

Case Study – Stepney Bank Stables

Newcastle's Inner City Community Horse Project, Stepney Bank is a unique multi-Award winning registered Charity, set in the centre of The City at the very heart of the local community

The Centre is held in very high esteem, both locally and nationally, and its welcoming atmosphere and ethos of inclusion, set in such a busy, noisy and happy environment, attracts around one thousand individuals to regularly use and support the project every year.



Stepney Bank has a range of charitable aims and objectives and offers a wide variety of exciting activities and meaningful and rewarding opportunities in which local people can become involved. The Centre is also a BHS accredited riding school and a Pony Club Centre with around 60 members, ensuring that riders, volunteers and beneficiaries are part of a wider national framework and can be assured of the highest standards of professionalism and support.

Background

The Project was originally established in 1992 by the City Farm Byker, becoming an independent organisation in 1999 and a registered charitable concern shortly afterwards. Income has been generated through the provision of riding activities, coupled with the support of funding obtained from local grant making and charitable trusts and national funding sources including Sport England, The National Lottery and the European Social Fund and also generous donations from the general public. It now employs 8 staff including a full-time Volunteer Co-ordinator and a part-time Education worker.

What are the project's aims and objectives?

The project works with youngsters from some of the most socially disadvantaged wards in the North East, the majority of whom become involved to meet a variety of personal, social or educational needs. Stepney Bank aims to use the horse as a tool or a method of motivating, educating and passing on key social skills to young volunteers.

This has proven to be an extremely successful and effective long-term method of reaching and engaging with disadvantaged, disaffected and hard-to-reach groups who would not normally have the opportunity of engaging in equestrian activities.

Through the project, many individuals from deprived backgrounds have been supported in developing new interests and gaining significant self-esteem, to a level where they are able to seek further training or paid employment.



How is this achieved?

Caring for horses provides purpose, structure and routine where it may not have previously existed and creates a team of motivated, enthusiastic young volunteers with a common interest. Riding lessons, an incentive often earned via a 'Time-Banking' system whereby accrued voluntary hours and sustained commitment are rewarded, provide an environment where people skills are paramount, which is also an ideal setting for positive social and personal development.

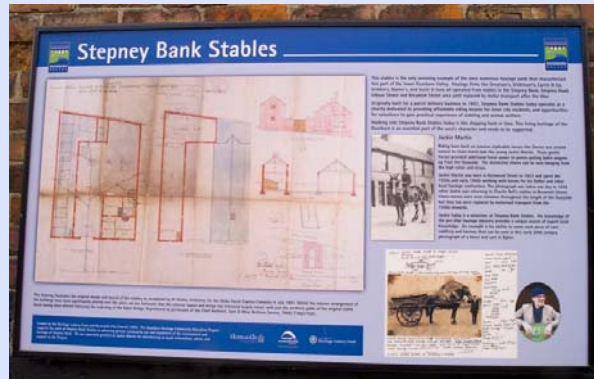
Stepney Bank has also been the subject of two very popular Childrens' BBC television series, which are regularly screened on CBBC and have recently been repeated on BBC2.

How has the Project developed?

The Project has developed into a unique community facility which, since 2004, has been committed to developing its commercial riding activities to enable the project to become self-funding and sustainable. It remains a not-for-profit concern which is heavily reliant upon the support and commitment of its many volunteers of all ages.

A derelict warehouse has been sympathetically transformed into a state of the art indoor riding arena and a disused haulage yard, which is also a local Heritage site, has been converted for use as a stable yard for many of the Centre's horses. A sense of continuity between past and present is further maintained as one

of the Centre's most dedicated volunteer supporters, Jackie Martin, not only remembers the yard as it was in its 1930s hey-day but also worked with horses for local haulage contractors in the district. He is featured on the information board which has pride of place on the stable yard.



What makes Stepney Bank special?

