

VOICES

FROM EXPERIENCE

“If I can do it, so can you” Personal stories of community empowerment

Here are two stories of people who have made a difference in their communities. Tina and Paul both became involved as volunteers in their local community, moved into more active and influential roles, and are now paid community based workers. Tina and Paul’s stories are individual but they characterise the personal empowerment and the consequent community strengths enabled by opportunities for community involvement. As Tina says: “If I can do it, so can you”.

Have you got a story like Tina’s and Paul’s? Please get in touch.

From typical resident to volunteer to activist to local worker

The story of Tina Smith, 45 year old single parent of two grown up children, community activist and Neighbourhood Participation Worker

The resident

I have lived in Kendray, a council housing estate in Barnsley South Yorkshire for twenty-seven years. For seventeen of those years I was what is nowadays described as a “typical single parent” - receiving benefits and bringing up my two children up alone. There was not a lot of support or opportunities available when my children were young, no Surestart, no training opportunities and not much advice on career options or how to actually raise children; you just got on with it.

Getting hooked through learning

I left school with several CSE’s but didn’t really use them in the jobs I did before the children were born. As the children got older, I wanted more out of life, I thought “if this all there is to life I might as well forget it”, when a friend of mine asked me to go to the local Resource Centre with her, where she was studying for her RSA qualifications. I’d never heard of the Resource Centre but I gave it a try, and was hooked instantly. Over the next eighteen months I studied and gained several qualifications: CLAIT, Integrated Business Technology stage two; Word processing RSA’s 1, 2 and 3; I completed the ECDL at the local Oaks Millennium Technology Centre; and gained first aid and food hygiene certificates. All these qualifications and learning were available free to people in receipt of benefits.

Community activity

During this period Kendray was undergoing drastic regeneration, and with having lived on the estate so long I know a lot of the community very well -after all they saw my children grow up. The local council hadn’t really got the community spirit at this time and was basically run by the ‘old boy’s network’ standard way of doing things. This meant that residents within the community were not asked for their thoughts, opinions or ideas, but were just told what would happen to the estate. How anyone can believe that **they can just walk into a community and tell residents there how they should live and what they needed was completely beyond me**, and still is.

Personal Stories of Community Empowerment

The main thing that sprung me into action was the way residents, especially the elderly residents that were to be re-housed because of the demolition process, were treated by the local council. The treatment of the residents appalled me, and a lot of the elderly just accepted the treatment, mainly because they didn't know who to complain to, or what their rights were. How could someone in a suit come into the estate and tell people that had lived there 30 years or more they had to leave their houses? Did no one tell these people that the houses they talked about were not just bricks and mortar, but family homes that residents had lived in for years and even generations? No, this couldn't be right.

One couple in particular asked for my help, and this was the start of things to come. Their house was to be demolished and they had to be re-housed. A house became available and they accepted it; they spent their pension on wallpaper and paint, only to have the keys taken of them the week after. Both of the residents ended up ill, so I complained and when I didn't get the right answers I asked the same question every time, "who is above you?" I continued in this vain until I was finally put in touch with some one that could actually do something. Thank heavens I found some one in authority with some compassion. All worked out well for the couple. That is just one example - some of the stories are actually unbelievable. But I knew what I was up against now, and maybe I didn't go about things in the correct way and use the correct words, but by god I ended up getting the correct answers.

Moving into paid work

During this period I joined a local community group called "Laying the Foundations", a locally held, friendly group, I knew most of the members of the group as they were all residents on the Kendray estate.

The local Community House is located just two doors away from where I live, and one day the manager there asked me if I had ever considered doing any voluntary work. I hadn't considered this until then, but when she said I would be dealing with the residents within my own community and helping them interact with the council and service providers, I jumped at the chance.

During my time as a volunteer I had learned how the council worked, gained a lot of contacts and found out who were the compassionate, community minded employees within the local council, and of course more importantly I found out who was not.

The satisfaction of helping people and getting positive results for them was indescribable, so when the opportunity of a temporary job came up I jumped at the chance. There was a lot to consider - I was in receipt of Disability living Allowance, which was not a great deal of money, but the wages were not very good either, and there was also the possibility I could become ill again, so I needed to take this into consideration. Once I was informed I wouldn't lose this money there was no question, I took the job.

The information about not losing Disability Living Allowance proved to be wrong and my benefit was stopped. So that gave me something else to look into, and there was a Welfare Rights Adviser based at the Community House, so I took a keen interest in his job too -I would listen and ask questions. I think I became rather annoying, but believe me **you don't get to know anything without asking**. I didn't become an expert in the field of benefits but I did learn the procedures and what people were entitled to. The job proved to be perfect for me. I soon realised that the people that were once described as **the little people could actually make a difference**.

