

A real eye-opener: Intergenerational cooking skills at Dowlais Cooking Club

Maldwyn Little

“It’s been a great adventure and we hope it’s going to continue.”
Maldwyn Little.

This workshop was run by several members of the Dowlais Cooking Club, who all contributed by sharing their experiences of the project.

Background

The Dowlais Cooking Club began three years ago. Maldwyn Little was involved with a Housing Association and suggested cooking as a good way to encourage community involvement. The idea was well received and they began with four cooking taster sessions. At this stage it was very popular with young single mums, many of whom weren’t at all confident in the kitchen and some of whom were spending as much as £100 per week on takeaway food. The taster sessions were a great success and mothers learnt many new skills and healthy recipes which were popular with their children.

The cooking club has developed into an inter-generational experience and is an OCN certified course (each course lasts 10 weeks). However there’s no rigid structure to the classes and the topics for the courses vary from cooking with pasta through to Indian dishes. Participants are also learning how to grow herbs.

There is a great enthusiasm from participants of the cooking classes and the key words are PASSION, ENERGY and ENTHUSIASM! The classes have generated something that has changed the lives of the individuals and families involved, and they are now the talk of the town.

Activities

During the classes, everybody participates and gets practically involved. The classes have increased the self-esteem of members and there’s a real community spirit within the group – a community spirit that was missing before. The club is advertised through Communities First and has capacity for twelve to fifteen people. It meets once or twice a week, is open to all age groups and provides a crèche. A small amount is charged each week for the food that they cook with. The chef then does the shopping each week before the class and at the end of each ten week session they have a social gathering called ‘The Feast’.

Four members of the cooking club had recipes recently published in a cookbook put together by A Taste of Merther’s Food and Photography Project. The course allowed members to develop the skills they needed to develop and write up their recipes. Leslie, one of the group’s members, said

that attending the cooking club has been a fantastic experience and that he's learnt to cook things he'd never cooked before. He said he now has a totally different perception of cooking than he did before, and that the club has allowed him to meet new people.

Maldwyn explained how each of the members has noticed a marked difference in their health and have learnt new practices such as using spices to replace salt. They have also attended a fascinating and informative nutrition course run by a local dietician.

Members of the cooking club have been involved in extra-curricular activities, such as visiting supermarkets to find out about nutritional advice food labelling and providing cakes for the local Christmas Fair. They recently were invited to go over to Poland to find out about how cooking clubs there were operating. Members visited a drug rehabilitation centre and saw how a community project was run in Poland. Although there was a marked difference in affluence between the UK and Polish counterparts, what the Poles lacked in affluence they made up for with community spirit. Maldwyn stressed that this was something that needed to be regained in the UK.

Outcomes

The new group is constituted and is now able to apply for funding. They are considering going to the BBC food show in Birmingham, visiting a cheese-maker's and perhaps holding an open day for the local community so people can find out more about the cooking clubs. The project continues to play an active role in the community and is considering setting up a local lunch club, café or food co-op.