MUSICAL ODYSSEY
A DAY WITH SOUNDABOUT

Words by ALEX JACKSON
Photos by SOUNDABOUT

"MUSIC is your own experience, your own thoughts and your own wisdom," once exclaimed a supremely talented American jazz composer.

Lydia Harker and Steve Pratley

And what Charlie Parker mulled over in the 1940s, is very much reflective of the modern day ethos of many an artist today, and there is no better example of this "wisdom" and "experience", than a partnership which has blossomed over the years between the Trust and music charity, Soundabout.

The Oxfordshire charity, formed in 1997, has been working with people with learning disabilities for more than 14 years now and first started working with people supported by Ridgeway Partnership six years ago.

Under the tagline: "Using music to unlock the potential of young people with severe disabilities", the charity, which was originally based at Ormerod School in Headington, aims to use music and sound to help severely disabled children, young people, and adults learn, have fun and communicate with the world around them.

Soundabout, now based in Worminghall, Buckinghamshire, visits many of the individuals who Ridgeway provide support to across the region, which over the years has allowed for many strong friendships to develop.

Jodie Winfield

None more so than at Barrantynes where charity teacher, Steve Pratley, built up a three-year long friendship with Katie Blanchard, who sadly passed away last year.

Katie's love for music was second to none, and the pair bonded over guitar music and singing.

"Katie was so enthusiastic and over the years we reached such a great level of rapport," said Steve.

Just weeks before Katie passed away; we recorded a duet of her singing as I strummed the guitar, which was then played at her funeral.

"It was a very moving moment and a beautiful piece of music which represented what she enjoyed in life and reaffirmed the positivity and creativity which music can bring out in people."

The sessions use a whole host of musical instruments from soundbeams, electronic keyboards and guitars to vocal sounds and movements. The idea is to create one big jam, in which families and carers can also partake.

"The lessons are based around slowly and carefully building that initial link and friendship through music. I have seen huge changes in people's characters and the sessions make you appreciate and respect what a service user can do when working in a positive way to create a piece of creative music.

"It's an exciting role in which enthusiasm and perseverance can make such an important difference in a person's life giving them that artistic responsibility."

The sessions with people where the Trust provides support and special organised events at Worminghall, give parents and carers the opportunity to get together, share information and make new contacts.

Team Leader, Richard Dyer, who helps oversee a number of sessions at Barrantynes, said: "The sessions bring joy to the service users and there is a real lift in the atmosphere of the home every time Steve visits. Katie loved every minute of her time with Soundabout and they not only tapped into her enthusiasm for music, but were also a big part of her life."

Maria Carmichael, Team Leader at West Street, in Henley, added: "The lessons have enriched the lives and communication of the people we support at West Street. Everyone absolutely loves them and it is an unwritten rule that whoever is in the home at that given time must become involved with proceedings."

The charity hopes to continue holding sessions with people Ridgeway support, no doubt, long into the future and Steve hopes that more people will potentially become involved with the project.

"We have a great working relationship and all our teachers are involved in some way or another with teaching Ridgeway service users. It would be great to build on these existing relations and continue sharing information and creating original music."

And just as the great aforementioned jazz composer paused for thought after his original assertion, he added, "But man, there's no boundary line to art," which rings true with everything Soundabout aims to achieve.

Katie Blanchard and support worker Kelly Shelton

Katie enjoying her musical session

Jodie relaxing to the music

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