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Welcome

These youth work stories are just a small number of examples of the challenging but ultimately beneficial work that youth workers from Warwick District have delivered. They have been compiled because nationally and locally youth work practice is vanishing.

We want community members, decision makers and influencers to hear these stories so that they can better understand why youth work is so important and so this decline can be halted.

Youth work makes a difference. It changes lives. The way it achieves such success is often shrouded in mystery and the profession can go unrecognised. Youth workers themselves can find it difficult to promote and celebrate their achievements and its uniqueness of youth work.

This needs to change; society should recognise the value and its uniqueness of youth work.

Youth workers take time to build relationships of mutual trust and support with young people, working in their communities, helping them make their own decisions about their own lives, and developing their confidence and resilience.

They work where young people are - in schools, youth and community centres, at home or in the park, offering informal education opportunities starting from young people’s concerns and needs.

Nationally thousands of youth worker posts have disappeared and local government spending on young people’s services has on average decreased by 25%.

Please note that the names within the stories have been changed to protect anonymity and photos are representations of young people, not the people depicted in the stories.
We hope that by reading these stories and understanding the work that we do you will join us in making sure the young people of this area can always access youth worker support if and when they need it.
As so often with youth workers when they talk about their work, the workers who wrote the stories included in this book are often in danger of selling themselves short in one important respect: by just taking for granted many of the things they do and say – and don’t do and say – which have been vital in achieving the impacts on young people’s lives which the stories record.

Yet it is precisely these under-the-radar ‘interventions’ which go a long way to defining how their practice is a distinctive – which of course is not to say a superior – way of working with young people.

What follows seeks to extract from these stories some of these more embedded defining features. Not all are discernible in all of the stories. And, as space doesn’t allow specific references back to the stories to ‘evidence’ the generalisations, it’s hoped that readers will engage actively and critically with them to dig out for themselves where and how the workers were practising as youth workers in the ways suggested.

As a minimum, the examples of youth work practice presented in this book would seem to have been shaped, albeit in different ways and to varying degrees:

By rooting the work on or close to young people’s home territory – being and remaining ‘community-based’

By reaching out proactively to young people who in the main had chosen to become involved in their ‘free’ time, and who therefore – as an integral element of the work – retained considerable power in their relationships with the youth workers and an ability to control what was to be done.
Where this wasn’t the case – where for example the young person had been referred by another agency or where they felt under pressure to attend – by the youth workers committing, as a first and conscious priority, to work in ways which over time would win the young people personal ‘ownership’ of what was on offer.

By an initial acceptance by the youth workers of the young people as they were,

as they presented themselves in this situation – influenced as little as possible by the often negative labels which others might have attached to them or which the young people might have laid on themselves.

By focusing on and responding to the young people’s often under-estimated strengths and to the concerns and interests they had brought with them –

as prompts, in a safe environment, for offering opportunities specifically designed for them to do things and to go to places which they had perhaps never imagined possible for ‘people like them’.

By, at the heart of these encounters, prompting sometimes highly personal, intensive and deliberately challenging conversations,

some conducted through modern media but most taking place face-to-face, including - unplanned and ‘by accident’ - while the young people were doing a self-chosen ‘fun’ activity. Though recognised as at times constraining, by working with and through young people peer groups in order to tap into the potential stimulus and support these could offer for personal and collective development and challenge.

As trust between young people and workers developed within and through these groups,

by responding to individuals’ drip-drip indications of personal stresses and struggles, leading in effect to providing forms of ‘targeted’ support - including as appropriate connections with other specialised agencies.

To get close to the outcomes logged in these stories, by working within open-end and often extended time frames requiring the youth workers to ‘hang in there’ with the young person or the group for weeks, for months and even sometimes for years.
Role Model

Sarah, a shy young woman facing adversity on a daily basis grew into a budding member of the Community Youth Centre, through the nourishment and encouragement of a team of Youth Workers.

