

## **PARTNERSHIP WORKING**

### **- BETWEEN THE WEA AND THE STROKE ASSOCIATION**

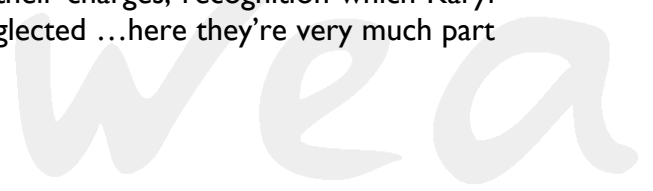
It is now almost a hundred years since the WEA has been active in community education in Wales, and thanks to the European Social Fund it has been able to initiate community projects that would otherwise struggle to find the necessary resources. The partnership between the WEA and the Stroke Association illustrates what can be achieved when two organisations, committed to democratic learning, work together to help build a learning community.

The Stroke Association Support Group in Maesteg was set up with money received from the Big Lottery Fund, its aim to broaden the scope of support already on offer. In Bridgend County two services already existed: a stroke support group for all stroke people, and a dysphasia support group for people left speech and language affected following a stroke. Karyl Carter, group coordinator at Maesteg, explains the group's vision "We wanted to set up what we call a Positive Action for Stroke Group ...to give these people something they could use to go on and do other things". For many stroke sufferers losing their confidence and self-esteem, means that returning to learning can prove daunting "We wanted to provide a safe environment for them to experiment and try different things...things they wouldn't normally come into contact with...that's the idea of the Positive Action Group".

Funding this kind of project would however prove difficult with the limited resources available. Not one to easily give up, Karyl's search for a solution led to the WEA. Committed to the promotion and provision of educational opportunities in the widest sense, the WEA has expertise in working right at the grass roots in communities. As Learning Manager Chris Franks explains "The WEA is keen to use the resources at its disposal to enable learners to become empowered, to have a voice, and develop confidence and knowledge to make informed choices".

Following meetings with WEA Development Worker Sonia Evans, a number of 'taster' sessions were held to establish learners' preferred options and in September 2004, three ten-week courses in Painting Techniques were set up. Thanks to money from the European Social Fund, the WEA was able to offer the classes at no cost to the learner as well as provide learning materials and the support of an assistant tutor. Chris Franks underlines the importance of this support "...stroke sufferers and their carers usually face financial hardship alongside all the other difficulties they have to cope with...art and craft in its many forms allows people to explore their creativity and build new lives".

To begin with attendance numbers were low, but as the warmth and enthusiasm of the tutor Lorraine and the volunteers worked its magic, word spread and class sizes quickly grew. The decision to open sessions to the carers also proved popular; it meant they did not have to make return journeys to pick up their charges, recognition which Karyl believes is long overdue "carers are very much neglected ...here they're very much part of the group".



Adopting this approach has enabled carers to build up strong relationships with one another, often meeting socially with their partners. In this way Karyl believes that the group acts as cushion: “from the carers’ perspective the networking is vital because when you are feeling fed up with your lot and thinking ‘is this it for the next ten years?’ it’s comforting to know that the [person] next to you is having the same thoughts”. One carer had spent the occasion of her husband’s fiftieth birthday in hospital. The prospect of spending twenty or thirty years living with somebody who’s had a massive stroke, who cannot hold a fluent conversation can be difficult to come to terms with. It is the support of the group that makes a difference, or as one of the volunteers more eloquently puts it; “without realising it we are all healers” One group member had lost his confidence following a fall two years previously, but encouraged by others in the group he is now mobile again. “The people here inspire him to get out of his wheelchair. Now he walks and the more he walks the more he is able to walk”.

Many of the learners are individuals who have never had access to Stroke Association Services before, a significant development and one, which Karyl hopes will ultimately lead to a situation where no one is excluded. “I can keep these people for as long as they need us...build their confidence in order to move them on”. Similarly, the WEA would like the learners to see the class as a stepping stone, as Chris affirms “We are keen to give class members the opportunity to learn about other classes that they may eventually take, such as counselling, e-learning, money management and healthy eating to name a few”.

For this group of learners, both carers and stroke sufferers, art in its many forms allows individuals to explore their creativity “This is a class they have joined following a new set of circumstances they find themselves post stroke” observes Chris “It is not only positive and productive, but it is social and moves them on”. For one of the beneficiaries, a thirty-seven years old mother of two young children, having a stroke has been devastating. Initially she was emotionally labile, unable to stop crying, but gradually she has become totally absorbed in learning and involving her children in the art of plate painting. “This has given her something that is hers” Karyl points out “It’s outside the family... its where she can be herself, express herself through her artwork”. And the benefits also extend to her husband who is still coming to terms with the fact that he nearly lost his partner. “Whilst she is at the sessions it offers him respite. He has two and a half hours to do whatever he needs to do, even if it’s just to lay in the bath ...”.

So what is it that makes the partnership between the WEA and the Stroke Association such a success? Karyl puts it all down to effective teamwork; “There needs to be somebody holding the reins, but we are a team...it’s very democratic”. The WEA has helped realise her vision for Positive Action Support. Not only has it made the provision of arts classes possible, it has provided ongoing help and support to the group. “Sonia regularly calls up to ensure we’ve got everything we need and Chris Franks has been very supportive, which is fantastic”. What does the future hold? Both partners are optimistic and agree that they will continue to provide as much support as possible to enable this group of learners to continue to build new lives. “The WEA has been a gift,” adds Karyl “that’s the only way I can describe it.”

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