

Personal journeys

Coming of Age, the publication that celebrates the 18 year history of the Rank Foundation's Gap Award, includes contrasting personal experiences of volunteering.

Within Rank's Gap Award, there are two different types of 'gapper':

■ 'School gappers' – the original focus of the scheme – come from the protected environments of private education to work on projects in disadvantaged communities.

■ 'Community gappers' are young volunteers who work in their own communities; they move from being 'users' or 'clients' of a project to being members of staff – leaders and role models.

These are the individual stories of a 'school' and a 'community' gapper.

Culture shock

What made me sign up to move from a sheltered private boarding school to one of the most deprived urban communities in the country? I don't think I knew. I had had a privileged background, with 14 years of private schooling and a pretty sheltered upbringing.

Although I had thought about this a great deal, I don't think anything could really have prepared me for the intense experience I had over those six months.

This was Kings Cross: drugs, prostitution, gangs, racism. I was dumbstruck. And excited. I hated it; and loved it. I was enthralled and wrapped up in it.

Through working as a youth and community worker; through pushing the elderly around in wheelchairs and calling the bingo by day; through breaking up fights, discussing religion, and helping out with homework by night; through living 24/7 within the community, I became a part of it. I undoubtedly changed my outlook, my beliefs, my awareness.

I guess people from my background are expected to become lawyers or accountants. Sharp-minded, quick-witted businessmen in for the fast buck. Not for me, not now. With my degree I got a job as an economic consultant, where I am now, hoping to focus my work on urban regeneration, community consultation, youth work and evaluation.

There is no doubt in my mind that I would not be where I am today if it wasn't for those formative years in my

late teens – opening my eyes to a world I couldn't have imagined without experiencing it first hand. Or were it not for that supportive programme of learning and reflection, based on a total immersion experience, ably presided over by a dynamic team of some of the most committed workers I've had the privilege to work with.

Nick Gardner

Local links

I first came across the Streetwork project (Edinburgh), when I was about 14; they were trying to get something going in the area. When they did get funding, they got in touch and asked if I'd be on the interview panel for the workers' jobs. Once things were up and running, a worker told me about the Gap scheme. At the time, I wasn't really going

anywhere with my life, I was between jobs with crap wages. They told me that the Gap scheme was a hard nine months and I'd get less money – but I wanted to give it a go! I was 17. Working in the community that I was from was difficult at first, because people saw me as Kim, the young person, rather than a worker. But being local has its benefits, too. Young people find it easier to relate to me; they know I'm from the area and speak on the same level.

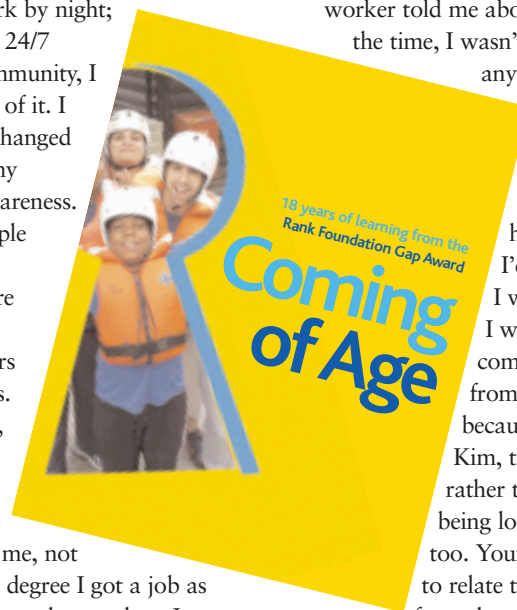
In February 2004 I was offered a position as an Apprentice Youth Worker with Streetwork. This means I've got a full-time job and I'll be doing the YMCA distance learning course for four years at the same time, to get a qualification. I can't describe what I felt when I got the job, it was so important to me.

I've got more responsibility now. I supervise volunteers and I do a lot of one-to-one work. I like it, but it can be hard emotionally. It's a lot more intense. My Gap experience gave me the confidence to be able to say to myself and other people that what I am doing is important.

Streetwork has completely turned my life around. Now I've got a career. Young people I'm working with see where I came from and where I am now and that gives them confidence to try for what they want.

Kim McGovern

Read the full account in *Coming of Age* which included in this mailing of UK Youth magazine.



TOOLbox

Resources on Young volunteers

Contacts

- For more about the Youth Achievement Awards, contact UK Youth: 020 7242 4045. Email: yaa@ukyouth.org Website: www.ukyouth.org
- For more about the Rank Foundation Gap Award, go to the Rank pages on the YMCA George Williams College website: www.ymca.ac.uk/rank
- ESSA can be found at: www.studentvoice.co.uk

Publications

- UK Youth publications include: Foundations the guide to running a youth group (£13) and Portfolio Building a guide for workers supporting young people (£34). Prices include p&p. Tel: 020 7242 4045. Email: publications@ukyouth.org Website: www.ukyouth.org
- The Russell Commission report is available for download at: www.russellcommission.org

Websites

- 2005 is the Year of the Volunteer, see: www.yearofthevolunteer.org
- Wavemakers Awards celebrate the achievements of young people. Find out more at: www.wavemakers.org.uk