There is a Community Centre, based in the middle of an estate with extremely high levels of unemployment, tons of social housing and a high number of one parent families…and herein lies the weekly run Youth Club. This wonderful space has become an integral part of the community, where the young people take part in activities, socialise and feel as though they belong. With regular attendees reaching numbers of 30 this space has become something really special.

But this is a story about a particular young person, Sarah. Sarah joined the club at the young age of 9, immediately her overwhelming shyness was quite apparent, noticeably more when having to speak to adults. Over the next few weeks Sarah started to attend the club regularly, we noticed that Sarah engaged particularly well with the led activities and over time we saw a keen interest in sports, especially football, which became a springboard for us to break down those communication barriers.

As we built on our relationship, teasing out conversations through common ground Sarah’s confidence grew through giving her a voice and offering a listening ear. Through her confidence the love for the activities began to naturally extend into the support of them, always being first to help clear the sports equipment away and helping the staff during the drinks and snacks break.

As Sarah blossomed, time passed, with a move up from the Juniors sessions fast approaching we took the time to ask how she was feeling about the imminent change. Sarah was reluctant to move on, being both comfortable and confident in the Juniors group. I was worried she may stop attending our sessions if asked to move which would have been devastating given the progress Sarah had shown thus far.

We had to be a bit creative in finding a solution to our problem…we wanted to make Sarah feel like she was progressing, and not lose her enthusiasm for the Youth Club. With the natural progression Sarah had shown in assisting with the activity and breaks, I suggested that it could be possible to attend the Junior Sessions on the understanding that she was a support worker for the Youth Workers, with the staff noticing the same potential, I posed this to Sarah.

She had to help with setting up activities, and be a role model to the all young people attending. Sarah liked this idea and as previously recognised by the staff the more responsibility and positive feedback Sarah received the more she came out of her shell.
The Junior members reacted positively also, treating her with the same mutual respect as the staff which has helped reduce the ‘us and them’ that is seen so often in other settings when engaging with young people.

By being involved in the running of the club it gives young people a platform to take ownership of the club. With Sarah acting as a role model, Sarah attended every week without fail, even arriving early to help set up.

Three Years later and Sarah is still assisting with the sessions and is now regarded as a fully fledged volunteer, the possibility of a qualification is around the corner and Sarah’s future is continually looking brighter.

“Sarah has become that role model and I have seen her confidence grow and not be shy of responsibility; it is inspiring to see other older members do the same and take ownership of their Youth Club. I hope in the future that these young people will be developing and running the Youth Club themselves. By allowing the older young people to attend the sessions and support the younger ones we are giving them the chance to be responsible and take ownership of their youth club.”

Sarah has said she realises the importance of the having the centre and how different the area would be without it.
Linda was a 17 year old carer who had experienced difficulties with her emotional health and well-being. She had survived bullying and bereavement and struggled with confidence and feeling good about herself.

My work with Linda was based around developing a respectful, caring, compassionate but also helpful relationship, by offering a balance of support and challenge on her terms of when, where etc. Over time Linda stopped self-harming, developed resilience, made positive choices about her future and achieved at university.

We soon discovered a range of similarities amongst the experiences of the group; bullying, self-harm, anxiety and feelings of isolation. One of the young women (Linda, aged 16 years) in the group struggled to share her feelings and experiences but indicated that she really wanted to take part. She told us about her depression, her self-harming and her struggles (family, sexuality, peer relations). At the breaks she sought me out to talk through some of her worries. Whilst delivering a peer mentoring training program for young people that have care responsibilities (looking after others in their family), I spent some time discussing why the participants wanted to become mentors.

It was essential that I developed a working environment that was safe, supportive, confidential and friendly. Each of the 7 felt comfortable enough to share with the group their backgrounds and how they wanted to give back, using their experiences to help others going through similar circumstances. Linda started coming to meet me for dedicated support 30 minutes before each session. We also explored her future; we identified goals and options to achieve her goals. Underlying all of this was a consistent message of confidence to choose to do what she wanted, to make the best choices, to feel ok about herself and her life and to look at things with positivity.