Moving on

While doing the job I gained my NVQ 2 in Business Administration, so when a job became available in the Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder Office, I applied. Although I hadn't had an interview for years and years the manager of the Community House gave me a lot of help and I was successful in the interview.

I started work for the Kendray Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder in December 2003 as a Clerical Officer. Anyone that works within a community knows there is no such thing as a clerical officer. The line that states 'and any other duty requested by the manager' just about says it all! Although it was a completely different ball game from

the voluntary and paid work I did at the Community House, I still enjoyed it - but had to remember the politically correct words and speak to officials and service providers in a slightly different manner - well a very different manner really.

Living and working in the same community

I hadn't realised the impact of living in the same community in which I work and there were a few teething problems. I never seemed to clock off. However I soon got the balance right and would state that I wasn't at work and that I would deal with the problem or enquiry during working hours the next day, unless of course it was a problem that I thought was totally out of order. But being me wouldn't let that pass by. Living in the same community in which I work has far more advantages than disadvantages; I have the trust of the residents albeit earned trust and respect, when I say I will do something I do it or give a very good explanation of why I am unable to do it.

Aspiration, reality and ownership

During my first year at the Neighbourhood Management office I gained my NVQ3 in Business Administration and Law, and several community regeneration qualifications; I attended conferences and seminars, although to be honest one pretty much resembled another and if all the fancy words and jargon were cut, it all boils down to common sense. If you just walk into a community and build a park for example, or even a Learning Centre because some one way up there thinks it's a good idea, of course its either not going to get used or its going to be trashed. However high up you are, you should not have the right to tell people what they want or need. Let the residents decide and the kids have a say, include everyone and life is a lot easier. Residents know what they need, after all they are the community, not someone sat behind a desk in an office somewhere. When I first heard the word "Ownership" I thought "what's all that about then" but yes I can say 100% it works, and we have proof of this method been a success in Kendray.

Moving on to an ideal

Due to staff leaving and things still needing doing I began working away from my job description and remit. Then a job became available for a Neighbourhood Participation

Worker within the Neighbourhood Management Team to fill the void - I applied and got the job and am now studying for a Foundation Degree in Community Regeneration and Development. My job is now my ideal job; I organise community events, attend several theme group meetings - housing, environmental, young people, community safety. I represent neighbourhood management and the residents; I'm working at developing a green space with the community, and work with young people. I facilitate a community group which has now become a TARA - the pride I feel about that is unbelievable, and thanks to the mind change of the local council, who now employ dedicated, committed, community minded people with of course the vital ingredient "Common Sense", I have a very good working relationship with a lot of council employees and service providers. I respect the people I work with and live amongst and in return I have gained their trust and respect.

What next?

Who knows? But be assured I haven't finished yet. If anyone thinks, "no I can't make a difference" or "I can't do that" think again, because **if I can do it, so can you.** Who would have thought that I would have come from the so called typecast "single parent" living on benefits, on a deprived council estate, to someone that has made a difference, in a job I love, in a community I love more, studying for a degree, and now buying my own home.

Yes a lot of obstacles are put in the way, but keep it in your mind that every one is equal, no one is better than anyone else, and no one as the right to look down on anyone, everyone has the right to be heard, and that life is made up of choices, some good, and some bad. We all make mistakes that's how we learn and that is what makes us human, never be afraid to say you don't understand something especially all this jargon that's floating about, I do, I stick my hand up and say "what's that mean then" let the people that use the jargon explain what it means, you only have to ask once and it gets easier, you'd be amazed how many people sit there nodding when actually they don't know what it means either.

But most of all keep that sense of humour and common sense, you'll need it!

**From
"Minding My Own Business"
To
"Community Development Worker"**

The story of Paul Dungworth

Time on my hands?

I have lived all my life in and around the same area of North Halifax and I suppose I am fairly typical of a lot of men my age (I am 45 now) who live in the area. I have always worked (mainly in low skilled jobs) and enjoyed playing football and going out with the lads on a weekend. I had a minimal interest in local issues and was quite happy to join in arguments/discussions in the pub but leave it at that!

Then I had children.

Now you tend to start getting involved in things when you have kids. However I was still working full time so my wife was the one who helped at the local parent & toddler group, then the playgroup, then the school PTA.

In 1996 my eldest son requested I take him to the local junior football club. He had been to watch me play on several occasions and I suppose like a lot of sons he wanted to copy his Dad.

