting prepared for the worst!"

After visiting Basildon, Rico will return to his French small holding and get back to being knee-deep in rubbish.

"I enjoy recycling things and proving everything can be used again," he laughs. "My favourite was cutting the roof off an old transit van and turning it into a 15ft boat. I stuck an engine on the back of it and took it out across the lake. It floated, no problem.

"I've still got the boat, but these days it's sitting in my garden with tomatoes growing out of it."

For more information about Rico, visit www.thesalvager.com