

Soft Touch

Inspiring arts projects are transforming young lives

Everyone should have a chance to become engaged in the arts, which is why Soft Touch is reaching out to those who otherwise might easily have missed out. Nigel Powlson discovers how creative projects are benefiting both the participants and their communities

FOR more than 25 years, Soft Touch has been on a successful mission to use the power of the arts to transform lives.

The Leicester-based participatory arts charity helps more than 1,000 young people a year via innovative creative projects that give them a new focus; getting them involved in things such as performance, music, film and literature.

Christina Wigmore, the business and strategic director with Soft Touch, says: "Our main age group is 13 to 19, that's our specialism, but we do work with those younger and older. These projects engage young people and help them to tackle issues that affect them and their communities.

"Many young people we work with

are not engaging with mainstream education. The ingredients of an interest in art or music, a supportive creative environment and great facilities helps young people get back on track when things have gone wrong. Through taking part in creative activities individuals and groups learn new skills, produce high quality art, music and media and get the inspiration and confidence to be part of the cultural life of the city."

Soft Touch evolved out of local authority sessions for the city council when the founders realised the potential for taking basic art schemes and making them more issues based and ambitious.

Christina says: "It was clear that the arts could be used to get messages across and give groups who wouldn't normally get an opportunity to have a voice and express themselves. It was all about the belief that arts could make a difference to people's lives."

Soft Touch is currently based on Har-topp Road but has ambitious plans to develop a new young people's arts centre on New Walk.

Christina says: "We see that as a catalyst for the future of the organisation. Where we are now is in a terraced street and away from the city centre. The new building will open up access to more young people and allow us to do more things. We need to be more enterprising to be sustainable in the future and the move will give us those opportunities.

"We're buying an old nursery from the city council and fundraising to refurbish the building to provide music and art studios, rehearsal rooms, exhibition and event spaces, creative kitchen and offices. It will offer us lots more op-

portunities to work with other arts and heritage organisations in the city and do exciting public art and digital art installations on New Walk."

Ideally, Soft Touch would like to raise enough funds to fully refurbish the building ready for a spring 2014 official opening.

Soft Touch is supported by the Arts Council and helps deliver on one of its key goals – "Every child and young person has the opportunity to experience the richness of the arts".

Christina says: "We don't just deliver creative projects, we're a development agency, always evolving, trying new things, making new partnerships, helping sustain the creative economy in Leicester, Leicestershire and the East Midlands, developing young people as future arts leaders and pushing the boundaries of where and how we take creative experiences to communities."

Some of the projects Soft Touch has been involved in include Big Up New Parks – a five-year flagship scheme funded from the Lottery and made up of different strands of work which use arts and media to tackle local issues.

Well Cool involves groups of young people running creative health campaigns – learning about healthy eating and passing information on to the community by cooking healthy food at events and distributing the recipe cards they've designed.

On-the-Make is about helping local women learn art and craft skills to start their own creative groups and run workshops in the community.

Soft Touch's Beatsmobile and Studiován travels to different areas where young people hang out on Friday and Saturday nights.



INSPIRING PROJECTS: Left - enjoying cooking up some tasty treats to music at New Parks as part of the Well Cool project and (below) the vinyl painted wheel workshop at the Vintage at Wilderness Festival attended by Soft Touch.



Christina says: "We run creative activities on the street and give them something positive to do which helps to reduce anti-social and risky behaviour."

"British design guru Wayne Hemmings invited us to run upcycling workshops at this year's Vintage at Wilderness festival in Oxfordshire. We had people queuing up to make collage clocks and cake stands from old vinyl using our bicycle-powered paint wheel."

Meanwhile, a Home Office "Tackling, Guns, Gangs and Knives" funded programme is enabling Soft Touch to work with young people to explore the consequences of involvement in crime and to produce "artwork with a message"

which goes to secondary schools across Leicester and Leicestershire.

Soft Touch recently worked with Leicestershire Fire and Rescue Service.

Christina says: "The Western Fire Station on Aikman Avenue let us use their fire drill tower, with a sporting giant built by local young people climbing to the top at an Olympic celebration event we organised."

Western Fire and Rescue Station manager Andy Galway said: "Soft Touch Arts is a brilliant organisation that likes to bring exciting and different experiences to local communities. I was delighted to be a part of this community event."

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

JENNA FORBES:

"I love Soft Touch. It's a family; it's not just a company. They help build and build and build all these people up. If it wasn't for Soft Touch there'd be a lot of lonely children around. I know I have talent but I wouldn't have known I had that talent if it wasn't for Soft Touch."

JIGNESH VAIDYA:

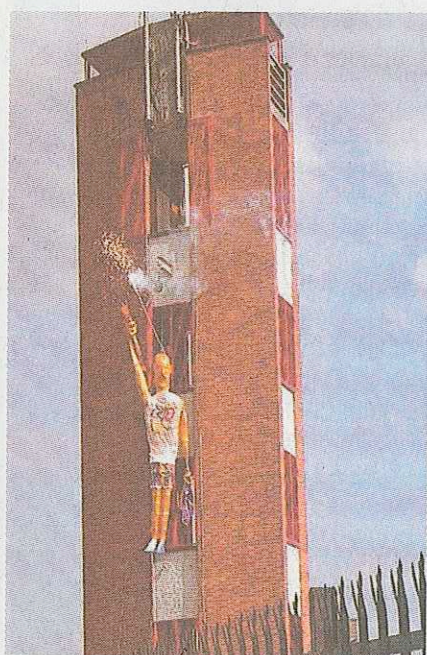
"I don't think I'd be doing the job I'm doing now at Radio Leicester if I didn't have the confidence I gained from meeting Soft Touch. It was such fun. And they never saw us as disabled: they were always encouraging us to do something."

JLM:

"I was in school but I kept getting in trouble with the teachers. I kept walking out of classes and getting told off. Soft Touch is different. I've learned to use a Mac to make music. I know how to set up a studio and use an analogue mixer and do graphics with Photoshop. I am learning that people can change for the better and I have changed."

J'S MUM

"My son has found something that he loves doing. He has realised that he is actually quite good at something and he didn't feel like that before. He has also become more sociable."



GOOD SPORTS: Fire chiefs allowed youngsters to celebrate the Olympics with this "sporting giant".