The project finished, Linda achieved her mentoring award and mentored younger carers. She gained a placed at college studying something she was passionate about and moved away from home. Our contact became sporadic, via text and email, until one day I received a handwritten letter:

> Just a quick note to let you know that I am doing really well. I am lots of fun college. No More. I am so much healthier! I have completely given up smoking. I hope you are well. I miss you. I want to talk but I am doing a lot better now. I’m happy. I do miss our chats! Love. Miss you. Keep in touch. Hope to see you soon, and hear that your doing ok too.
Some months later I sent her a message back to promote a new opportunity, which I believed would benefit and excite her (an educational trip abroad). Linda applied and was awarded a place. I was one of the two youth workers who managed and supported the group of 14 young people. The whole 10 days was a journey of discovery for each member.

Linda practised being positive and supported others who were struggling. She also spent time with me talking about her current situation (a recent bereavement, loneliness, relationship difficulties) and confided that she often felt like self-harming again. **Linda was open about her mental health and wellbeing difficulties.** I offered an understanding ear, consistent reassurance and ways of looking at things differently.

Linda like the other participants, so got through the challenging and illuminating 10 day trip. She was thankful for the entire experience and acknowledged how it had helped her to be more confident, more positive, deal with life’s difficulties and access support.

Linda is now completing her studies at University and looking forward to a long and fulfilling life.

Linda wrote me a note on her last day
It is voluntary to work with our service and it is important to build a relationship where young people feel good about being involved. Oscar was referred to our group due to social isolation issues and lack of positive peer group outside of school. Oscar reluctantly agreed to attend our project but was convinced to attend on the strength of the rapport build with the youth worker during an initial home visit.

Oscar was a donor child and will never know the identity of his father. He lives at home with mum who is gay and a younger brother who is unsure of his sexual identity which occasionally leads to aggression at home. Once he started to trust us, Oscar articulated in a very mature way the frustrations he felt about his personal circumstances and the challenges that he faces compared to children who he perceives as having a ‘normal’ childhood and family situation.

At the youth club whilst taking part in activities such as art and cooking, male youth workers observed Oscar mimicking their behaviour and body language. During project sessions he has been supported to discuss how his personal circumstances have caused him to feel occasionally angry about his life not being ‘normal’.

He has indicated that the youth work support and the opportunities to talk at length on a one-to-one basis with male youth workers has been a real help with giving the opportunity to share his thoughts and have his hopes for the future reaffirmed and encouraged.

This can often be at unusual times and spaces. conversations of real meaning and significance can happen on a drive going home for example. This highlights the uniqueness of youth work - being able to have the flexibility and creativeness of working with young people on a voluntary basis and is something that differentiates youth work between other services.

It is our unique selling point and one we should shout out about. Our support for Oscar has given him an outlet to talk about the frustrations he experiences in his life; in particular his lack of a father figure. He looks up to the male youth workers and is always keen to ask questions and learn.

This story highlights what is great and distinctive about youth work – an ability to build a meaningful and long term relationship with young people by demonstrating our ‘human’ and empathetic touch.

Youth workers are people first professionals second and this has helped to overcome emotional barriers that other agencies have historically struggled to address. Our long term commitment to young people also demonstrates that we are committed to being part of their lives during what can often be chaotic and frustrating times.

By understanding this, young people recognise the value of youth work in supporting them and can ‘buy into’ this support as and when they need it and on their terms – an absolutely vital aspect of the youth work approach.
“I really enjoy coming here. You give me the chance to talk.”
I am a youth worker who works for the local council and is based at the local youth centre. I had met Janusz, who is now 18, at a youth club a few years ago. He was then referred to our service by the school counsellor. The counsellor said they could not offer the housing support that the young person needed.

When I met Janusz for the first time in school he was nervous and rubbing his hands. I greeted him with smiles and a handshake, commenting on how he had changed since I last worked with him. He replied with nervous laughter and was very polite. I explained the confidentiality procedure between young people and youth workers (“everything that is shared with me I do not pass onto anyone else other than if they are in danger”).

