

Glasnost: Planning an Open Week

In the Autumn of 1987, St. Michael's House Training Centre in Ballymun, Dublin, motivated by a desire to embrace the local community, planned and hosted an "Open Week". Its success was far-reaching and on-going. For those who always wanted to do it but were afraid to try, here is a step-by-step guide.

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Why an Open Week

'Glasnost' is a much used word today. It may come as a surprise to some that this piece of enlightened Russian thinking has a place in Special Education! Those of us who work in St. Michael's House, Training Centre in Ballymun feel the policy of 'Glasnost' is part and parcel of the way forward and as such must be embraced by all of us, if we are to continue to grow and develop.

'Glasnost' means Openness. In September 1987 during discussions with our newly appointed Community Liaison Officer - Maria Kennedy - the idea of being 'open' to our community was born. Recent developments in our Centre had been community oriented; i.e. community interaction skills training such as travelling, shopping etc were taking place in each trainee's own locality, at the appropriate time of the day. The gap identified was that we did not know those who lived and worked in our neighbourhood in Ballymun Road and similarly, they didn't know us. An awareness of the dilemma did exist among the staff of the centre and they were not only willing but enthusiastic in their desire to make changes in this regard. It must be said that the idea of accessing our community, while laudable and desirable in itself, would have remained an idea without the unstinting hard work, generosity of time and sheer dedication of the staff of the Training Centre. They worked tirelessly to ensure its success.

The Plan

And so the Open Week idea developed. The steps in the process from the 'good idea' stage to actualisation were as follows:

Steps Towards An Open Week

1. The Aims of the Open Week
2. The Format.
3. How to achieve the Aims.
4. Target Groups.
5. Who to Involve
6. Resources.
7. The Programme.

Aims

Our aims were three-fold,-

To increase public awareness of St. Michael's House Training Centre in the immediate community.

To let people know both what we have to offer the community and also how the community could assist the clients of St. Michael's House Training Centre.

To initiate a framework whereby we could work together with the people of our locale.

Format

Experience and Information were to be the cornerstones of this Open Week. People who lived/worked in our area were invited to participate in carefully chosen activities, through which they were to be afforded an opportunity to get to know some people who have mental handicaps. Observation of clients at work was most definitely not part of the week. Information needed to be imparted and this was done through the media, community education and advertising.

How to Achieve Aims

Local groups were identified, as were the resources needed to target these groups. An information package needed for each was also developed and information regarding most suitable times for participation in the Open Week was elicited.

Target Groups

A geographical area within a radius of 2 miles of the centre was to be the area for greatest focus of attention. The list of groups to be targeted included;

Schools, Teachers, Residents,
Colleges, Lecturers, Employers,
Parishes, Gardai, Support Groups,
Clergy, Shop Assistants, Youth groups,
Social clubs, Bus crews, Unemployment groups,
Sports clubs, Recreation facilities, Young adults,
Other Training Centres, Housewives, Parents,
and families of clients,
Key people in the locality,
Information Centres

Who to Involve

The following were invited to be part of our Open Week:-

Training Centre Staff
Trainees and their families
Senior Management of St. Michael's House
Other St. Michael's House Centres in Ballymun Road
Schools, Hostels and Assessment Clinic

Resources

Despite what one might assume in these days of financial constraints, the primary resource needed *it people*; specifically; staff and clients who *want* to achieve the objective.

Funding is also required to meet the expenses accruing from such a project. A good availability of space prevents many headaches! We produced a short video entitled "Getting On," explaining the training programme; a brochure outlining the week's activities and leaflets on aspects of the Open Week programme. A visual display of the Training Centre was also commissioned. Posters advertising the activities were designed as were lapel stickers which were given to all who visited. A very large banner and bunting completed the picture.

Programme of Events

The Trainees were an integral part of all the activities of the week. Specific training courses to develop skills in acting as hosts, greeting people, making social conversation, giving information, conducting tours of the Centre etc. were provided for trainees who wanted to undertake such duties. Another group of trainees undertook to provide the refreshments needed for the week. The cleaning and preparation of the centre was also the responsibility of the trainees.

Each staff member undertook responsibility for a particular aspect of the week and worked out the format necessary, made contact with the target group, produced literature, engaged help and saw to it that all was held in readiness for the big event. Long days and nights were the norm for the months of Oct. and Nov. '87. At last the day was upon us and it was action packed from then on!

The then Lord Mayor of Dublin Alderman Carmencita Hederman kindly agreed to officially launch the week. The press reception was well attended by both local people, well known representatives of Government and Industry, families, clients and staff. Having got off to such a good start, we looked forward to a successful week.

Open Week Programme

OPEN WEEK PROGRAMME OF EVENTS NOVEMBER 23RD - 27TH 1987					
TIME	Monday 23rd	Tuesday 24th	Wednesday 25th	Thursday 26th	Friday 27th
11.00 a.m. - 1.00 p.m.	COFFEE MORNING for Local Residents & Groups	INTEGRATION ACTIVITIES for SECONDARY SCHOOLS	INTEGRATION ACTIVITIES for NATIONAL SCHOOLS	COFFEE MORNING for Local Residents & Groups	INTEGRATION ACTIVITIES for NATIONAL SCHOOLS
2.00 p.m. - 4.00 p.m.	JOINT DRAMA WORKSHOP for ALL HALLOWS STUDENTS	INVITATION QUIZ for ADULT TRAINING CENTRES	FAMILY AFTERNOON	INTEGRATION ACTIVITIES for SECONDARY SCHOOLS	
EVENING	OFFICIAL OPENING CEREMONY Will be performed by The Right Honorable, The Lord Mayor Alderman Carmencita Hederman	LEARN ABOUT MENTAL HANDICAP WORKSHOP	INTEGRATED SPORTS and LEISURE EVENING	LECTURE 'COMING IN FROM THE COLD' by DR. ROY McCONKEY	GALA CLOSING DISCO & PARTY

The following are short reports on the organisation, planning and implementation of each of the week's activities, which we hope may act as guidelines for others embarking on a similar project.

