

features

Travels with Tracey

Tracey Hewett from Cardiff loses count of the number of times she has been abroad with the youth service, on trips largely financed by grants and by fundraising by the young people involved. Now 21, she is training at the University Hospital of Wales to be a nurse for people with learning difficulties. She talked to Ymlaen about the role the youth service has played in her life.

I'm so lucky to have been on those trips. Unless I'd had the opportunity, I probably wouldn't be doing anything with my life. It makes you realise that you are valuable — and that life is what you make it.'

Tracey first came into contact with the youth service when she was eight but really became involved at the age of 12 after a youth worker had visited her school to talk about what the local youth club had to offer.

Her first trips were day-long outings, and then outdoor pursuit activities and weekend trips. 'Heritage camps', doing environmental work in Brecon, and larger scale activities, such as youth exchanges and expeditions, followed. After her first trip abroad, to Stuttgart, one of Cardiff's twin towns, Tracey's mother warned her she would never want to settle down. She wasn't far wrong.

Tracey and two dozen other youth club members spent five weeks in Kenya in 1988, helping people in the remote village of Katanga overcome water storage problems. Then came a youth exchange to Portugal, followed by acquisition of the youth group's prize possession, a bus bought from Cardiff social services.

Converted, it has taken young people, Tracey included, the length of Italy to Sicily (where Mount Etna erupted in honour of their visit), and across Europe to Turkey. Next year, a visit to US, returning this year's visit to Cardiff by young Americans, is scheduled. Tracey believes that youth exchanges and travel enable people to learn about different cultures and compare attitudes and ways of life. 'It can make you look at your own beliefs and ways, and change your view of things,' she says.

Between trips, Tracey and other members work hard on fundraising, approaching local companies and charitable trusts, but also indulging in more spectacular money (and publicity) -making endeavours, including a sponsored abseil from the roof of one of Cardiff's leading (and taller) hotels.

The youth service, Tracey believes, is about

giving people the opportunity to do things that otherwise might seem impossible, even the basic things are important/ she says, 'like a day out walking. A lot of the children on my estate haven't even been to Barry Island. They can be helped to see beyond their own little territory.'

Tracey's younger brother, Martin, has also had a long involvement in the youth service and has recently completed stage 1 of the county's Junior Leadership Course. Her boyfriend, Clifford, who once could see no point in foreign trips, was won over on his first venture overseas, and is now an enthusiastic traveller and volunteer helper with the youth service. A bricklayer by trade, he is now studying a youth and community work course, and hopes to go on to do social work.

Tracey's globetrotting would have been impossible without the youth service. The only alternative, trips with her school, were too expensive for her parents to afford. The youth service is, of course, about much more than offering trips but for Tracey it is the residential side of youth work with which she has been most involved, and that has influenced her most.

She believes the youth service also teaches people how to handle responsibility. 'She says, 'On foreign trips, for example, people have to look after their documents, luggage and so forth — there isn't a parent there to do it — and they also have duties within the group, cleaning and cooking for example. The more people show they can handle responsibility, the more they get' Tracey with two other experienced members recently led a party of young people on a residential weekend at the Gower.

The youth service has helped provide Tracey with a passport in more ways than one. 'The typical person here hasn't many prospects,' she says. Many of her friends are unemployed, and some now have children of their own to bring up. *I'd* rather be different. I want to do something with life — I want to be somebody.' She is considering seeking a social work qualification when her nursing course ends next July, or working abroad. New York is a possibility.

Tracey is dismayed that curbs on local authority spending are putting the youth service in jeopardy — and that would have a devastating affect on future generations. 'It would be the worst mistake the authorities could make,' she says.

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