

Adopt a Highway Travellers Project, West Belfast

Conservation Volunteers Northern Ireland

Conservation Volunteers have been working with the Travelling community in West Belfast for over ten years and this project started in 2005 as a strategy to evaluate this work by the people who benefit from the work – the Travellers.

Through a programme of environmental education workshops and practical conservation projects, project staff have established a high level of trust allowing good working relationships with a community often shunned by the majority of the Settled population.

The Trunk Road selected for the project was the Glen Road in West Belfast, bordering the most disadvantaged estates in West Belfast, which are still battle-scarred from the height of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. As a result, the communities living within these areas have become marginalised and isolated from the wider population of Belfast. The area suffers from high levels of domestic crime, such as burglary, car theft and 'joy riding', just as organised paramilitary activities are decreasing.

Living within these communities of West Belfast are families of Irish Travellers, residing in sites allocated by Belfast City Council and maintained by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. The families have had connections with these sites dating back twenty years and generations of children have attended the local primary school, which is now attended solely by Traveller children. The majority of the 2000 strong Traveller community throughout Northern Ireland live in Belfast, predominantly along, or in close proximity, to the Glen Road.

The Travelling community is the most disadvantaged and socially excluded minority ethnic group in Northern Ireland. In a recent survey 57% of those questioned stated they would not accept Travellers as residents in their local area and 66% were not willing to accept a Traveller as a work colleague. A further 40% did not accept Travelling as a way of life and therefore felt they should not be supported by local Government.

The Travellers project became the focus of community development initiatives through Conservation Volunteers' 'Environments for All' programme. This gave scope to identify sectors of society who have the least access to volunteering opportunities and those who would benefit most from improvements. Work with the Travellers has continued after the close of the EfA funding through the determination to secure ongoing funding and a desire to maintain and develop relationships.

The Travelling Community were the focal point for this project with the children from the Kelly family identified to evaluate the work they had carried out with Conservation Volunteers over the past year. At the start of the project the family consisted of eight children, ranging from age 3 to seventeen with the ninth child being born mid way through the project. The project was also supported by An Múna Tober (Travellers Support Group) who won the Community Group Award in the Green Heroes Awards 2006 as a result of the support they gave the project.

The Adopt a Highway project was delivered through various media, aimed to involve a wide range of people.

The initial stages of the project were aimed at gaining the trust of the children, who would be involved throughout the project, and their parents. Informal site visits to Conservation

Volunteers' wildflower nursery in South Belfast allowed the children access to the countryside in a safe and controlled environment. At the nursery, the children had the freedom to explore the different species of wildflowers, shrubs and trees and to gain close up experience of nature first hand. The children also took part in environmental games and activities, designed to awaken their senses and open their eyes to their natural surroundings – something denied to them by both the protective stance of their guardians and the stark concrete dwelling site where they live. As part of the site visits, the children were also introduced to a healthy diet with the provision of healthy snacks such as fruit, which does not form part of their regular diet at home.

Conservation Volunteers worked closely with outreach workers from An Munia Tober to identify areas for improvement within the Travellers' sites along the Glen Road. A mother, Margaret Kelly, whose children were involved in the project, proposed a particular site for development. Community Project Officers encouraged Margaret to help with the design of the site and to select materials and plants which would be accepted by the extended Traveller family living on the site. Margaret, and her family, supported the project and helped build relations between Conservation Volunteers and the Travelling community. Throughout the project, an area overgrown with weeds and used as a dumping ground for machinery parts was transformed into a green oasis of healthy shrubs, trees and wildflowers. Volunteers worked to improve the area and as the project progressed, support from members within the Travelling community grew. Local residents of the site recognised the value of the work undertaken and proposed further possible sites for similar improvements.

Community Project and Volunteer Officers worked with the Play Development Officer from An Munia Tober to facilitate a series of sessions to produce decorated window boxes. Children from the After School Club spent several sessions designing the boxes which were decorated with mosaic tiles to form bright patterns. The boxes were planted with native Irish wildflowers, selected by the children from Conservation Volunteers' Wildflower Nursery. The children had great fun decorating the boxes and they were delighted with the completed boxes, which were destined to be presented as gifts to elderly residents from the Settled community.

