

Celebrating a century of adult learning

01/03/2010

Grassroots adult education in the North East – immortalised by the hit theatrical production *The Pitmen Painters* - will be celebrated thanks to a grant of £42,500 from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). One hundred years of the Workers' Educational Association North East Region (WEA) is being marked by a project 'The Right to Learn' that will chronicle the development of education among working class communities, particularly in mining areas.

The WEA classes are credited with providing accessible adult education that improved the life chances of many individuals while underpinning social change through the extension of 20th-century democracy.

The WEA's North East Region was established between 1909 and 1911 to help socially disadvantaged adults who had little formal education and low expectations from life. The organisation gave them new hope and knowledge to improve not only their lives, but those of their families and communities by encouraging active citizenship.

The project will recruit volunteers to help conserve the WEA's existing archives and augment them with oral history interviews capturing the memories of people whose lives were changed by exposure to learning opportunities. The memories recorded will be reproduced on a widely-distributed CD and an exhibition will be created for Tyne and Wear museums. A dramatic performance will reproduce the WEA's first annual meeting in 1910, a debate and discussion event will be held, and a centenary edition of the association's newsletter will be published focusing on its foundation and history.

The project will provide volunteers with training in new skills, including oral history interviewing, and will also contribute to the ongoing discussion about future plans for adult education in the 21st century.

For the WEA North East Region, Nigel Todd, Regional Director, commented: "This is a terrific boost for our centenary celebration. The WEA has changed the lives of thousands of people in the North East over the last century. It has also contributed strongly to regional culture as Lee Hall's hit play, *The Pitmen Painters*, demonstrates by relating the story of a group of mainly miners in 1930s Ashington whose WEA art class led them to become internationally famous artists of everyday life. But we want the past hundred years of 'the right to learn' to be an inspiration for the next hundred, and the grant will assist in making that happen."

For the Heritage Lottery Fund, Head of HLF North East, Ivor Crowther, said: "This project will spread awareness of the WEA's proud history in developing the region's tradition of radical adult education as both an engine for social change and a fundamental part of the heritage of democratic values."

Notes to editors

Using money raised through the National Lottery, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) sustains and transforms a wide range of heritage for present and future generations to take part in, learn from and enjoy. From museums, parks and historic places to archaeology, natural environment and cultural traditions, we invest in every part of our diverse heritage. HLF has supported 33,900 projects, allocating £4.4 billion across the UK.

Further information

HLF Press Office, Laura Bates on 020 7591 6027 or lbates@hlf.org.uk or Phil Cooper on 07889 949173.

Nigel Todd, Regional Director, WEA North East Region on 0191 212 6100.