

Could you make people happy?

Ask not what your community can do for you but what you can do for your community, is the question posed by People United. **Ed Hill** talks to the charity's founder Tom Andrews about how it sets up projects aimed at building a real sense of community spirit through good deeds

WHAT makes people happy? It's a question not just of interest to psychologists but increasingly to politicians. David Cameron is spending £2 million getting the Office of National Statistics to create a happiness index to measure the nation's well-being. But one Kent organisation is already blazing a trail in the field.

Canterbury based People United describes itself as a creative laboratory aimed at making the world a better place.

It was the brainchild of Tom Andrews who has spent a career in the arts, education, community and charity sectors.

He said: "It came down to something very simple; people getting on with other people. Of course that links it to all sorts of other things such as citizenship, anti-social behaviour and the Big Society."

The aims of the charity may seem naively idealistic, but the group's projects are backed up with thorough research by the psychology department of the University of Kent.

Mr Andrews said: "It can't be just nice words; it has to be something that happens on the ground."

"The university's involvement gives us credibility. The psychology department evaluates our work. If people say what we do is a bit wishy-washy, we can show our work actually make a difference."

The group's first project was in three primary schools. Two in Kent and a partner school in Halifax.

Mr Andrews said: "We looked at things like role models and empathy and then developed that into practical projects. We use the arts to inspire kindness and social interaction."

"We often hear the worst about people but we wanted to turn that round. We got the children to talk about the kind and courageous things people do."

"We worked with musicians, poets, illustrators theatre and film makers to help children tell their real life stories about people. That led on to other things like schools going out and clearing up their local park or making smoothies and biscuits for their local fire station and hospital."

"These may seem like small things but it does make a difference. The children did it themselves and by doing something that made other people happy they made themselves happier."

The success of the project was backed up by academic research. Psychologists compared children in schools who had been part of the project with others that had not.

Mr Andrews said: "The results showed consistently that at the schools where the children had taken part they were more willing to help one another. They also saw people who were outside their social circle, for example children in another school, in a more positive light."

People United published a small book about what it learnt and sent it to other schools in Kent so they could begin their own projects. They can also access the charity's website for more help.

Mr Andrews said: "We want every project to have a real legacy."

Not content with trying to make a school



IN IT TOGETHER: People United projects are aimed at getting communities working together as one

happy the small team of three decided to apply the same principles to a whole town. They called the project We All Do Good Things.

Frances Moran, operations manager, said: "We chose Herne Bay because it was local, not too big and we had a good relationship with the volunteer centre. We also did some research about Herne Bay and there was a need for more volunteers to bring people together. Canterbury and Whitstable were relatively well catered for when it came to the arts, so people were happy it was happening there."

The group worked with more than 30 organisations to stage 90 events over a year. They included writing workshops, poetry sessions, craft making and much more.

People United estimate that around a sixth of the town's population was involved in some way with the project. The finale was a giant picnic in the town's memorial gardens.

Ms Moran said: "The whole community loved it so much that they are doing it again on August 28 this year. We have now handed it over so people in Herne Bay can carry it on."

The latest project has involved getting young people in the town to redecorate a beach hut where people can explore their ideas on how they can help the community.

The group's reputation is growing all the time. Mr Andrews has talked of their work at national conferences and its research results have been presented in America.

He said: "We are ambitious about what we can achieve. We are a national organisation for the Arts Council but we do not want to get too wrapped up in policy."

"We will write up the things we have learnt and then people can develop it in their own way. The way people do something in Herne Bay will be very different from how they would do it in Walsall but the principle is the same."

And Mr Andrews has no doubts about the need for People United to continue.

He said: "Unesco found that the UK was really low down on a scale of kindness and how people thought about people around them."

"It's not just about helping old people across the road, it is about what sort of society we want to live in. What our schools are like."

"Most people want the world to be a fair and kind place and our work is to find out how we can make that happen."

■ If you have an idea that will help make positive changes about your community and use the beach hut email info@peopleunited.org.uk or call 01227 811800.

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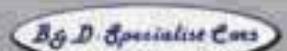
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