Throughout the project, a photographic diary was used to record the development of the relationship between the Travellers, Settled Community and supporting organisations such as Conservation Volunteers and An Munia Tober. Initially, the photographs were to document the involvement of the children in the environmental games and creation of the window boxes. The taking of photographs became a focus for the children, who showed immense appreciation when trusted with Conservation Volunteers precious digital camera. The children rewarded us by taking some of the most outstanding portraits of themselves and their friends. These images were displayed in the Community Centre at the final event to the delight of the children and their parents.

A significant part of the evaluation of the Adopt a Highway project was the hosting of a celebratory event, bringing together people from both communities to celebrate the achievements of those involved. The attendance of either side to such an event was challenging to Community Project Officers and not one previously attempted by Conservation Volunteers.

The event was held in Tullymore Community Centre, located in the heart of Andersonstown Estate. Flyers were designed and distributed throughout both the Settled

and Travelling communities. Outreach workers from An Munia Tober made personal visits to many of the Travelling families to encourage attendance from both the children involved in the project and their families, and Community Project Officers from Conservation Volunteers worked with the Settled Community to encourage local residents to attend the event. All efforts were rewarded as over one hundred and twenty people filled the community hall. Both communities were well represented, with a good mix of ages from toddlers to pensioners. Derek Hanway, Director of An Munia Tober, was amazed by the high attendance from the Travelling Community stating it was the "biggest social gathering of Travellers" he had seen in recent years.

The event 'kicked off' with a 5-side football match between youths representing the two communities. The match was played with good spirits, even though the final score was 6-0 to the Settled Team. Sinn Fein Councillor Michael Brown presented the winning team with a trophy and a re-match was scheduled for late autumn.

The football was followed by a series of short presentations from Tullymore Community Association, Conservation Volunteers, An Munia Tober and local Councillor Michael Brown. The event was well attended by local elderly residents, who had entered a draw to determine who was to receive the lovely window boxes created by the children. Michael Ward-Gavin, a teenager from the Travelling Community, presented the boxes were to the winners of the draw and proved entertaining when he gave each winner an extra prize – a kiss on the cheek! The elderly ladies received both their prizes with good spirit and they enjoyed their part of the night.

Keeping the spirits high, young Traveller girls entertained the crowd by signing traditional Travelling songs. Everyone was encouraged to join in and the hall was soon buzzing with the sound of voices, young and old, singing. The singing was followed by a first class buffet, provided by a local caterer and an open music session.

A local Community Development worker was engaged at the start of the project in a training and evaluatory role, working directly with the Traveller children. The role was two-fold - to engage the children in an evaluatory process, looking at their thoughts on previous and current projects they were involved with and to act as an overall evaluator of the project.

The project had a positive start with a great relationship developing between the children and the evaluator. A series of photographs taken by the children on activity days with Conservation Volunteers were produced, starting the process of the evaluation of our work. The photographs were taken on trips to Conservation Volunteers' Wildflower Nursery by the children using disposable and digital cameras and on following practical tasks at the After School Club.

As with the nature of the Travelling community, the Kelly family decided to visit relatives in England for four weeks during the delivery period of the project. Although the family had discussed the visit for several months their actual departure was fairly sudden resulting in a break in the project for over a month. On their return, the family needed time to resettle and the children focused their attention on their return to school and had little time to partake in the project. During this break, unfortunately the local evaluator was forced to move on to other work, being unable to wait for the indefinite return of the family.

Evaluation of the project was picked up by key staff at Conservation Volunteers who made use of the already established close relationship with the family to work with the children to achieve results. While working with the children, staff encouraged the children to talk about how they felt about the work they had done and what it means to them when they see the

plants and trees from their caravans. The children spoke positively, smiling at the memories of planting the shrubs, watering them and chasing their young cousins from playing in the garden. With regular visits to the site the family have developed a sense of trust with Project Staff and have displayed a sense of ownership over the project they have helped create.