Janusz was of Polish Catholic heritage and was taking his A levels at 6th form. During discussion about why the young person may need housing support he disclosed that he was gay and frightened, as well as worried, about coming out. He felt he may be disowned or become the victim of violence for bringing shame on the family. I reassured him I would be with him all the way.

During the critical initial support I encouraged an atmosphere of trust, care and compassion. Janusz became more comfortable in my company and he went on to say he had attempted to take his own life two occasions.

Janusz had already given what he wanted to do some considerable thought. He wanted to tell his family after he had finished his exams, which he was busy studying for. He also was unsure about how to tell them, he did not want to do it in person, but by letter. We explored his relationships with every member of the family on an individual basis. I suggested to him that his relationships with the family members were different that he write a letter personally to each one. He liked this idea and set about it.

We arranged to meet over a long period of time as the exams were not for 7 months.

He preferred to meet at school to eliminate any chance of being ‘uncovered’.

I made enquiries on his behalf, without disclosing who he was, relying on my strong relationships with other agencies for a possible move in date to supported accommodation. I also made them aware the placement may not be needed if the outcome is positive when ‘coming out’.

We discussed a plan for potential employment opportunities if he was disowned, although this would affect any housing benefit claim. Janusz was very proud and did not want to rely on state hand-outs; he said “there are people far worse off than me who need it”.

Together we visited two placements for assessment interviews.
He had to go over the reasons why he needed support again. He felt ok doing this and was welcome of me being there as he motioned towards me a couple of times when explaining and informed them I was indeed supporting him. I contacted projects that support gay people locally and nationally.

I sign-posted Janusz to a project that supports young people from his background specifically. In the later stages of planning I asked for support from a colleague of the same ethnic background who understood the culture far better. Janusz found great comfort in this when meeting with my colleague.

When the time came to meet the family face to face I also arranged for my line manager to be my emergency contact.

Janusz was very nervous, scared and worried but determined to continue. I gave him emails, texts and calls encouraging him and sending messages of support in the times between meetings. On the day he planned, he left the letters at his house, my colleague and I picked him up and took him to supported accommodation, which was quiet as the staff had left for the weekend.

It was at this stage, whilst sitting with him in the room, that I felt panic for the first time.
Had I supported this young person correctly, what would be outcome? The young person was getting up pacing then sitting down.

The family phoned Janusz when they had read the letters. He would not answer; he did not know what they would say. He told me he had a text saying come home, but he was still unsure. I asked if it was ok if I spoke to them as we really needed to gauge their feelings. I dialled his dad’s number on my phone. The father was in tears, ‘he wanted his boy back’. They said they do not care about his sexuality. When I relayed this to the young person he was surprised and smiled.

After another phone call Janusz, with my colleague and I, arranged to go to the family home almost immediately, under condition that Janusz could leave with us, as he said to me he wanted to try and take in everything that was happening. He felt this was for the best so everyone could have space to think.

Immediately on entering the family home Janusz was swamped in hugs and tears. They repeated that they only care for him not his sexuality; they added they did not want to lose their boy. They appreciated that Janusz had someone to support him through this most challenging of times.

Janusz’s father said he would sooner be disowned as a family from the wider Polish Catholic community before he ever disowns his son. On hearing this, the young person lit up, he looked so happy. It was at that very moment he knew he would be safe and loved.

I met up with the Janusz a couple of times, after this powerful meeting and their relationship had gone from strength to strength. He did not get the grades he wished for at school, not surprisingly with all the worry he had to cope with.

He is currently resitting them. He is determined to follow his chosen path in law. Janusz’s world has changed forever. He has a closer bond with family especially his father.

“The support I received has been paramount in the outcome of my issue. If I had not received the support, I would have been still engaging in suicidal activities stemming from my depression.”
Lyrical Progression

Working in a local Community centre around four years ago I was greeted by two siblings who had created a monster persona that was respected through fear by their peers. Greg was 12 and his brother Luke was 11.

They had elder siblings that were in and out of jail. They were bullies, disengaged with their community through anti social behaviour and false expectations of negativity, which they owned and at many times lived up to. It was feared by their school that they would follow the path of their elder brother.

