

FEATURE



Harnessing the power of sporting achievement, performance and arts

When Gene Kelly kisses Debbie Reynolds goodnight and launches into one of the most famous song and dance sequences in cinema history, the sheer joy of *Singin' in the Rain* puts a smile on your face.

The extraordinary thing is, though, that singing, dancing and a lot more besides – art, drama, poetry, football, tennis and even boxing – all have the power to help chase away life's storm-clouds.

What's wonderful is that you don't have to be able to tap-dance, sing in tune or score goals to feel better and transform your life.

It's something that, over the past 10 years, Suffolk Community Foundation has seen on numerous occasions with the thousands of small charities and organisations it has worked with. And, says Tim Holder, the foundation's development director, this is the reason it is creating three targeted funds – the Arts and Culture Fund, the Sports Fund and the Rural Fund.

■ Wendy Herber, partnership development manager for Suffolk Community Foundation



Again and again, science has proved sport, theatre and the arts can make you happy. Suffolk Community Foundation believes it also has the power to make our county a better place

On September 24 the Arts and Culture Fund is being launched at the High Sheriff's Command Performance at the Theatre Royal in Bury St Edmunds, featuring, among others, Timothy West, Kit Hesketh-Harvey, Helen Fraser and the Royal Ballet. There will also be a charity auction, and High Sheriff

Judith Shallow says in addition to supporting the Theatre Royal she is hoping it will raise £25,000 to get the new fund underway.

One of the star performances will be by Suffolk-born Gary Avis, Royal Ballet Master, who will be dancing *Lieder*, created for him and international ballerina Mara Galeazzi by Alastair Marriot. Gary is taking a rare one-day leave of absence from the ballet *Romeo*

and *Juliet* at the Royal Opera House to support the Arts and Culture Fund. He understands from personal experience not only the difficulties that can hinder young people but how the arts can make a difference.

"When I was at school in Ipswich I used to be bullied and spat at on my way to school, and would have to take a different route every day because there were kids who just wanted to pick a fight. Every night my Mum used to wash my clothes as soon as I got in."

He says it was thanks to the local arts scene, and in particular the support of Linda Shipton, Scilla Dyke, the Co-op Juniors and theatre groups in Ipswich, that he was able to build his confidence and find a way through this difficult period.

"For lots of my friends at the time, performing provided lasting benefits, such as confidence, discipline, fitness and teamwork, and I think the fact that I was then lucky enough to go on to launch a career as a professional dancer was just the icing on the cake. I'd like to see as many people as possible, young and old, benefit from the power of the arts." Of course, not



■ Halesworth Volunteer Centre

everyone can pursue an international career but, says Rebecca Gibbs, of Spinning Wheel Theatre, the arts can make an enormous difference.

Her group is based at her home in Rickinghall but works across the county, taking professional theatre into remote village halls and communities that might otherwise not see live performance.

She has also been running Spinning Wheel Youth Takeover for 16-25-year-olds in Bury St Edmunds and it's so successful another group is about to be formed in Haverhill.

"Unlike other youth theatres we

let our young people do everything; they choose what they want to perform. They do the props, the PR, the lighting, the acting, the costumes, flyers and they manage the budget too."

Last year they did a Harold Pinter show at the St John's Centre and it was a sell-out. Of course, Rebecca and her team are on hand to advise, but by letting the young people do all the work, they provide a really wide-ranging experience in lots of roles. "We've seen a huge difference in our young people – there was one young girl who was incredibly shy and then really had to speak up as

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■ Top left and above, Eastgate Boxing Club; top right, Halesworth Volunteer Centre has a befriending team; right, a scene from Spinning Wheel Theatre's rural tour of Mindgame

she was running the technical rehearsal; and since then has really come out of herself."

Tim Holder says that in the same way as the arts fund would be directed at groups making a difference in all aspects of culture, the sports fund is very much directed at achieving the same types of benefits of physical and mental wellbeing through physical activities.

The Sports Fund has had a fantastic start, he says, having amassed funds of £320,000. These have been invested in the foundation's endowment fund, and grant-making will begin next year.

"Over the last 10 years the foundation has, of course, supported many charities and community groups that work in the sporting arena but setting aside a specific fund means that we can do more to help and hopefully attract more donors to the fund who have a specific interest in supporting this work."

For example, groups like Eastgate Amateur Boxing Club in Rougham, which helps local people tackle a range of problems – everything from fitness and obesity to confidence and bullying. Mick Bryant, who has run the club for 30

years, has three community boxercise groups a week, with sessions for all ages and abilities, in addition to regular boxing training.

"Whether or not people want to progress and take up the sport more seriously, it still seems to make a huge difference to people's lives.

"For example, last year one young woman came to us – I suppose she was about 15 at the time – because she was getting teased and bullied at school for being about five stone overweight. Since then her life has changed, she's lost the weight, she's become very fit but also very happy and her outlook on life is completely different to what it was a year ago."

Mick said she's now progressed to his regular boxing sessions, which focus more on competitive sport.

Meanwhile, the Rural Fund, which is being launched soon, will be targeting isolation and deprivation in Suffolk – issues that are often hidden and go unnoticed.

Wendy Herber, partnership development manager for Suffolk Community Foundation, explains that it wasn't until the foundation's *Hidden Needs* report was published in 2011 that the scale of the problem was revealed. The facts are, though, that beyond obvious pockets of

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deprivation in Suffolk in places like Lowestoft, Haverhill and parts of Ipswich, no-one really had any idea that many of our picture-postcard villages hide an uncomfortable truth.

"We now know that you might find two or three houses in a village where people were really struggling," she says. "Problems include isolation, lack of access to services like health care, domestic violence, sexual abuse, and, because of poor transport services, there's nowhere to turn to for help.

"Also, when you live in a small village, you might not want the

community to know that you have money problems or whatever, and not want to seek help."

Hidden Needs, says Wendy, really changed views about the county and, as a result, national charities like the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and Henry Smith Charity have started or increased their grant-making in Suffolk.

However, the economic climate and public finance priorities have evolved since then, and with new Government statistics due to become available, the *Hidden Needs* report is going to be updated, which should give a clearer picture of the current situation.

This will enable the foundation and its Rural Fund to target charities and community groups that are most in need. For instance, a group like Halesworth Volunteer Centre would fit the bill.

Based in the town's council offices, and with more than 50 volunteers, it runs services ranging from dog walking and odd jobs to a befriending scheme and a car service. Manager Tracy Gardner says most of the people they help are older. "We'll drive them to and from doctors' and dentists' appointments or, if necessary, to hospital – the

James Paget, Norwich, Ipswich, Papworth or Addenbrooke's.

"Befrienders will drop in to people's homes or meet them for a coffee; whatever suits the individual. Later this month the Volunteer Centre is to launch a new project, Men in Sheds, aimed at encouraging older men to meet new people and get involved in community woodwork projects as well."

"You might not think that Halesworth is isolated, because we have a rail and train service, but people can be isolated because they can't get out of their homes and we are about as far from a hospital as you can get."

Suffolk Community Foundation chief executive Stephen Singleton says: "The beauty of creating these themed funds is that they shine a light on the work of grassroots organisations who are making a lasting contribution to your community. If you are passionate about sport, the arts or understand the challenges of rural living and want to make a difference, making a donation to a central pot of money means that groups from across the county can receive the funding they need to continue doing their invaluable work."