So, off we both went to the next training session and he registered with the under 11 team. I followed his progress all of that season being very supportive of the team and the team manager, helping put posts up, referee matches, coaching etc. During that season I changed jobs and became a Postman with Royal Mail. Back in the days when they started at 5.30am and were home for 11am!

Somebody must have told the club Secretary this because he started pestering me at every home game to run the next seasons under 11s team (which my son would be playing for). Well, nobody else was coming forward so I thought I would give it a go as I had a bit more time on my hands now with the new job.

Getting drawn in

The start of the new season loomed and again the club Secretary came to me. This time it was to kit me out ready for the forthcoming new season. He handed me two old footballs, a set of faded maroon shirts of varying sizes and a promise of one new match ball before the season starts! All this was reminiscent of when I first started playing football – but that was 25 years ago! Surely things should have moved on! Well they had moved on at all the other clubs in the district but not our club. We were often the target of ridicule and bigoted attitudes when on our travels. I decided then that for my son's sake, his team mates and for everyone in North Halifax I would strive to make the club as good as, if not better than, all the other clubs in the Halifax League!

I needed to find out all the internal workings of the club and see where things could be improved. I joined the committee and within a year the secretary had handed the job to me with a free rein to take the club forward and make things better for everyone involved.

I attended every meeting possible that had a bearing on where I wanted to see the club progress to. I spoke with local councillors, local council officers and probably the most influential and helpful organisation, The North Halifax Partnership – the SRB 6 regeneration group that had existed for a few years now and I had never even heard of it! They pointed me in the right direction for applying for funds to provide the existing teams with just the most basic of essentials. From there we were able to grow in size and form more teams. Now the local kids were wanting to play for their club and were no longer ashamed of being associated with it. In fact they now wore their new kits (all matching) with pride!

Broader horizons

Over the next few years the club continued to grow and I continued my own personal development and started to broaden my horizons a little bit. I joined the North Halifax Partnership as a Community Board member and sat on the grants panel. More and more I was getting called upon to speak on behalf of the North Halifax residents on a variety of issues. Now when I first started with the football I was very quiet and would never have had the confidence to stand up in front of a group of people and talk. I never realised that if I did not do this then nobody else in the club would do it. **So I just had to do it.** And I was as nervous as hell! Even so, the more I did it the more confident I became. I soon realised that if you have that organisational power people just shut up and listen to you – even if it is a load of drivel! I also realised that the people who were listening could also help to bring about change and things were happening!

I became Chair of the partnership and during my time we were instrumental in attracting Neighbourhood Management to Ovenden and Mixenden (two areas of North Halifax). This started to have an impact straight away. All this time I was still a postman in the area. Then a position came up with the local Sure Start programme. It was working with families and

ideally they were looking for someone who could engage with local men in particular. I thought **“I could do this!”** and still do all my voluntary bits. I worked with Sure Start for two years and again further developed my skills and understanding around work in my own community.

The perfect job

In 2006, the Ovenden Initiative Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder organisation advertised for a Senior Community Link Worker. This was like the perfect job!

I have been in post for two years now and love every minute of the job. I am able to influence change in my local area like never before. I still run the junior football - as Chairman now. When I started we had 5 teams. Next season we will be running with 27 teams and over 400 kids. We are widely regarded as the best club in the area and often get consulted on a wide range of issues. My life is not my own anymore but that is a very small price to pay. Doing the weekly shop in the local supermarket takes ages because of getting stopped down every other aisle to talk over people's personal issues. I never dismiss them as I am one of their own and understand what they are saying. I am as much proud of their progress as I am of my own.

Why I became an activist!

I must be totally honest here. The reason I very first started being active in my local area was down to very selfish reasons.

I have always been proud of the area where I was brought up and had never really witnessed much of life any where else. Getting involved with the kids football really opened my eyes to what it was really like in other areas and how people from those areas perceived my community. I did not wish to see my kids and other kids in the area growing up missing out on so much. Yet I could visibly see the difference whenever we went to play in other areas. There were marked differences in confidence, expectancies, health, educational attainment levels, and wealth – all the areas that community activists work to address.

The phrase “narrowing the gap” never seemed more relevant when comparing my kids to the kids from across town.

I am still driven by this motivation now I am in paid work. If anyone ever tells you that living and working in the same area has disadvantages then you must question their commitment to the job. Because so far I have only ever experienced positives from living in the area that I now get paid to serve.

Paul is a member of the Regional Community Panel for the National Empowerment Partnership in Yorkshire and the Humber.

This study has been produced by the National Empowerment Partnership in Yorkshire and the Humber. For further information contact COGS, 0114 2554747 or email mail@cogs.solis.co.uk