

Overview

We delighted to be able to use the Orchard for a weekend camp and a week of day time activities this year, against all the odds. The Orchard represents a safe and supportive space for the young people we have been working with for many years and this year the sanctuary of peace, nature and timelessness was all the more needed.



Through conducting a detailed risk assessment we established that effective social distancing procedures were possible and would be effective. We were able to host two different groups over an 8 day period in early August 2020 and were confident that we could conduct all our usual activities without compromising the current regulations or the health of those with underlying conditions that made them more vulnerable to Covid-19.

We have sometimes struggled to find locations where our collective needs are understood, where those running them share our values and our purpose. This year has been particularly difficult to find those willing and able to collaborate.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to the Trust and to Martin Hayes who facilitated our time there so very willingly, sensitively and patiently.

Young people we worked with

From mid March it was very clear that some of the young people we work with would experience a tougher lockdown than others and that their existing issues would be significantly compounded. We worked with Gloucestershire Funders Group, the Lottery Reaching Communities fund and with Children in Need to fund and support a programme of activities that would support these young people through lockdown and post lockdown. Our focus groups were young refugees and asylum seekers and disabled young people, between the ages of 13 and 25.

For young refugees and asylum seekers, Gloucestershire Association of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (GARAS) reports that young people are coping with complex stressful circumstances and severe trauma, with no community or family support, isolated from peers, no access to social opportunities. They have significantly reduced economic, social and cultural life-chances, physical and mental health and well-being, and are vulnerable to negative relationships, criminal activity, drugs and alcohol and sexual predation.

For disabled teenagers and young adults referral agencies and local partners in the charitable and public sector report young people are socially, physically and attitudinally excluded, excluded from mainstream activities and have limited opportunities for self-agency. They are isolated, with low self-esteem, have limited relationships beyond family, experience low expectations by others and of themselves, participate in few purposeful activities. This groups has a significantly higher risk of long-term depression, suicide and compounding physical health issues than non-disabled peers.

Supporting young refugees and asylum seekers

We worked with GARAS to overcome the barriers to engagement for the young people they work with – travel, fear of the unknown, engagement by their foster carers and house managers where they live and for some, acute anxiety and depression.

Fourteen young refugees attended an outdoor activity camp at the Orchard for two nights and four days in total. We



set up our lovely bell tents, a kitchen tent and made 5 loos for their 5 social bubbles!

Over the four days the group became increasingly relaxed and engaged and their growing happiness was palpable. We ran long sessions of green wood work and art, had daily yoga sessions in the shade of the biggest tree, spent happy hours in the rain walking with a falconer and his hawks, rambled along the river and in the beautiful Severn Vale, and loved the simple timeless practice of sitting chatting, telling stories, laughing and singing around the fire well in to the night.

Most of these young people grew up in or have strong links to the countryside at home and most were deeply curious about the Orchard, local wildlife, the wild food and crops growing there. There was an easy confidence with countryside skills and crafts and a great desire to do more of it.

These young people have very little support to get out in nature and are living without exception in a very urban environment that they find alien, noisy and stressful without respite. They need clear pathways to participating in outdoor based activities, transport and support to engage fully over a period of time. Whilst we had little language in common with some, many had good English and helped others to express themselves. Mostly we communicated through the language of nature, music and laughter! We were utterly moved by what the young people told us:

'I haven't been into the countryside since I came to England, I don't know where to go, whether I am welcome or safe or whether I have permission, or where I can walk'

'This is the first sunset I've seen since coming to England'

'..I found myself daydreaming of home before it became unsafe, for the first time. Normally I have nightmares. It's being here at the orchard. It's so peaceful – I slept welll.'

'I can see my home all around...(he pointed around the orchard as he spoke) these fruit trees, some crops, the muddy track, homes where my family, friends, aunties and uncles live, someone sleeping under the trees, the smell of cooking, goats here, chickens over there, camels and cows here'

'It made me remember to live'

The GARAS team also gave us an insight in to the importance of getting out in nature for these young people: *'They are well cared for, theres no question of that, but it's the bits that make life good that are missing. Nature for many of these young people is in their bones and they just don't get there, and it seems so simple to us, doesn't it?'* *'We need more of this kind of collaboration as GARAS just doesn't have the capacity to support this kind of thing. It makes a huge difference to mental health, a sense of having a positive future, of being able to make a happy life.'*

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Supporting disabled young people

Sadly our annual camps programme was cancelled for this year and the young people who have been joining our camps since 2010 from May to August each year were really bereft – for some the camps are a vital connection to a great friendships built over those many years. The camps aim to raise independence, confidence and self-esteem and are a fixture for 30 or more disabled young people living in Gloucestershire.

It was so important that we maintain the connections and continue to support both young people and their families that participate each year. We compensated by running zoom activities through lock down that echoed the values and activities of the camps but always aimed to do it for real as soon as possible. We had established a great relationship with Martin and the Trust over the last four years of the camps programme and knew exactly who to call when we needed a location!



The need for respite for families was more acute than ever and for both young person and their family there was also the benefit of a few days apart. Families also told us that their usual support and activities schedules had instantly dried up and that they were desperate for positive, healthy and social activities for their young person.

The participants, parents and carers told us that the four days of Day Camp were the first away from home experiences they had had in 4-5 months, having been shielding due to underlying health conditions that made them vulnerable to contracting COVID19:

'The day camps were a great substitute for 'proper camping' and a chance to keep the friendships going while normal camps can't take place. For a young man with very few peer friendships this was so important.'

'There has been so little going on, we have found it pretty tough. We were so happy to have the Orchard day camps – I needed some time away from home and it makes him so happy to spend time there.'

And in the words of a young disabled participant:

'Thank you so much for the Day Camps. It was a Dream come true. I have enjoyed coming. My best bit was Daisy on the guitar and singing HEY JUDE with us. It was so Delightful. I would like to come again please. I enjoyed everything. My best bit was Anna telling us a story and Richard telling us a story. I enjoyed seeing John Bird and his Birds. BY THE WAY, I ENJOYED THE RAIN. I have enjoyed doing the Activities at the Day Camp. I would like to come back so that I can see everyone again. THANK YOU SO MUCH. IT HAS MADE MY DAY.'

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