

UNLOCKING HUMANITY, IMAGINATION AND CREATIVITY IN THE COMMUNITY



By Audrey Thompson

We've heard that collective imagination can make a different future possible and our humanity can build bridges and move us to change, but how can we translate these principles into practical action within a community? Audrey Thompson writes here about her experience of doing this in Doncaster.

How can people from different sections of the community be encouraged to come together – exchanging their ideas, planning together, taking a share of the workload, and sharing whatever resources are available – in order to bring about a fairer, more equal life for all?

Here is a little story I would like to share with you. It starts in 1970 when a new primary school was built in the village of Arksey, on the edge of Doncaster, where I lived with my husband and five children. The local authority decided the community could have the old school building for community activities, provided they could come up with a plan for its use. My husband and myself were invited to a meeting with others from the village to discuss ideas.

Above all, we decided, we wanted a youth club. After members of the community came together to decorate and clean the building,

my husband was appointed as leader, with myself as assistant leader. With the help of the community and a lot of creative thinking and imagination, we turned the old school into a community hub, with not only a youth club, but also a wives' group, a playgroup, a village Gala and more.

But soon a difficulty became apparent. Some children in the community were too young to be allowed into the youth club, and they used to hang around the door, trying all ways to enter and generally making a nuisance of themselves.

Some of the club members thought this was very unfair, but for insurance reasons I could not allow the young children to join the club. So we talked it through, and the club members came up with the idea of having one evening a week just for younger children over five years old.

We worked together and put forward a proposal to the management committee to open one evening a week. A group of young members and adults from the village offered to help. The Junior Club was a great success with lots of activities suitable for the children, using the many talents and enthusiasm of the young people, supported by adults.

This experience, and the learning from it, was valuable for all of us, and it helped grow our confidence, and further initiatives soon took place, drawing again and again on the creativity and imagination and goodwill of local people. In 1972 as part of my youth work training I worked with a group of young people to plan and run a project chosen by them. The outcome was an Easter Playscheme. This was how we set out our plan:

So, how did we make this happen? We started by using the group's contacts to ask for help in any way they could. And this worked very well. The sixth form at Don Valley High School raised funds. The school provided play equipment and craft stuff. Local factories gave us offcuts, wallpaper, lace and material. Even the colliery provided reams of paper, pens, and crayons. The Doncaster Book Club brought their caravan, and this became a base for story times, with books borrowed from the library.

That Easter the weather was cold and it snowed. But some of the residents took pity on us and we were invited into their homes, for toffee-making, storytelling, and singing accompanied by a guitar.

The project was a great success and I was able to produce an impressive folder to

Proposal for Easter Playscheme 1972

Why: Complaints of vandalism and anti-social behaviour on a new housing estate were being reported by all sections of the community, especially during school holidays.

What: Provide events and activities that would involve all sections of the community. It was hoped that enjoying activities together and 'rubbing shoulders' with each other might promote good and lasting relationships and community cohesion on the new estate and the surrounding older village and continue after the event finished.

Who: All sections of the local and wider community who were interested in supporting the project.

Where: The new housing estate in Toll Bar, about four miles North of Doncaster, one of several distinct neighbourhoods within the Urban District Council of Bentley. It was isolated from the main area of Bentley by a hill and a railway line.

When: Easter school holidays.

hand in as my youth work project! It was well recorded with visual, audio and written reports. One of the main comments from the young people was that it would have been good to have more parents joining in, to which I replied, 'Where would you contact them?' Their answer came back, 'At school'.

Lots of great things happened following this project, including my appointment at Bentley New Village primary school as a community project worker. I had attended this school as a child.

And so began quite a journey. For over 49 years I have worked with successive generations of young people and with the community in Greater Bentley as a

whole, continuing all the time to find ways to unlock the imagination, creativity and humanity that lies within. But that's another much longer story!

Audrey Thompson was born in 1935, her father was a miner, she was married in 1954 and her husband died in 2003. She has five children and thirteen grandchildren. She worked for Doncaster Council as a Youth/Community/Social Education worker. She is currently a volunteer/Director of Bentley Library. Her hobbies include: gardening, textile and other crafts and listening to music.