As a team we created opportunities for them to engage. At times they would, but often they would keep a distance. We persisted using music and sport as a carrot, with lyrics writing in particular the thing they were into. It came to a point that we had built trust and were able to work intensely with them in their peer group and in a mentoring capacity.

To start they had a natural flair, however the content of what was written by them was heavy with drugs, violence and general ‘badman’ mentality. In true youth worker style we encouraged the positives and challenged the negatives, engaging in profound and inspiring discussions which led to them writing and recording about true and real issues affecting their lives. It was a truly magical process to see how these two showed their vulnerability and worked towards making themselves stronger in a world they were still trying to make sense of.

The input from us was intense and by majority challenging. During the time of working with them they came to us when their Nan had passed away. They wrote a song for her that they wanted to perform at her funeral and us being trusted enough to see them at their most vulnerable was pivotal in our relationship. We recognised they had a positive outlet to express their anger, frustration and understanding. If we had not been here would that of been expressed in a different way?

We encouraged other avenues in their lives, other than music, which has led them to become focused on goals. School life had improved and was noted by their headmaster, they became positive role models amongst their peers outside of school, they both trained hard at sports and have now been presented opportunities to join top youth football clubs.

Our youth work approach and intervention has created a lasting influence. They are both positive role models and leaders amongst their peers. They are focused, ambitious, healthy and resilient; it is a great pleasure to still be able to serve these young people.

Greg said during a recent visit to our centre. “I wonder what would have happened to me without you guys?”

We all need somebody to trust and somewhere safe, where we are allowed to be our best and worst. We all need to feel like we belong to something, have a purpose and have somewhere where we can be free to assert ourselves, find encouragement and grow in confidence.
“I wonder what would have happened to me without you guys?”
I am a youth worker for the local authority. I was asked to work with Marcos who had just been excluded from school. He had just completed some group work with my colleagues (see Plums in the Park). Historically Marcos’s experience of school was very poor, his attendance was really low, he had very low confidence and struggled with his self-esteem.

Marcos would rarely go into lessons and did not participate in any school work. He had really low levels of ability, messed around and acted the fool rather than put his head down and get on with studies.

I made contact with Marcos’s mum and arranged a time to go and visit. My first and second visit were unsuccessful; no answer, although I suspected someone was in. On my third visit, mum was at home and so was Marcos. I introduced myself and discussed what I could do as part of our service. Marcos did not speak much, in fact grunted a few times but I got the feeling he was not confident that I could do anything to help.

I decided to leave with an offer of a one to one chat and a hot chocolate on my next visit. Marcos was very pleased with this offer and our first meeting out to drink Marcos started to chat to me. He enjoyed being taken out and treated to a drink.

I attended meetings with Marcos and his mum at the new school to negotiate him back into education. When back in school, Marcos was on a reduced timetable and only participated in a few lessons. To keep him focussed, I challenged Marcos using a number of small but easy goals.

He had weekly targets to accomplish in order to develop this confidence and esteem, these included spending time in certain lessons he had not yet attended, attempting to talk to teachers like humans and to let school assess his ability level.

I had to get him to slowly increase the level of attendance and engagement each week, to ensure he started to get used to being back in an education environment, by challenging him to try a new lesson each week to build up a timetable.

I was getting the feeling Marcos was starting to trust me and understood I was here to help him. It became apparent that Marcos was scared of change, worried about being judged and petrified of being found out that he really couldn’t read or write, add up or subtract.

Marcos is an improving young person. Although there are still some issues, Marcos’s self-confidence and esteem has greatly improved. The school has reported a big change in his overall behaviour and attitude towards them. His attendance is higher and he is expected to leave school this year with some GCSE qualifications.
I have been a constant figure for him for 18 months of his life, I have not given up on him and have followed him between schools and visited at home at least once a week.

