

Naila Akram: Individual Case Study



“I initially came into contact with BTCV when I was working in Glasgow and the company I was working for had awful recycling practices. I had heard that BTCV was a charity that promoted recycling and I approached them to see if they could teach me about it. They gave me loads of information and sent me on useful courses to learn more information. I then decided it was a charity that I wanted to get involved in more. I didn’t have an environmental background but I could see a real passion in the staff and this really inspired me. Everyone was so supportive and inspiring and there was always someone at the end of the phone. I became a Volunteer Officer for one of the Project

Officers, Jenny Biggart. I never thought I had an environmental conscience before, but speaking to other members of staff, I realised that I did.

When the post of “Environments for All Project Officer” came up at BTCV, I jumped at the chance, as I have always been really interested in creative arts such as literature photography and poetry. Although I didn’t have a huge amount of experience in multi-media, BTCV took a chance on me and offered me the job. What made the organisation so appealing was it let me take the project where I wanted it to go. I was very lucky in that the team I was working with had a real trust in their staff and allowed you so much freedom in your work. I personally think that made the biggest difference to the success of projects and allowed real scope for creativity.

I was extremely lucky to become involved in the E-Merge project, which aimed to get ethnic- minority groups involved in multi-media. This was such an exciting venture to work on and I found media to be a really inspiring tool of learning and got some tremendous results out of the community groups we worked with.

Perhaps the biggest highlights of my time with BTCV was a project involving women from a diverse range of cultures. The idea was to take a group of people deep into the Scottish countryside who had never really had the opportunity to do so before. We wanted to look at the environment through different eyes and use the common interest of food as a catalyst of conversation. We gathered together a group of women from Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Iraq, Iran, India, Nigeria, England and Scotland. Everyone shared the picnic and food that they had brought with them and we explored the countryside for native berries and plants that could be eaten - “Food for Free Trail”, where we picked native leaves and berries along the way. Unfortunately, we couldn’t eat any of the things we picked in the wild, because of health and safety restrictions. Instead, in the evening, we had a huge multicultural feast involving all the food that everyone had brought along.

I also really enjoyed working on an After-School’s Activity Club for a group of Afghan refugee children. We organised drama workshops and made digital storyboards with them. Another highlight was when we worked with a group of



American children of serving military personnel on active duty in Iraq in April 2003. The results of this project have really stayed with me and we really got these children to open up. We explored heritage links with New York and Glasgow and focused on the tobacco trade between the two cities and recorded it with digital photography.

I would say that working with BTCV, both as a volunteer and EfA Project Officer has given me the confidence to do more challenging things in my life. My experiences of working with E-merge have taught me to be in charge of myself. In fact, it's given me the confidence to do things that I never thought I would do.

I think E-merge is a very exciting project to be working as you see some great results in connecting people and getting groups to communicate. Reflecting on the lessons learnt from the projects, I think it's vital to have good communication links with the community groups. The Muslim communities were particularly apprehensive about having their photos taken and also didn't like appearing in front of a camera and this posed problems on certain projects.

I also found it very upsetting hearing stories about people's lives from the countries they came from. Often the refugees we worked with had had extremely traumatic experiences and sometimes they just needed to talk to someone. You would see kids with no shoes on, or hear about why some refugees had to leave their country because of torture, for example. When you work with the refugee community, people expect you to be a psychiatrist and councillor. I found this quite difficult to deal with sometimes and upsetting. One of the hardest things is learning how not to become emotionally involved, as I'm not professionally trained in being a social worker. Obviously I provided as much support as I was able to give, but it's learning how to deal with befriending them and when to say no.

One of our main aims, as a team in Scotland was to encourage more integration between community groups in our projects. It is vital to carry out projects that involve a variety of cultures, not just one group. Our work has to be something that helps people come out of their communities, to prevent them from being isolated. This, I think, should be the future of the EfA initiative.

I absolutely loved my job working E-merge and it really helped me gain new confidence in what I wanted to do. I'm now working for the Home Office in the Race Relations department in London."