The project continues to have a positive effect on the children, their parents and the wider Travelling community who share the site. Whilst many of the outputs are easily measured (eg number of shrubs and trees planted, number of days volunteered), many of the others are seemingly immeasurable, such as one child apologising for hitting his sister while working with us – the first apology she ever received from him! The children have also become guardians of the site, making it a ‘no go’ area for other children to play in because they were damaging the plants.

The children also protected the plants during recent works to install a more efficient electricity supply to the site which threatened some of the plants being uprooted by contractors. The children stood by the plants forcing the contractors to take more caution when using machinery and change the foot access to the site.

On a recent practical workday our work coincided with a site visit from the local Housing Executive to inspect the Serviced site they provide for the family. A new member of staff challenged us on our activities on the site as they were not aware of the work. The family quickly defended the project, stating the work was done for them with their children because no one else was going to help them. I

Some of the children have returned to formal education part time and practical work on the site is organised round the days they are not at school as we want to encourage them to attend classes and work with us as a bonus for going to school.

The project was very successful as a community development initiative, creating links between the Travelling and Settled communities and as an evaluation of the work carried out. Through the project the children produced a number of wonderful window boxes for the elderly residents as well as achieving shrub and fruit tree planting for their own residential site and landscaping of the After School Club they attended daily.

Quotes from the children when asked how the activities made them feel:

- ‘I like working with the plants, they make the place look better’
- ‘I like it when you come here in the red van because I like being outside helping you plant’
- ‘Working on the boxes was good fun, me and my friend did one and it looked really good’
- ‘I told my friend about planting the plants and she was jealous and wants to help’
- ‘When you started working here my brothers helped a bit and I wanted to join in. I like it now’
- ‘I didn’t know how to plant these before and now I do’
- How the activities made a difference to their lives:
- ‘I don’t go to school so this is something to do and I like it’

- 'The flowers make this place much better'
- 'It's my job to water the flowers. I do it every week.'
- 'I know where plants come from and how to look after them. I want to be a gardener'
- 'My bother loves digging when you come up here. He looks after the plants so they are here when you come back'
- 'I liked the day we went to get the award with An Munia Tober (Green Heroes 2006) and you bought us ice creams for being quiet, that was good'

Lessons learnt/ Challenges

Many challenges affected the smooth delivery of the project, which ultimately led to a break in momentum, and the subsequent non-completion of the original evaluation of the project.

- The family left for a period of time during the project which broke the momentum of the project and the arrival of Margaret's baby temporarily took focus from the planting project.
- With short term funding the norm, a change in staff working on a project is a familiar challenge faced by community projects. This project was, unfortunately, no different and with a cross over of delivery staff, time taken to establish good relationships with the children was duplicated, lengthening the overall project delivery timescale.
- The success of the Adopt a Highway project was very dependent on the development of trust between community workers and members of the Travelling community. Travellers in Northern Ireland have faced consistently high levels of discrimination and are cautious to trust outsiders. They are initially sceptical to lend their support to any project involving them, their children or the area they live in. They have a general apathy towards Statutory Agencies, whom they feel have consistently let them down in the past. Conservation Volunteers' approach has been strictly at ground level on an informal basis. The organisation has been cautious not to be too idealistic as to what can be achieved.
- Contact with the Travelling community must be strictly informal. Travellers do not live within the restrictions of a 'diary' and regularly miss or attend meetings later than scheduled. This is by no means a sign of disrespect but a reflection of a different way of life to that of the Settled community.
- Staff working on the project must have an understanding of the Travelling way of life and be sympathetic to the hardships faced by the families. Children living in large Travelling families have mostly led a turbulent life, many having first hand experience of domestic violence and scenes of intimidation and discrimination. Their needs must be recognised and dealt with in a compassionate and supportive manner.
- It is possible to change perceptions of those who have no understanding of a different way of life. Media, exaggerated stories and urban myths disguise the fundamental differences between different communities and people are often divided by the misunderstanding of other cultures. Many of the volunteers who worked on the Adopt a Highway project were able to gain an insight into the Travelling culture and have changed their attitudes to one of acceptance.