I have communicated with Mum, school, family support and others. I have always had Marcos’s best interests at the heart of this process as well as a hot chocolate when he needs it most.
When the County Council closed a village youth club the local Church stepped up to run the service. They formed a Management Committee and over the next few years the service grew from the back of a converted library bus in a layby, ran by a few determined volunteers. The years have seen loads of growing pains, but it is now an expanding service, ran by two local part-time Youth Workers from the local Church rooms.

With limited resources and no real place for the youth to ‘call home’, we were approached by a Community Sounds company, with the idea of running music based workshops with the youth club.

We nearly snapped their hands off at the opportunity, as the young people attending the Youth Club were really into music and had raised this very said thing at a recently formed Youth Forum, (a group formed with the young people to allow them to be more involved with decisions within the service.)

The music project sessions sat alongside our Youth Club sessions, with both starting in the same room but then quickly the project became something we felt could be a stand-alone. The young people were pushing to record their music and wanted quiet, so whilst the other members of the group were pretty respectful of this, the young people were really keen to have a crisp recording, so we opened up another room for them to concentrate solely on their production and recording.

Bethany, a young person who had been attending on and off, came over to us to show a video on her phone during the 1st music session, a video of her singing. Bethany could really sing but having overcome bereavement and bullying in the past Bethany was battling with undiagnosed mental health issues and presented very low self esteem.

When asked if she wanted to sing she immediately said no. We spent some time teasing out the ‘whys’ behind why Bethany didn’t feel she could sing in front of her peers and Bethany began to disclose her low self esteem and how performing in front of others made her very nervous. Bethany felt unable to record in front of the other members of the group.

During the first couple of sessions we chatted about what song theoretically she might sing, taking Bethany through to the music group to engage and familiarise herself with the music workers with the song suggestions and to begin to work on breaking through some of the barriers that were up.

Over the course of the workshop Bethany attended each session, involving herself by encouraging other members of the group to sing yet still didn’t take to the microphone to record herself. Each week we chatted about her fears and hopes and in the third week came to an agreement, Bethany would sing with the others outside of the room at first, we would then playback to the group so they could listen, Bethany was reluctant to agree but with the encouragement from the rest of her peers it happened.

A breakthrough, the young people showing encouragement and respect
for their friend and Bethany, fighting back the nerves to record her song. **By week six, Bethany was recording in front of the majority of the group.**

When the music project was extended due to its success, Bethany came to speak to us, she didn’t usually attend on a Monday evening as she spent her week between families and was worried she would be unable to attend.

We offered to call her Father to explain the extension, we also had the opportunity to say what an achievement it had been for Bethany to sing. **Encouraging and sharing this with family gave Bethany a real boost and the forthcoming weeks resulted in singing in front of the entire youth group.**

Youth work is fluid, changing to suit the needs of the young people, who are first and foremost the most important part of any youth setting, **by reacting to the needs of the young people such as Bethany, it enabled her to overcome her fears and grow in confidence.**

Bethany has just auditioned for the Local Talent Show and hopes to sing in front of a live audience.

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“I like to be able to record music in a professional and nice environment. I feel more relaxed here, unlike at school where people sometimes laugh at me”
The Journey

We are a youth work charity, delivering outdoor education, sports, activities, residential opportunities and training. We also provide infrastructure support to affiliated youth groups.

We first came into contact with Lee in 2009 when he took part in the 100 mile canoe test as a member of another youth group. Lee was 14 and lived in a deprived area with his Mum and Dad who were both on a low income.

After leaving school Lee struggled to find work and was unclear about a way forward in terms of education, employment or training. He had also been involved in criminal activity, had a criminal record and was known to Youth Justice and the police.

Over a number of years Lee took part in many residential with us. During a leadership training residential Lee was encouraged to go for the Level Two Award in Community Sports Leadership which he completed. As a result of gaining this qualification Lee became a volunteer. Lee's new role was assisting our staff with the delivery of activities and training courses.

We fully supported Lee throughout this process, guiding him through the ups and downs, encouraging and mentoring him. From this Lee went from young person, to volunteer, to a young leader.