The Centre works hard to dispel the myth that equestrian activities are elitist and strives to be as inclusive as possible and make all its activities accessible to all interested parties within its community. Whilst personal recommendation from friends encourages many new volunteers to join in, referrals also come from individual schools, Youth Workers, Training Advisors, Education Welfare Officers and Social Services as well as Youth Offending Team and Community Service placements.

The project boasts some impressive statistics; in 2005, the project engaged with 130 young people between the ages of 13 – 16 in risk of exclusion from school whilst the overall total of 12 – 17 year olds participating was 233. During a 3 week period in August 2006 alone, 30 young people have contributed 560 volunteering hours. These young volunteers, who often become involved in volunteering for personal reasons, are also defined as beneficiaries of the project, as they live in a deprived ward where low household incomes are the norm and there is an associated lack of opportunities. Stepney Bank encourages young people to address the challenges in their lives in a manner that enables them to make supported choices about their futures.

Both children and their families are invited to become involved in exciting activities and they are regularly consulted with to ensure the Centre offers what they want. The full participation of children and young people is always supported; all under 16 year olds are required to undergo an assessment by the youth officer, who also has specific responsibility for engaging with 8 -12 year old beneficiaries, who are encouraged both to get involved with yard duties and learn about horse and pony care in the Education centre.

The Centre has a strong commitment to the continued professional development of its high-calibre, hard-working staff who are encouraged to participate fully in the running and development of the Centre and who consult with the young people, between them often coming up with exciting and inspirational ideas and innovations.

Scholarships

A generous private donation has been provided for the creation of a scholarship for younger volunteers to provide support for riding lessons and an exclusive brooch for participants.

In addition, Newcastle Building Society has provided £5,000 to fund teenagers wishing to take BHS Stages 1 & 2.

How much influence do young people really have?



The Staff are in very close contact with the young volunteers and riders and work hard to build strong relationships with them. Regular group meetings and forums are held where young people are consulted and encouraged to pass on their ideas. All the activities provided are dictated by young people and as Susan Tron, the Manager says: 'Stepney Banks tries its hardest to accommodate every wish or desire [they have].'

Volunteering Activities

There are many ways volunteers can get involved at Stepney Bank and not all of them are directly to do with horses! Although yard duties, leading horses and ponies during lessons and helping at summer camp are all core activities, volunteers also provide vital support in the areas of administration, office work, database design and data entry, reception, running the gift shop, promotional and marketing activities, arranging special events, fundraising, Trustees, youth work, art sessions, cleaning, membership/riders, preparing food at racial awareness days, providing transport to camp etc, DIY, repairs and maintenance plus professional services including solicitors, accountants, computer support, instructors and plumbers!

Time Bank

This is a system which enables volunteers to accrue their hours for use in a reciprocal scheme to reward and benefit them. One Time Bank place is provided on every ride and eight hours of volunteering can be exchanged for one ride with a limit of two rides per week. To encourage volunteers in less popular activities such as office work, it has been agreed that office volunteers can benefit from 'double time', where they will qualify for a free ride after only four hours.

Awards received

Amongst the many official Awards presented to the Project is the Queens Award for Voluntary Service 2003, a prestigious award given for outstanding achievement by groups of volunteers who:

- regularly devote their time to helping others in the community
- improve the quality of life and opportunity for others
- provide an outstanding service

Susan Tron, the Centre Manager, won North East Sports Personality of the Year 2004 and one dedicated young volunteer, Craig, has been nominated for Sports Kid of the Year 2006, an award presented by the local BBC station. He was interviewed to camera at the stables and the interview was later televised.

In addition to the above, Stepney Bank's fame has spread to the extent that the Stables has now been included on the official Newcastle City Tour Bus route!

Conclusion

Stepney Bank Stables provides a truly inspirational example of how young people, particularly those from deprived backgrounds can derive huge personal benefits from becoming involved in equestrian activities and also demonstrates how an equestrian establishment can become the central focus of a local community, accessible to all-comers regardless of income or social status.

**Report prepared by Jill Loader, Consultant National Volunteer Co-ordinator
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