

Marie Goldman

Deputy leader of Chelmsford City Council and Liberal Democrat Parliamentary candidate for Chelmsford

POINTS OF VIEW

Heartbreaking and uplifting stories from The Wilderness Foundation

SOMETIMES, I'm invited to events with Chelmsford charities and voluntary organisations that blow me away with how much they achieve and how utterly invaluable they are to our community. Earlier this month, I attended just such an event at The Wilderness Foundation. The stories told by the young people they help were simultaneously heartbreaking and uplifting. The work the Foundation does is simply astonishing and I really want you to know about it. The event I attended was the graduation ceremony for something call the 'TurnAround' programme. Over a period of nine months, seven young people completed a course of wilderness therapy and personal growth. This was the sixteenth group coming through the Foundation with the first group starting in 2007. The project predominantly works with young people living in areas of high



The Wilderness Foundation graduation ceremony celebrated the achievements of members of the Turnaround Programme

deprivation, poverty and 'general concern'. They are drawn from across Essex where participants have typically fallen between the cracks in the system, where education or normal support services are unable to meet their needs.

The programme supports vulnerable young people, whose family life may have included domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse and those who might have experienced physical or sexual abuse, among other life-limiting issues.

Through the TurnAround programme, The Wilderness Foundation gives these vulnerable 15-21 year-olds a second chance and helps them to feel confident making their own decisions and their own life choices. It does this by taking them out into nature and helping them heal.

It also creates a home base for all young people who have been through their doors. They continue to engage and connect with previous graduates who come back to support others, and share their thorns and roses of life as they mature.

The programme took them through tough, wet and cold wilderness trails in Scotland, Devon and locally in wild woods through 2023 and into 2024. Activities including camping wild, climbing mountains and trees, and exploring rivers by canoe, all contributed to learning and expanding personal and social skills, and helping to grow resilience, personal awareness, self-esteem and confidence.

Post the pandemic, many young people were crying out to grow social skills, working through serious anxiety, self harm and suicidal risks, whilst also building hope for the future and thinking about careers or plans to dream of and work towards in the future. The TurnAround programme helps them find a positive way forward with their lives.

The graduation was a gathering of families, mentors, funders, supporters and civic leaders all gathering around a collection of brave young people who made the choice to step out of their troubled and often traumatic pasts, towards making a positive change in building new futures for themselves.

The ceremony included young people standing up in front of the audience and telling their stories. Each speaking alongside their mentors, everyone shared their journey from start to finish and several talked about how, without the support of their weekly mentors and the therapy and outdoor facilitation of the team, they may not have been with us today.

It was impossible not to find the ceremony deeply emotional and moving. It's rare to hear young people have the courage to stand up and speak so intimately of what they have experienced and been through in their young lives. They were commended by the Mayor of Chelmsford, Cllr Linda Mascot, the High Sheriff, Charles Bishop, and the Chair of the Foundation, Vincent Thomson, alongside the staff team and mentors. Other

attendees included Assistant Chief Constable, Rachel Nolan, and Cllr Stephen Robinson, Leader of Chelmsford City Council.

The afternoon finished with a sense of joy and pride, a deeper understanding of how change is possible for all of us who are willing to step forward and experience things beyond our comfort zones, understanding how honest and kind support mixed with listening without judgement allows us to learn new ways of seeing ourselves and the world. It reminds us how vital nature is to all of us - providing the necessary space and freedom to see beauty with new eyes.

It's a privilege to be taken into the world of teens and see reality through their eyes and experience. As adults, we must understand and remember how social media, bullying and peer group pressure can strip young people of all self-belief, and how a cycle of rejection and not fitting in can leave a deep sense of loneliness and despair.

With all that - it was uplifting to know that there is hope to change things and have new beginnings.

The Wilderness Foundation offers group programmes for children, teens and adults experiencing mental health challenges, those surviving domestic abuse, volunteering at the allotment in Melbourne estate and one-to-one counselling. All programmes are outdoors and in nature.

For more information visit their website at www.wildernessfoundation.org.uk where you can also make a donation or sign up.



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