

SUSSEX LIFE

YOUR ESSENTIAL MONTHLY GUIDE TO THE COUNTY

MARCH 2022

Natasha Kaplinsky

'I'm a real life Dr Dolittle'

WONDER WOMEN

Our county's historical leading ladies and the unsung suffragette

JUST WHAT THE DOCTOR ORDERED

The Sussex choirs for mums prescribed on the NHS

ROYAL INFLUENCE

Prince Charles' secretary's new Sussex role

CHICHESTER

Celebrating the canal's bicentennial

Why Brighton still rocks!

Let's move
to the city

£4.50



Singing Mamas: hitting the right note

Mothers across Britain are being prescribed singing lessons on the NHS to help with postnatal depression thanks to a nurse who started her own choir in East Grinstead

WORDS: Katie Scott





Photo: Supplied

Nurse Kate Valentine started Singing Mamas in East Grinstead to help new mums

Pushing her pram into the village hall, Stacey* takes a deep breath. She doesn't know any of the other mums who are gathered round talking while keeping an eye on the young children, playing at their feet.

Stacey, 31, is nervous. She's hardly been out since her six-month-old baby was born, and meeting so many strangers at once is daunting.

But she's quickly welcomed into the group and handed a cup of tea, a biscuit – and some vocal exercises to perform to warm up her voice. Fifteen minutes later, the new mum is singing and by the end of 90-minute session, she's feeling stronger and happier than she has in months.

For Stacey is one of a select few who've been given a prescription to join a session of Singing Mamas by her GP as part of an NHS pilot programme that hopes the group can help new mothers suffering from postnatal depression.

'I was worried about going because I didn't know what to expect or how it would make me feel,' Stacey says. 'But this group has been amazing. To be in a room singing with women has had an effect on my mental health – it's been a really empowering experience.'

While Stacey went along to a session in Liverpool and Knowsley, the Singing Mamas was created by nurse Kate

Valentine in East Grinstead back in 2010. The groups are now nationwide and help women diagnosed with postnatal depression, anxiety and even breast cancer, by singing and being part of a choir.

'I was diagnosed with breast cancer four years ago,' another woman at the group, who doesn't wish to be named, says.

'After my treatment I didn't even know if I could have children but when I discovered I was pregnant, I became scared.

'I'd been so ill and was terrified something would go wrong.'

She joined the group after having her baby – and credits it with helping her overcome her postnatal depression. 'It's not been an easy ride, but being part of Singing Mamas feels quite therapeutic as well as just being a great way to meet other mums and babies.'

HELPING NEW MOTHERS

Hearing such feedback is music to Kate's ears. She came up with the idea for the not-for-profit organisation in 2010 after

discovering how much singing relieved the stress of her working as a nurse and juggling raising a young family.

But when she relocated she couldn't find a singing group she could take her three children, then aged 11, five and four, along to as she didn't have any childcare, so she started her own.

Eight women joined her at that first session but six weeks later, there were 20 packed into the village hall. Behind the drive to create the singing community was Kate's long-held conviction that song can help mothers in distress, especially those suffering from postnatal depression.

'We exist because suicide is the leading cause of death for women during pregnancy and one year after birth. Singing is clinically proven to reduce symptoms of postnatal depression faster than the usual forms of treatment,' she says.

These findings are taken from a three-arm randomised control trial published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry* in February 2018 (authors D Fancourt and R Perkins). The study highlighted ▶

'Singing is clinically proven to reduce symptoms of postnatal depression faster than the usual forms of treatment'



Photo supplied

that 73 per cent of mums who took part in a 10-week programme of group singing recovered from postnatal depression, and that participating mums also reported an increase in self-esteem, confidence and bonding.

Since then Kate's groups have helped countless women across the county and country – and sessions to them are now prescribed on the NHS.

