

Luton... What a Place! Grassroots... What a Team!

Luton, Luton... what a place! I have worked here for over eight years now, and there is rarely a dull moment. Luton is a place which gathers the world, and a place in which events on the world stage have a direct local impact. While cultural and religious diversity certainly brings many joys, they can also present challenges as people learn (or not) how to get along and negotiate difference. This is certainly true for Luton. Luton is a place where years of 'political correctness' have left sections of the community feeling overlooked and invisible. It is a place where the actions of a small group of vocal Islamic extremists gave rise to the far-right English Defence League. And, long used to receiving an extremely bad press, Luton has at times found itself voted 'the crappiest town in Britain', and labelled by sections of the media 'a hotbed of terrorism'. I do love a challenge, but in coming to work in Luton, did I bite off way more than I can chew?



More than I can chew...? No!

I say 'No!', because in setting up the CRCW Project, someone had the wisdom to ask local charity, Grassroots, to 'hold' the CRCW post. Grassroots is an ecumenical Christian programme engaged in building community between Luton's diverse faith and cultural communities. So, starting work in Luton, I became part of a small, yet extremely

diverse team. Within our small number (6), we currently have two members of the URC, two Catholics, two people of no particular faith affiliation. We have women and men, and a cultural mix which includes black, white and Asian. We work extremely closely with a Muslim colleague from our partner organisation, Luton Council of Faiths (LCoF). Grassroots works in partnership with numerous entities and organisations - including churches, mosques, Hindu temples and Sikh gurdwaras, and has strong relationships with the local Jewish and Baha'i communities. Grassroots has a long history of supporting and enabling groups who might be considered 'hard to reach' or 'on the margins'. The aim is never to create a 'melting pot' in which difference is ignored, or negotiated away, but rather to create respectful spaces, where each person, each group, is free to be themselves whilst respecting the right of others to be themselves too. In joining the Grassroots team, I had a ready-made set of colleagues - each with different skills and experiences, and heading up distinct yet intersecting areas of work. Although an entity in its own right, the CRCW Project became part of the Grassroots 'portfolio', tapping into existing projects and initiatives, whilst developing new projects, and drawing in groups and individuals who were not previously being engaged.

Matthew 5:9 says 'Blessed are the peacemakers' - not those who *want* peace, or those who *love* peace, but those who actively *make* peace! This is surely what Grassroots is about.

Day in and day out, Grassroots is there - using any excuse to gather diverse peoples for mutual learning and understanding: Sports activities (football, cricket, archery), women's groups (exercise, outings, celebrating International Women's Day), faith and cultural celebrations (including the hugely popular One World Week celebration), community campaigns (the award-winning multi-faith Luton Fairtrade Steering Group, which led the successful 'Making Luton a Fairtrade Town' campaign), circle dancing, creative writing, and work with children and young people, to name but a few. In moments of crisis, Grassroots is still there, and the ongoing work comes into its own: When terrorist atrocities in the UK or around the globe would threaten the stability of local community relationships, or when racist groups target their attentions on Luton, local people - from all faiths and none - stand together in solidarity, vowing 'We will never let evil drive us apart'.



Although engaged in so much - and with so many - Grassroots' default position is to be 'behind the scenes', shining a light on the groups and individuals with whom we engage. The 22nd March 2018 was different - a rare opportunity for Grassroots to be placed centre-stage. This was the date of Grassroots' 25th Anniversary Celebration - a wonderful occasion which gathered almost 400 guests from across Luton, the UK, and even from overseas. Guests included local dignitaries, staff and trustee's past and present, members of partner organisations and local community groups. The evening

was set in prayer by denominational heads from Grassroots' four key Church funders (Methodist, Catholic, Church of England and URC), including Rev Dr Andrew Prasad, Moderator of the Thames North Synod of the United Reformed Church. The colour-filled programme included song, dance, poetry and reflections, a short, animated film documenting Grassroots' history, environmentally-friendly gifts, a youth panel, and a beautiful 3-course meal. I was deeply honoured to act as host for the evening.

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For more 25th Anniversary Celebration photos, visit:

https://www.facebook.com/pg/GrassrootsLuton/photos/?tab=album&album_id=1413311488773046

For the short, animated history, or Grassroots - 25 Years in 25 Minutes, visit:

<http://grassrootsluton.org.uk/news-events/25years25minutes>