

# At the sharp end

tales from the field

## Things can only get better...

On my return to Wales following a short stint as a youth worker in England, my first job was at a youth project which has in recent times developed a widely recognised reputation for excellence. In 1980, however, it was very different. On walking through the front door of the Project's three-storey Victorian building I gazed up through successive floors and ceilings and through the roof to the open sky. Damaged and lost slates had remained unrepaired long enough for the elements to cause damage right through to the concrete passage on the ground floor which led to the coffee bar.

This area could have been used to film no end of scenes which would have fitted comfortably into many of the horror films that had kept me awake during my childhood years: dim lighting, rotting furniture, bare walls and the smell of decay and warm sweaty male bodies filled the air - the building was in constant use despite its condition. It was September and I was to learn as the months went on that nothing remained warm in the unheated building.

As my eyes became accustomed to the gloom, through a half-open door, I could make out an area to the left of the coffee bar entrance segregated by a counter. To be more precise, it was an eight-by-four untreated plywood sheet balanced precariously on a wall of bare breezeblocks. Leaning on this was the member of staff responsible for serving young people with tea or coffee - prizes were given for those who could tell the difference.

I still remember that moment as I stood at the coffee bar entrance with about 40 male skinheads watching me with welcoming smiles on their lips. During my five years with the Project, and despite four different doors, I was never able to remove the loud creak that echoed around the room, alerting everyone to a new entrant - some people were never able to survive the experience. I was saved by the coffee bar worker who invited me in. This seemed to satisfy those present who carried on with a variety of different activities, none of which would feature in today's Curriculum Statement for Youth Work in Wales.

Leaning nonchalantly against the counter, as only new youth workers can, I was asked if I wanted tea or coffee. On observing the state of the deeply stained counter and the cracked sugar bowl filled with congealed grains of brown and yellow sugar, I felt I needed some time to answer. Fortunately, then as now, luck smiled on me. Before I could answer a steady thick brown sludge began to descend from the ceiling and onto the counter. Looking up, Pat the coffee bar worker said "dear me" (or words to that effect), "the toilets are overflowing again." I was later to find that the toilets were situated directly above the counter. Expecting quick and decisive action I said "well, what do you do?" Without a smile but with a quick movement she replied "we move the sugar bowl."

## Letters . . . .

**Dear Ymlaen,**

*/ am delighted to have received a copy of your first issue, and hope that it will continue to arrive at the office — is it free?*

Biddy Wells, Youth Development Worker, Community Music Wales, Canton, Cardiff.

**Ed: Yes it is!**

**Dear Ymlaen,**

*/ have just read the article on sex education in Ymlaen, and found it useful in helping youth workers clarify various issues around the law, confidentiality and clause 28.*

*I am enclosing the pack 'Sex, AIDS & Videotape' that you may like to add to the list of resources held at WYA. Funds to produce the pack were supplied by Mid Glamorgan Education Authority with the brief to produce a learning resource on HIV and AIDS for young people that was identifiable and relevant in a cultural context.*

Simone Davies, Curriculum Development Worker, Community Education Department, Rhondda, Mid Glamorgan.

•Ymlaen welcomes your letters, which may be posted or faxed to Liz Sharp at the WYA. Letters may be edited.

# Dear diary

by Neil Desparandum

...AND HERE IS THE SIX O'CLOCK LOOS...

For the first six years of my life I lived in a house without a bathroom. I could cope with the old zinc bath that hung behind the kitchen door and was used by the whole family, but the outside loo was an entirely different proposition.

If you have shared such experiences you will know that it is not entirely the cold or dark that make using outside loos unpleasant. There are also spiders. These are an entirely different species from the ones that scuttle short-sightedly around lounge carpets on cold autumn evenings. In our loo you could feel the spiders breathing on the back of your neck.

Today, loos are on the up-and-up. A chain of popular roadside restaurants has fresh flowers in the loos of many of its outlets, and the motorway services nearest to my home prides itself on having its loos "checked hourly by the management". The growing importance of the smallest room as a customer service led to a hotel in North Wales winning a national award for the excellence of its toilets.

The educational world has been slower to catch on. Many youth clubs and schools have a long way to go, but I wonder whether the schools now handling their own budgets are paying as much attention to upgrading toilet facilities as they are to revamping reception areas and prospectuses.

Young people have the right to expect youth clubs to provide clean, warm, well-lit toilets with hot water, soap, and hand-drying facilities readily available. This is not universally the case, and I have used youth club toilets where the graffiti is so ancient as to be of historical interest (Anarchy rules! Down with William Pitt!)

Youth club loos must be second only in importance to coffee bars for small, informal meetings of young people. Here is an opportunity waiting to be taken. The walls of many youth clubs carry numerous notice-boards, with items of important information jostling for attention with other items. Advice on contraception and safer sex can lose its impact when surrounded by posters advertising sports fixtures and local bands' gigs.

Dedicated notice-boards in youth club toilets could overcome such distractions, improving visibility of crucial information. Let us learn from those motorway service areas which reserve their most important items of information for eye-level notices on toilet walls (including the time limit for free parking, after which your car is clamped!)

Perhaps the day isn't too far away when we'll find fresh flowers in youth club toilets. Now wouldn't that be something.