Local Residents / Groups

Two coffee mornings were to be social events where local people could meet the trainees, have a chat and learn from them about their daily activities. Advertising the events took many forms; letters were written and put through letter boxes. Libraries, Shops and Information Centres displayed posters. Resident's Associations and groups were contacted, announcements were read in the churches and bingo halls. The mornings began with trainees welcoming visitors, asking each to sign the visitor's book and then being escorted to the canteen for refreshments and a chat. The guests were shown the centre by trainees. The video was also on view. A make-up demonstration and a cake icing demonstration were organised for those interested. Such were the crowds that a queue formed at the front door of the centre!

Secondary Schools

Representative students from twelve schools in our area came to the Open Week. They participated alongside our trainees in activities such as Photography, Outdoor Pursuits, Pottery, Woodwork, Snooker, Basketball, Soccer, Video Workshop and Cookery. On arrival in the Centre they looked at the video, followed by the activity session and concluded with refreshments. Students were asked to report back to their peers and organise a display in their school which would be judged by a Training Centre representative and some trainees.

National Schools

Representatives from the 6th classes of the twelve National Schools in our area were invited. Pupils were given a list of possible activities and they arrived in the centre having decided on their choice from a list that included - games, art, cookery, table-tennis, snooker, basketball and face painting. Pat Ingoldsby of R.T.E. fame visited all the sessions and was a firm favourite with all. Pupils had an opportunity to see the video about the Centre's activities and the session concluded with refreshments and a sing-song. It is said that 'organised chaos' prevailed and everyone had great fun! On return to their schools, they briefed the others on their visit and took part in a competition which, again, was judged by staff and trainees. Pupils could write a poem, short story or draw a poster inspired by their visit.

Sports And Leisure Clubs

We are fortunate to work in a district which has such a large number and range of clubs. Thirty-three clubs were invited to the evening, ranging from angling to soccer and from basketball to karate. In addition, folk dancers, gymnasts, badminton groups etc. demonstrated their particular skills and invited trainees to take part.

Such was the response that four venues were needed to accommodate all the guests. Many of the clubs were very open to having some trainees join and indeed many have done so.

Families of our Clients

Families and friends of the trainees were invited to come to the centre for a Family Afternoon. The response was magnificent. A questionnaire was sent out, where people indicated their choice of activity, numbers attending and any special requirements. A timetable was then drawn up allocating people to their desired activity. It was a new departure for us to have parents and trainees working alongside one another in such things as woodwork, cookery, bowling, table-tennis, snooker and pottery. The most common feedback from parents, was their surprise at the level of competence among the trainees. Also many expressed a wish to get more involved in order to re-inforce skills at home.

Drama Workshop:

An integrated drama workshop for trainees and students from the nearby All Hallows College was held. Participants engaged in name games to get to know one another, trust exercises to build confidence followed by mime and role play activities. Finally participants got together in small groups to create a story line and act it out. The session concluded with simple massage and discussion/feedback to each other about what was enjoyable and/or difficult.

Invitation Quiz

We decided to involve people from other Training Centres and Workshops in an Inter-Centre Quiz. A major coup was achieved in getting the Supreme Quiz Master - Mike Murphy of RTE-fame to ask the questions. Two Centres took part and tension was running very high; in the end Cherry Orchard Workshop from Ballyfermot captured 1st Prize. Mike presented an engraved plaque; all competitors received a novelty pen.

Learn About Mental Handicap Workshop

Eight trainees assisted by St. Michael's House staff put together a most enthralling evening. People from our area e.g. gardai, nurses, bank staff, business people, teachers and neighbours, listened to and discussed with the trainees what their lives are like. They talked about problems encountered every day, their hopes and aspirations. A wide range of subjects was delved into on the night. The Self Advocacy Movement had certainly arrived. Such was its success, that a repeat will definitely take place.

Future Styles Of Service Workshop

The Open Week would not be complete without putting on an 'educational' evening.

Practitioners in Special Education, Parents, Volunteers, Clients and interested parties were invited to listen to Marjorie Soden who gave us a parent's perspective and Dr. Roy McConkey whose talk was entitled "Coming In From The Cold". We were told how we have frozen out people who have handicaps and enlightened as to how we might change this. We heard about the wealth of people who are willing and able to assist us in our work but who wait to be asked ! The discussion afterwards was lively and could have gone on much longer.

Conclusion and Beginning

The Open Week was a mammoth undertaking which proved to be even more valuable than we anticipated. Lest we forget, it was however, but a beginning. The road to truly becoming part of the community is a long one, with many bends and traffic lights to be negotiated. If we are to develop our services, be they schools or training centres, we must embark on the journey into the community and an "Open Week" such as ours is one tried and tested beginning to that exciting journey.