Some of the work at summer camp that Fred took part in was assisting the delivery of kayak coaching, taking responsibility for a small group of young people during an orienteering / mountain walk exercise and delivering a sports leadership training course. This was with a diverse group of young people who at times challenged Lee's ethics and values.

Lee has since delivered a number of residential and projects with the organisation and taken responsible roles supporting young people as a regular and committed volunteer.

There were many occasions when Lee’s behaviour was challenging and he disengaged due to his background and perception of other workers and adults. But as professional youth workers we gave him the required patience and understanding to make mistakes and need the stability of a constant in their life, and for Lee we became that. Over time we removed these barriers by allowing Lee to express his frustrations, worries and concerns and by giving him space to explore new opportunities and new relationships.

There was no eureka moment, but slowly and surely he made positive changes to his life. This as a result of our investment of time, assessing his needs, capturing his imagination and willingness to learn and develop.

Our intervention prevented Lee from becoming more involved in crime and gave him the confidence and self esteem to recognise and believe in his own potential. He gained new skills and qualifications. Lee spent the summer of 2015 travelling. On his return he enrolled in a college in Cornwall training to become an outdoor education instructor. In the summer of 2016 he will be helping to deliver the National Citizenship Service.
“I have got to say a big thanks again for the opportunities and time you have given me. I would never have had the courage or confidence to travel Asia on my own and would certainly not be going to study outdoor education at Uni, you have truly helped me find my way in life. I think I am definitive proof that what you guys do works, and why it is worth putting the time and money into young people to change their life”
We spotted a group of about 8 boys who were hanging on a bench by some bushes; they were aged about 14. They were rolling cigarettes and chatting with each other. We approached them walking over to where they were sitting with a smile, showed our ID badges and introduced ourselves. After about 10 minutes of ‘banter’ they began pulling plums off a nearby tree and started throwing them at us. We left with good humour and said we would come by next week if they wanted to meet us.

The following week the group were waiting for us in the park. They seemed pleased to see us and we had a really nice chat about them; what schools they were at and what they liked doing. We picked up quickly that they were struggling at school and home. They were also very sexist and anti social in their language and behaviour, which we felt we could positively challenge.

The group attended weekly sessions at the community centre throughout the winter. After a few sessions with ‘getting to know you’ games we started to move into areas the young men wanted to go, such as sexual health and drugs. From the first session we had to firmly establish the ground rules. There was lots of ‘banter’ which put people down, lots of sexist and homophobic language which we constantly challenged. How does it make people feel? What does that word mean? Why do you use it?

The group set their own rules and agreed that if this happened more than 3 times in the session we could kick the whole group out. We enforced this rule a couple of times and although there was some moaning the group took collective responsibility for when it went wrong.

The young people put lots of emphasis about us being honest and not passing on the things they told us about. The group were involved in anti-social behaviour in their community and gradually started to tell us what was going on. This allowed us to challenge the roles they were taking on as members of the group. Some were just watching but their presence gave an audience to others in the group who were behaving badly.

We encouraged them to think about how their behaviour affected others. We linked this with their attendance at the community centre youth club where their behaviour was often challenging. We asked them what they thought they had learnt throughout a winter working with us.

They said: To think before I do something. To ask for help when I need it. To use a condom. To not smoke weed every day. To walk away if I don’t want to be involved.
As they got to know us, their barriers came down and they started to see us as people that could help them. Some of the group went on to have weekly individual support from us. Marcus was excluded from school during the project. We supported him in his new school for a year (see ‘Hot Chocolate’). Jamie has been supported through intensive therapy as we discovered that he experienced a trauma in the past that he needed help with.

We have been able to support these young men to stay at school. All of the group had been excluded at some point from school and our support has encouraged them to achieve their studies. Youth work has also helped them to reduce their risk taking and their anti-social behaviour as a group in their community has stopped. No other way of working could have engaged these young men on their own terms.

The group although needing individual support also needed to be worked with as a group to challenge their behaviours with each other. Our intervention started in a park where they pelted us with plums and has continued through to their homes, their community centre and their school.
A Good Education

I am a youth worker based in a local secondary school. I met Lydia who is 15 when I started at the school in September.

