

ANGEL COMMUNITY CANAL BOAT TRUST

AN INTERVIEW WITH PAUL WALLACE AND ROSE PARNIS

Angel Community Canal Boat Trust operates a skippered community canal boat, for use by local residents and community groups at a cost they can afford. The service has been operating for over 30 years. We caught up with Community Skipper PAUL WALLACE and Development Officer ROSE PARNIS aboard Angel II to talk to them about their work with local young people.

How did Angel Community Canal Boat Trust (ACCT) start?

PAUL — It was founded in 1974 by Crystal Hale, a feisty, formidable lady. When she moved to Islington she used to row round the City Road basin. Local kids were chucking rocks at her so she shouted at them ‘Instead of throwing stones at me why don’t you get in and have a go?’ And that’s what they did.

She decided to setup a boat for inner city kids – to get them involved in a positive activity, to get them out into the countryside. She commissioned the first boat *Angel I* to be built along traditional lines and to her own specification, design, layout etc. Since then there have been half a dozen skippers at the most.

How do young people benefit from the boating experience?

ROSE — These are young people who normally have very tough outer shells and who don’t communicate in a particularly nice way with other people. Inner city children often have to put a very tough exterior on – sometimes on estates in London, that’s kind of how you have to be to survive. It’s nice that we can provide an environment where they can allow other aspects, kinder aspects, of their personality to come out.

PAUL — These inner city kids would never usually get an opportunity to get out into the countryside for what is largely speaking a white middle class preserve. We do day trips, short weekend residential and week-long residential in the summer holidays. We also offer training opportunities. The boat gives young people the opportunity to pick up transferable soft skills.

ROSE — A massive advantage is developing their interpersonal skills. You’re in this environment and you’re pretty much stuck there for a week. Having previously been a youth worker

I know that when you run a two-hour session with thirty or forty kids, it’s very difficult to get to what the children really want to talk about. I’m talking about the more controversial issues or personal stuff. Here you’ve got the same ten children for a weekend or for a whole week. It’s intense and the chances are that they will start to communicate some of their needs, some of their problems or some of their hopes for the future. They become very confiding and build up trust in you.

One of the benefits of the boating community is that it’s very friendly. You might go into a lock with another boat and then be stuck with them for the next seven locks so you have to learn to communicate better. Living on the boat means you have to work together, someone has to cook dinner for the whole group, when there’s a mess someone has to clear it up. We have a positive ethos towards the children and it’s nice to give them responsibility and see them enjoying responsibility. We have a rota of who’s helping out so all the kids know what they have to do. I think those skills are invaluable in life.

“A lot of the young people demonstrate challenging behaviour so a big challenge for us is disarming that behaviour.”

PAUL WALLACE

Many people see Islington as a wealthy borough. What are your thoughts on this perception?

ROSE — You’re right, people walk down through Angel and perceive Islington to be a very wealthy borough. It’s as though everyone’s got a Macbook and they just sit outside cafes all day long drinking cappuccinos. When actually levels of poverty here are some of the worst in England, let alone London. Life is hard on those estates. Islington has a huge drug and alcohol problem and crime levels are rocketing. Increasingly most

youth workers know someone who's either lost their life or has been in a very serious incident.

I think that a resource such as the boat along with many other fantastic projects is very important for Islington. We have to address the young people, they are our future and we must put time and money in. We need to address root causes of poverty but actually also the symptoms – how are they coping with it? They need to have fun activities to keep them busy and to give them a positive outlook on life.

You received funding from Londonations through CCF to fund trips for young people from BME communities. How did that work out?

ROSE — That was off the back of some other work that we had been doing on engaging kids from BME communities. Looking at the figures we just thought that the mixed nature of the borough wasn't reflected in our figures. There are a lot of BME groups in Islington so we did a hard push promoting. We contacted refugee community and asylum seeker groups who are not allowed access to public funds. Some of the asylum seekers we had on board had come from really tragic situations where they had lost family members. Many were living in extreme poverty and were never going to be able to afford anything. We wanted to see what we could do with these communities and to try and get them involved and if nothing else to make them aware that this resource is here.

What are the challenges of running ACCT?

ROSE — It's tough work doing a residential and a lot of staff don't really fancy the idea of working themselves to the bone. The kids don't go to bed until 1am or 2am and the first ones are up at 7am, so you're lucky if you get more than three or four hours' sleep. It's something you have to be passionate about otherwise you wouldn't do it.

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ROSE PARNIS

PAUL — A lot of the young people demonstrate challenging behaviour so a big challenge for us is disarming that behaviour. Those kids that do find it difficult can make it very hard for everyone else. Very rarely would I chuck in the towel and cut the trip short but it has happened twice in twenty years.

ROSE — Monitoring is obviously vital but when you've got three funds coming in and each monitoring form is slightly different, sometimes you can be pulling your hair out. We have to focus heavily on the monitoring because if we don't monitor correctly we'll fail to get any more money. But the paperwork stacks up heavily. Sustainability is also a real challenge for us.

PAUL — There are just not enough hours in the day.

What are your future plans for ACCT?

ROSE — We'd like you to give us some more money!

PAUL — I'd like to emphasise that!

ROSE — A few things are bubbling... In the long run, the plan is to buy another boat so we have one boat focusing on residential trips and one boat available for day trips.

PAUL — With another boat we'd have to be very careful to not play the 'zero sum' game, where we spend a huge amount of money on setting it up but there is no net financial gain and we are still firefighting. Capital funding is relatively easy to get hold of but revenue funding is a different matter. It's a struggle to get funds to pay salaries and to cover maintenance. In the short term, as a quick fix, we're thinking about doing the boat up so that it could be available for corporate hire.

ROSE — We are constantly looking at how we improve our engagement with young people. The average fourteen year-old from London wants something a bit more than just a boating holiday. So we've introduced a certificate in boat handling skills to make it more formal so that it can count towards an ASDAN for example.

And finally what do you find most satisfying in running ACCT?

PAUL — For me it's the energy from the kids. They give me a new way of looking at things. They have a ruthlessness and honesty. They live in the present where everything is very immediate. Things can flare up and disappear in seconds...

ROSE — It is satisfying when we get positive feedback from group leaders. They are astonished at how confiding the kids can get. And it's great to see the kids gain support from each other and to see that energy and teamwork amplified. ●