

Case Study: My Orchard Journey by Mel Sheldon

Location: YMCA North Staffordshire, England

In 2016, YMCA North Staffordshire where I was a resident, joined the Fruit-full Communities project to create an orchard in our outdoor space. A group of us got together to think about what an orchard is, taste some fruit and have a fire pit. We visited an orchard in Congleton to learn about the orchard fruits and how we could bring something similar back to our own space at the YMCA. We worked together to design an orchard in the space that we had on site – a strip of land next to the football pitches. I did a bit of research on Pinterest and made a journal of what the potential orchard could look like and how it could serve our community. What would we do with the fruits? All the young people did a vote and we decided that we wanted to make apple cider, bottle it up and sell it at our community meals.

A Safe Space

It was something different that I'd never done before. Living in an urban area we don't often spend a lot of time outdoors. It's nice to sit outside in green space and relax in the fresh air. It's not that safe down at the park near here - there have been a lot of incidents. So it's nice to have a safe place to be outside. If anyone is ever feeling a bit stressed I say to them, come down to the orchard and have a smoke. Just take a step back from life.



Before this project I didn't really care about the environment. I didn't know anything about trees. Now I know how to plant and look after them. It opens up a new world. You get to meet people with similar interests. It was interesting to find out about why trees are important for us. They help you breathe, for one.

There are other YMCAs that planted their own orchards so we've all got something in common and it brings us all together. Creating the orchard was a big job and it took months of planning and organizing. It gave our young people new skills. There are jobs to be done all year round such as pruning and watering.

Whether it was raining or snowing we were still sitting here eating chocolate and popcorn from the fire pit, we had a right laugh. We all put in a lot of hard work and effort and we have something long lasting to show for it. It's going to be here forever. We all really enjoyed it.

On the Our Bright Future Youth Forum panel we got to meet some amazing people doing similar but very different projects – all doing something good for the environment. It shows that little by little all the projects have a really big impact together.

Opportunities

I had the opportunity to attend the June 2018 'Justified and Ancient': The Value of Trees in Cities conference in Sheffield and to sit on the general discussion panel. I didn't think I would ever do anything like that. I got talking to an elderly woman and was really touched by what she had been doing to protect the trees. It was interesting to learn about what other people have been going through in Sheffield and why.

I'm glad I got involved in Fruit-full Communities because I've learnt so much and I can share the stories and the skills with other young people.

Now I work at the YMCA as an activities co-ordinator and I'm just about to start doing a part-time PGCE in art and design teaching for 16+ at Leek College. I live in a YMCA house that I share with my friend. It's been a good journey.

What makes Mel's story special?

This is a story written by a young person who was involved with the Fruit-full Communities project in 2016 as a 23 year old resident at YMCA North Staffordshire. In her own words Mel tells us how being involved in this project benefitted her and fellow residents.