It took Lydia about six weeks to engage in work with me, she needed time to trust me and to understand what the aim of my support would be. **Lydia’s school attendance was 55%.** When at school Lydia would refuse lessons and present with challenging behaviour. She could be verbally aggressive and at other times be very quiet and closed off. Lydia would show low level self-harm and could threaten to harm herself in front of me.

I started to build up Lydia’s trust through ad hoc one-to-one work during the school day. The aim of having a youth work perspective within a school setting was to develop an open access approach in an environment where her attendance is compulsory.

Lydia’s work with me wasn’t compulsory, but with the build-up of trust she started to seek me out at difficult times and would appear at my office door, where I was accessible for her when needed.

With our time I found out more about her, family, friends, likes, dislikes and how she felt on good days as well as bad days. I moved the focus away from what she ‘should’ be doing at school or from what she felt was expected of her.

Our positive work was set back by **long periods of unauthorised absence, which led to Lydia presenting as withdrawn, uncommunicative and negative.** Unauthorised absences led to tensions between school and Lydia’s mum. At times a home visit from me would be needed to break this cycle and reassure Lydia back into school.

Mum was supported through an assessment with Children’s Services, helping plan her re-engagement with the family support process and placing a referral for a family support worker.

Mum often presented barriers to Lydia’s engagement in this provision by saying she was ill or that Lydia couldn’t get the location of appointments, although this would have been arranged.

Lydia’s attendance at school started to improve with a legal target put in place. Lydia could still be distressed and aggressive when faced with entering classrooms throughout the day.

I advocated for Lydia’s need to be removed from her timetable into a safe place. It was agreed that she could access Learning Support, a nurturing learning environment where she would receive more focused support throughout the school day in the one location. The team within Learning Support and I encouraged Lydia into some classes, but most days she would refuse and stay within Learning Support.

I supported the communication with all teaching staff about how Lydia could present and approaches to move her forward into the lesson or back into Learning Support.
This enabled staff working with Lydia to understand her refusal and presentation, supported communication and offered flexibility for Lydia throughout good and bad days. I also supported the communication with staff to prioritise Lydia’s workload, as she had missed chunks in learning. Lydia could then take some ownership over what needed to be prioritised, so work in chunks when in a good frame of mind in Learning Support.

Lydia now presents in a positive way with her peers at social time, with her overall attendance improving and currently at 72%. **Lydia’s emotional distress and aggression is decreasing and the adults working with her are finding her more approachable and open to support.**

Lydia is a complex young person and the support for her will need to be ongoing through links with her mum. A **flexible approach for Lydia’s learning environment in school will need to continue** as it is expected to be a gradual process to engage her back into classroom learning. It would have been easy to think a solution had been reached due to the fact that Lydia was a school refuser who is now attending school.

A large part of my work was to ensure that this assumption didn’t occur and to advocate that there were wider circumstances that required on-going and individualised support.

**Working with a youth work approach within a school helped increase Lydia’s engagement in one-to-one work that would support some of her emotional needs and experiences. As a youth worker I was able to consider Lydia’s circumstances and experiences in context of her family structure, community and cycles of disengagement.**

By using principles of empowerment embedded in youth work I could support Lydia to set targets for herself and take ownership of some of her behaviours and what she wanted to achieve - a good education.
Thank-you for taking the time to read through our collection of Youth Work Stories from the Warwick District. Our services are under threat and by telling our stories we hope to widen the understanding and importance of the work that goes on every day in the area.

Services for young people are increasingly under threat, research into the scale of council cuts since 2012 show evidence of the following:

- 600 Youth Centres have been shut
- 2,650 youth staff have lost their jobs
- 139,000 youth places have been axed

Please support us in spreading the awareness of the work that is happening **right now.** With 180 councils warning more cuts ahead your support is imperative to ensuring the survival of our Youth Services.

[https://www.justgiving.com/crowdfunding/youthworkstories](https://www.justgiving.com/crowdfunding/youthworkstories) youthworkstories@gmail.com

In Defence of Youth Work