Around 90 women have been referred to the Singing Mamas

'My aim was to bring people together, nurture and bring out other people's innate creativity'

prescription groups this year alone. 'We are seeing great results with women that are really in need as the service hones in and focuses on their mental well-being,' Kate says. 'The premise with us is that you put the new mother in the middle, and she has the whole community around her to really support her.'

The women who have taken part say that the singing has been far more effective and easier to access than the conventional treatments for postnatal depression that they were offered before.

As news of the groups spread, Kate made the decision to leave nursing and to focus instead on growing the network and teaching other women to lead choirs. She has now trained around 100 women to be leaders and there are about 40 active groups across the country with more planned. The groups meet weekly, for an hour and a half, and sing in the round, a bit like singing round a camp fire. There are no song sheets – they simply follow the group leader to learn the lyrics and music.

The women have performed impromptu and one group even sang on request at a funeral, but

the aim of the group is to unite the women not to become a performing choir.

TAKING ON A GROUP

Lynfa Sioufi trained five years ago and is now leader of a thriving group in Wivelsfield Green. 'I wanted to start my own small singing group at home,' she says. 'My aim was to bring people together, nurture and bring out other people's innate creativity and help people feel at ease – and it ticks all of those boxes!'

Megan Fitter decided to become a leader after realising how much Singing Mamas increased her

TOP:

There are now Singing Mamas groups all over the country

BELOW:

Mothers singing with their babies form a strong bond, research showed



Photo: Jim Holden



Photo: Jim Holden

confidence and is now running groups in East Grinstead and Lingfield and plans to start another in Crowborough. The 31-year-old carer and freelance artist is pregnant with her first child, and says she feels supported by the group. 'I was so shy about singing,' she reveals. 'But everything in me lit up and I realised that one day, I might be ready to be a group leader.' She emphasises that, for her, the joy is sharing the experience and nothing about perfection or performance.

BATTLING COVID

The women, like the rest of the UK, all panicked when the pandemic hit and the nation went into lockdown. 'I wondered whether this was going to be the end of the road,' admits Kate. 'Some groups had taken years to build up their community and some had only just got off the ground. It was pretty devastating and I really felt it for everyone. But I thought, well, we're going to have to survive this somehow.'

The network of leaders came up with Songline – free sessions hosted on Facebook by different leaders three times a week. And, thanks to winning a £20,000 National Lottery grant, it continues to this day reaching a staggering 200,000 households around the world.

The leaders have even recorded a song called *Apart Together*, written by Asha McCarthy, and published a song book.

'I thought, well, we're going to have to survive this somehow'

Kate, who now has a fourth child, aged three, went back into nursing during the pandemic, but was desperate to find a way to reintroduce singing in person, especially for the groups supporting mothers suffering with mental health problems. She came across an exemption

ABOVE:
The Singing
Mamas of
Forest Row in
full voice

in lockdown that allowed new mothers to meet in support groups. She then set about determining best practice to ensure these were as Covid-safe as possible, including studying the research of an ENT consultant who concluded singing was no riskier than talking for transmitting the virus.

'I was acutely aware that new parents were really vulnerable and isolated,' the A&E nurse says.

'This drive to get groups back together was strong for me, because I knew that there was a really serious, undiagnosed mental health crisis.'

Now Singing Mamas are meeting in person again across the UK and Kate is hoping they continue helping mothers.

'Our network of leaders is very responsive and that's reflective of the individual groups,' she says.

'When you set up a group in a village or in a town, wherever it is, that group of women, there's not much they can't do.' ♦

HOW DOES IT WORK?

Each week Singing Mamas leaders work across the UK delivering groups to hundreds of women. Their approach incorporates

the NHS's Five Ways to Wellbeing which means that participating mothers:

- Feel more connected to each other and their baby

- Improve breathing, posture, muscle tension and physical wellbeing
- Stimulate cognitive function through learning new songs

- Feel a sense of community
- Pay attention to the present moment and reduce stress hormone levels.

singingmamaschoir.com