



Stories 1



Individual stories about real people are often very challenging, inspiring and thought-provoking - all at the same time.

This selection of real-life stories about young people are each followed by a series of questions that can be used for further discussion and reflection.

These stories can be used alongside or instead of a traditional sermon, or they might be used as a focus for prayer, bible study or a local social action project.

Shell's Belles

I grew up a mere half an hour from Burnley, so the landscape shouldn't have come as a surprise to me. On this particular morning, the rain and hail lashed down in torrents on my approach to the town and through my frantically swishing windscreen wipers I glimpsed snow on the nearby hills. I was here to visit Shell's Belles, a community cheerleading project. As I entered the large, well lit studio space where they meet, I was amazed to see around 50 girls, some as young as four, going through a stretch and warm up routine. Many were proudly wearing black and pink 'Shell's Belles' sweatshirts, and all but a few of the very little ones were concentrating hard on following the coach's lead.

Project founder, Michelle Williamson, explained that she started the group because she grew up in the local area and there was nothing for girls to do. "I would have loved something like this when I was growing up." Burnley is not an affluent area, and she reckons that around 40% of her girls come from families where "Parents just don't take any notice of their kids". It was important to find a venue within walking distance of the main residential area, she says, as lots of families don't have transport. "We charge for the classes so that we can have a fund for helping pay for travel and costumes when we enter competitions. All the money goes back to the group."

I talk to Rhiann and Jessica, aged 10, about why they like being part of Shell's Belles. They are hugely enthusiastic.

"It's really good because we get opportunities to do loads of stuff we wouldn't do otherwise. Like we've been in competitions and shows, and we are always learning new stuff. It's fun and it keeps us healthy too." They are glowing with pride as they tell me about their recent success in the National Cheerleading Competition in Birmingham.

"Everyone cried when we won. Even we cried. It was so exciting, it was brilliant!" (They demonstrate their winning routine for me later and although they haven't performed it for over two months it is timed to perfection and executed to a very professional standard.) The girls also made it to the final stages of 'Britain's Got Talent' in its first year. Rhiann tells me she plans to work hard at her dancing and to become a junior coach when she is old enough.

Michelle's 'junior coach' scheme enables girls of 14 and over to take an active part in teaching the younger age group and choreographing their routines. This morning it is the turn of Francesca and Chelsea to put the group through their paces. They work their way along the lines of girls encouraging, giving advice and laughing along as the dancers practice their routines. They are confident and although watched over by older staff are clearly at home taking charge of the session. For some girls this junior coaching scheme has been a route into working in dance and fitness. 18 year old Devon now has a part-time paid role as assistant coach, having worked her way up from a young age. She does other casual work, she tells me, but this is what she loves best. Her eyes sparkle as she describes her work with the group, and I sense she is grateful for the opportunity to be paid to do something which is so much fun. In fact, everyone I speak to seems proud to be part of this project, which takes community just as seriously as cheerleading.

Questions

Are there things happening in your community that encourage, excite and provide opportunities for young people to grow and develop their skills? If not, why not think about starting something? Shell's Belles helps grow the self-esteem of young people. How can your church similarly help young people?

14 year olds take a strong lead at Sell's Belles. They have been given a chance and have risen to the challenge. How could young people be given leadership responsibilities in your church?