

Growing goodness

History teacher Matt Willer explains how passing on passion for the environment is key to his award-winning school project work

Winning the RHS School Gardening Champion of the Year award for 2018 was a great moment in my life. It is one of many amazing chapters in the story of The Allotment Project, a school and community garden that I helped create back in 2015 at Reepham High School and College in Norfolk. By growing food here, children and young people are really starting to understand where their food comes from and how it was grown.

I was nominated, surreptitiously, by parents and staff and, most importantly, the young people who continue with great zeal to develop the project. So this award belongs to all our parent, staff, student and community volunteers: it is their project as much as it is mine. National recognition has reinforced us as a community working together with a renewed common goal: to inspire others at our school (staff, students and parents alike) to think differently about their world. We want to show, by real example, that living more sustainable and environmentally ethical lives is absolutely possible. Winning this award has also made our whole school/college, and wider community, take The Allotment Project so much more seriously.

Why build an allotment?

Being a teacher means that we are in a privileged position to set an example for a better, more ethical, world. Offering experience of 'sustainability' and environmental awareness to children and young

people remains the ultimate reason why I started The Allotment Project. From our raised beds, made by upcycling wooden pallets, to our rainwater catchers made from old sailcloth and washing lines, it has always been about trying to set a sound and inspirational example to the next generation.

Rather by accident, I also discovered that children and young people wanted to help at The Allotment Project because it provides them with a form of



temporary escapism from their assessment- and exam-focused education. Learning outdoors, through The Allotment Project, is about diluting this rather intense educational experience. The Allotment Project, I guess, is the only part of our school/college where students are learning but are not formally assessed nor placed on a spreadsheet next to a number.

I certainly became a teacher to find the very best in children and young people and to help them find goodness in themselves. When they volunteer they are always welcomed and valued by our adult volunteers.

The Allotment Project, and the experience of creating it, saved me as teacher. I refuse to accept that I am only employed to help students pass exams. I am no exams instructor; I am a teacher. A quote from renowned primatologist and anthropologist Dame Jane Goodall really sums up my own feelings: 'We have a window of time, a window to start changing the direction, but it depends on changing attitudes... if our young people lose hope, then we may as well give up.'

What I started and helped develop alongside so many amazing others at The Allotment Project is, as it always has been, for the children and the young people. ○

Matt Willer is lead staff volunteer at The Allotment Project. www.reephamhigh.com/our-school/allotment-project

To nominate inspiring young gardeners, outdoor educators or young gardening teams for the RHS School Gardeners of the Year competition, visit: schoolgardening.rhs.org.uk/sgoty19 (deadline 24 April 2019).

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