

INTERVIEW

Making Waves in London

Emily Glorney talks to **Clair Ongley, Operations Manager of Adventure, Help and Opportunities for Youth (AHOY)** about how sailing and rowing can turn around the lives of young people in London who have offended or who are at risk of offending.

What is the background to AHOY?

AHOY is a charitable organisation that aims to change lives through sailing and rowing. Established in 2003, AHOY is located in Deptford on the south bank of the river Thames in a disadvantaged area of London where rates of poverty, unemployment, single parent families, disengaged youth, truancy and lack of opportunities are high. AHOY's primary objective is to work with disadvantaged youth and people with disabilities in order to break down barriers and divides between people from different walks of life and backgrounds. This has included work with young people at risk of offending and ex-offenders. Sailing and rowing are two of very few sports that the able bodied and disabled can participate in on equal terms. With the Olympics around the corner and sailing and rowing being one of Britain's most successful events, now is the time to use this as a means to get local people active. This will not only raise aspirations but also make a real difference in the community by engaging young people in positive activities.

We believe it is our personal approach and time invested in all our members that really makes that extra difference to our many activities. Once someone comes through our charity's gates, their background, disability, age and crimes they have

committed are put to one side and they are all given a clean slate and all given the same opportunities. This has an encouraging effect on the way young people think and from experience has a positive effect on behaviour.

How do young people at risk of offending and ex-offenders gain access to AHOY?

Schools visit the AHOY centre and when pupils like what they see they sign up to join in with us. A number of young people, disadvantaged and others, either do not fit into the present education system or, through their backgrounds, do not see the need and some just simply do not have the support or encouragement that is needed. AHOY receives referrals from Youth Offending Teams and Safer Neighbourhood teams. These young people are encouraged by police to turn their lives around. We always encourage them to continue to learn and progress but we do not try to force them to stay.

What activities do AHOY offer and what do they aim to achieve?

We offer young people an alternative to crime and the opportunity to get involved in a community activity by participating in a challenging activity on the River Thames and gaining nationally recognised qualifications. We give young people an alternative to street crime and gang culture which, in turn, reduces anti-social behaviour and youth offending.

Our *Shipmates* programme is aimed at youth aged 8 to 18 years both able-bodied and those with disabilities and is graded from Bronze through to Platinum. The scheme develops skills from basic team work through to team leadership whilst gaining Royal Yachting Association (RYA) and British Rowing Association (BRA) national qualifications. This project is designed to give participants the opportunity to develop their skills, further their education and at the same time become responsible for themselves and their future development. Ultimately they will turn

into an asset to the community and provide role models to other young people from similar socio-economic environments. We teach and train them not only how to sail or row but also how to use their new skills to go on and teach and help others. There is a major focus on social cohesion, teamwork and personal development and through the courses and activities we offer we look to build self-esteem, confidence and offer training which will lead to employment.

Our *Show Me Why* programme engages young people in a programme of practical learning that demonstrates to them the need for education and a self-desire for knowledge. The principle of *Show Me Why* is simply this; show someone a practical application in a real life situation then the desire/need to learn becomes apparent. AHOY has shown that, through its projects, having a reason to want to learn has changed people's attitude to education. This will lead them directly into the proposed training programmes where they will gain both qualifications (NVQs & RYA qualifications) and participate in Apprenticeship schemes. In addition they will also gain other skill sets such as boat and building repair, metalwork, mechanics, leadership and teaching. Included within the learning process will be transferrable skills and knowledge of a practical nature that will open up many potential avenues to further education or employment. Deptford used to be the biggest boat-building centre in the UK, so it's great that we're bringing skills back to this area.

Pulling Together is a rowing programme that starts in a dedicated dry rowing area before more challenging rowing on the Thames. The focus here is on concentration and team work and there are different leagues and sponsorship challenges. In 2010 two of our teams rowed the English Channel and 12 have signed up to do so this year. Apprentices build and repair the Thames Waterman Cutters, boats which have direct historical links with the River Thames.

Unless disadvantaged young people get the right training and qualifications their future will be very limited. The direct cost to society for dealing with and managing 'disengaged' young people is high in monetary terms and is creating problems for the future unless something is done. According to the Audit Commission, it costs four times as much to put a young person through the criminal justice system as it does to keep them out of it. Holding a person in a Young Offender institution (YOI) costs around £100,000 a year. The additional impact of custody on crime and unemployment adds up to at least a further £40,000 of expenses to the state. Our pilot programmes demonstrate that the cost can be substantially lower and the problems removed.

For example, our *Youth Engagement Programme*, where we worked with pupils who were persistent truants or excluded from school, improved the participants' behaviour, self-confidence and increased school attendance by over 50%. Feedback from the participants suggested that the programme helped them to understand why education is important and to help them reach their full potential: *"for the first time I know I'm good at something..."; "at school the teachers treat me like I'm a child and no good but here the AHOY instructors treat me like an adult and encourage me..."*.

You have spoken about a number of key factors that are well-established in the psychological literature as being important aspects of interventions to prevent or reduce risk of (re-)offending such as the promotion of taking responsibility for self and others, social cohesion, social inclusion, engagement, validation, improving self-esteem and self-confidence all of which work towards achieving a better, healthier life. What makes the activities that AHOY offer different from other

interventions with similar objectives?

We think about water as being an educational tool and water activities as subliminal education. Being on the water promotes a sense of independence and confidence to try something new but it's a risky environment; people have to listen and pay attention to keep safe. They are also exposed to strong role models and clear and consistent boundaries; we have strict rules on behaviour. Some young people learn more being on the water than being in a classroom. Teachers have commented to us that their returning pupils have improved focus and concentration in school. We see that communication and social skills improve as a function of team working, improving confidence and developing life skills. The young people tell us that they like to feel 'treated like an adult' and to feel that they are good at something. There are always clear goals to work towards and these are tangible. Sailing and rowing can bring about the real changes that are needed to turn lives around.

"AHOY's work to divert young people away from crime & improve anti-social behaviour is outstanding ... it is an excellent achievement that many young people will become member volunteers of The AHOY – this again will divert many young people away from crime by engaging them in something positive" Sergeant Chris Ellison – Metropolitan Police

"The London Borough of Lewisham Neighbourhood Community Safety Service, of which I am an officer, works with all sections of the community and partners to

improve neighbourhoods and reduce crime and anti social behaviour. Although there are powers available to us that support an enforcement approach towards reducing anti social behaviour and crime, some of the most effective responses are those that foster preventative and diversionary work. The activities the AHOY Centre charity delivers and the evidenced results they get are deeply impressive.”
Ali Williams - Neighbourhood Community Safety Officer - London Borough of Lewisham

You can find out more about the work of AHOY at <http://www.ahoy.org.uk> or e-mail Clair Ongley at clair@ahoy.org.uk