Changing lives: volunteering helps Ben turn away



Getting involved in a project bringing to life the fairground past of Kidsgrove in Staffordshire helped 17-year-old Ben head towards a brighter future.

The youth club at the Galley Centre offered the young people of Kidsgrove, Staffordshire, a reason to keep off the streets and out of trouble.

But when bored teenagers, including some of 17-year-old Ben's friends, vandalised the centre, the youth club was closed down.

It left them with nothing to do. Ben and his friends found themselves causing trouble throughout the rest of the town and getting told off by the police. In his own words Ben thought that he was "just going to mess around all my life with my mates".

But in a twist of fate, the closed-down youth club was to play a part in Ben turning his life around.

Learning about Kidsgrove's past

Dave Richards, development officer for Sporting Communities, which had been responsible for running the youth club, had kept in touch with Ben.

He approached Ben with the idea of volunteering for the organisation and getting involved with their programme Paradise of the Potteries. This National Lottery-funded project explored the heritage of Clough Hall Park in the heart of Kidsgrove.

Unbeknown to many of Kidsgrove's residents, Clough Hall Park used to be host to a pleasure park. Between 1889 and 1906, The Paradise of the Potteries was home to a fairground, switchback railway and zip line. It attracted performances from world-famous acts including Charles Blondin, the French tightrope walker and acrobat.

Taking on responsibilities

As part of the programme, Ben became a member of the Heritage Headquarters group, known as H2Q. H2Q was tasked with organising events at Clough Hall Park to recreate the pleasure park and reconnect young people of the area with their almost-forgotten local heritage.

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Ben had a number of different responsibilities throughout the programme including recruitment, carrying out research at the library, planning and delivering events, collecting evaluation, and devising and producing a comic strip in which he has a starring role.

Reflecting on the project, Dave said: "Thanks to the National Lottery funding we received we've been able to inspire young people and residents."

That inspiration can be seen in Ben, who said of his involvement: "I've definitely got more mature, I'd like to say. I've knuckled down more, I've focused on what I want to do."

A bright future

That focus has led Ben to continue volunteering at the Galley Centre. And he has also enrolled in college in the hopes of becoming a fully qualified coach, and inspiring future generations of Kidsgrove youngsters.

He said: "I think we've made a place that looks like it [was] having a bit of a dead end come back to life, and hopefully the kids can grow up and have a bright future."



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