

Spotlight

focus on youth work in Wales

Llanfyllin - Life In the Fish bowl

Ymlaen spoke to Tony Maitland, project co-ordinator and Community Enterprise Officer for Llanfyllin about the work of Llanfyllin Art Club. In 1995 Llanfyllin Art Club was awarded a Premier 'Youth Work in Wales Excellence Award' for 'The Jungle' a project which introduced young people to art and making skills. Ymlaen also spoke to Emma Cooper, Chairperson of Fishbowl, a youth arts group that has subsequently developed in this rural community in the north of Powys.

Tony explained that it had all begun in the Autumn of 1994, when Eileen Roberts, the Area Youth Officer, asked Tony and his partner Jean, to facilitate a group of local young people in the production of a mural for their local community centre. The group's hard work resulted in a removable mural on the theme of environment and conservation which still hangs in the centre's hall. The



project provided young people with an opportunity to learn art and making skills through which they could express their views and feelings.

After this success it was decided to continue the work by forming an art club and undertaking the 'Jungle' project. The project, which revolved around the issues of endangered wildlife, was designed to introduce the group to various art skills and techniques as a means of personal and group expression. Using techniques that they had developed during the 12 workshop sessions - which

included sculpture, photography, video and printing - the group transformed a room at the community centre into an imaginary jungle in

only six weeks. In recognition of their work, the group received a Premier Award in the Excellence Awards, one of only three presented in 1995 from over 50 entries, and the project was also included as part of a much larger exhibition by local artists.

As well as introducing young people to expressive art skills, the projects also had another important underlying purpose. They sought to provide an opportunity for the young people to take responsibility for the management of the projects and ultimately the club. The young people were given responsibility for group organisation, administration, fund raising and purchasing and allocation of materials, and producing guidelines for future members.

These management skills are now being put to good use by the Fishbowl youth group who formed last year. Emma Cooper, the group's Chairperson explained that "The young people involved are solely responsible for their group including their programme, organising events and fund raising and managing their accounts".

Why Fishbowl? -Emma explained that the group had "Struggled for over an hour to think of a suitable name to make sense of what we were doing - we were getting to our wits end when one of the group said what about 'Fishbowl' - it was so irrelevant that it seemed to work!" In total Fishbowl has about a dozen regular members, although the number can increase up to 20 when they are undertaking projects and members are aged between 10 and 18.

"The group receives support from Jesse, a youth worker who attends the committee meetings as an observer, but who also provides ideas and takes part in events like any other member of Fishbowl." explained Emma. Jesse and other youth workers and artists are also employed by the group to run workshops and sessions. The Committee select, interview and appoint the candidate they think most suitable and pay for the worker's time from their own funds.

Since its formation, the group has been extremely busy organising and participating in events, including involvement in the design and building of an award winning car-

nival dragon. The end result was a smoke breathing dragon which housed 16 people.



"The dragon just kept

growing and growing and we had to keep rehousing it. In the end it grew so big, at over 30 feet long, that we had to move it to a local garage perched on the top of a truck. It was like a scene from 'One of our Dinosaurs is Missing'" explained Emma.

Last year was indeed a busy one for the group who also put on a "Safari Soap". The open air living soap-opera, to parody all other soaps, was put together in only one week. It was then performed at various sites around the town and watched by an ever-growing audience who were guided around by one of the group dressed as a vicar. "It was a hectic performance" explained Emma "with the cast having to dash down back alleys from scene to scene to get there before the audience and without getting seen" It was an event for the whole town, who joined in the spirit, with local businesses only too happy to allow scenes to be enacted on their premises.

However, the group does not limit its activities solely to arts work; members believe that it is important for them to play an active role in their community. They are already working with Mencap and other local community groups to design and build a 'touch and feel' garden for children with disabilities on a piece of wasteground adjacent to their centre. They also have ambitious plans for the future; they hope to organise a youth exchange to Dublin and are currently working on a film, directed by Jesse and scripted by two members.

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