Changing lives: instilling confidence in Port Talbot



A project examining Richard Burton's diaries gave young people in Port Talbot pride in Wales, in their town, and in themselves.

Born and bred in the Welsh industrial steel-making community, Richard Burton became one of the world's biggest film stars and his ongoing relationship with Hollywood starlet Elizabeth Taylor was legendary. In a National Lottery funded project celebrating the anniversary of Burton's birthday, students at Neath Port Talbot College uncovered another side to him, as a prolific writer and diarist - recording his private thoughts from the age of 14.

Starting out

Many of the teens taking part in the project were unsure about joining in: 17-year-old Shaleem Abdul Khalik wasn't sure what direction to take in life, but decided to take part in the project, which involved researching, creating and starring in a documentary about Richard Burton's early life.

Sophie Ludlaim, also 17, was also confused about her future. "I'd been out of school for three years, and when I came to college it was really difficult," she explains. "I thought I'd made a big mistake."

Discovering hidden talents

Creating the film and working together proved valuable to all the students in different ways, and they gained skills and qualities they never would have predicted.

“When you come in to such a big project that meant something to the community, to take that on, it was a big confidence booster.” Sophie explains. “As a group we had to mould together to get ideas, do the research and the writing and do the phenomenal amount of work to make the film.”

The film will not only become a lasting resource for the community, but it is hoped that in the future the young people’s project may lead to the creation of a regular celebratory event to promote the area’s creative talent – both past and present – and ensure this important story continues to be told.

Raising ambitions

Sophie has also gained more faith in herself. “My ambition has changed since the trip to Oxford as part of this project,” she says. “I never thought I would visit one of the most famous universities in the country.

“I said at first I wouldn’t act, but I did – I enjoyed it a lot.” Sophie is now studying for a BTEC Performing Arts qualification – something she never thought herself capable of, until she realised the power of having faith in yourself.

The project also inspired 17-year-old Shania Burton to pursue a BTEC in Performing Arts. “Doing the acting, research and the trips has brought my confidence up,” she says. “It’s given me the power to go on stage – before, I wouldn’t have even thought of it.”

As well as acting, researching and creating the film, the group got to interview another famous local actor, Michael Sheen. Shania feels lucky to have had such an opportunity:

“I felt honoured to be able to speak to someone who walked, in many ways, in the shoes of Richard Burton.”

Inspiration for the future

Abdul is now studying for a Media Level Two qualification at college. “Because of this project I am more keen on what I am doing, more focussed on what I want to do”, he says. “I’ve learnt that if you put your mind to something you can achieve it and, whatever ambitions or hidden goals you have, just don’t be afraid to take that leap. I just feel really positive about everything.”

Another participant in the project, 17-year-old Dominic Jones found new friendships through the project, which improved his social skills. “I enjoyed acting, and meeting people from the community.” He says. “The group I worked in seemed like family.

> "My confidence has grown 110%!"
>
> - Participant Dominic

“I still meet people from the group, even though they have gone on to do other things; and I also meet members of the new group – we often meet up and have a chat and a laugh. My confidence has grown 110%!”

The power to transform lives

The students’ principal, Keith Booker, sums up the young people’s achievements during the project: “I was very, very impressed with the engagement of a group of individuals who often find it difficult to engage.

“Afterwards they were in a better place than when they’d started and there was a sense of belonging and pride in that community. They were achieving things which they would never have believed the year before that they were ever capable of doing, and that to me is real success.









"I've learnt that if you put your mind to something you can achieve it" - Abdul

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Changing lives: TOWIE helps Jessica bag a career