

No name – but a powerful voice

Musician Marie Benton used the therapeutic power of music to launch The Choir with No Name – and found proof that it builds confidence, skills and ability among the homeless. Now she's ready for the next act

December 2009. I am at The Funding Network's Christmas event, and next up is a choir. Marie Benton, its founder, fundraiser and conductor, is a bit nervous, as not everyone has arrived. 'I just hope they'll all get here. Fingers crossed.' It's a tribute to Marie that they do, because it's a truly filthy night with torrential rain and The Choir with No Name largely consists of people who are homeless.

They're not pitch-perfect, but they bring the audience cheering to its feet. One soloist loses his nerve and doesn't come in on cue, so the keyboard player tries again. The audience is tangibly willing this guy to get there — which of course he does, with a voice that touches us all. By the end we're singing along, the choir is beaming and we feel the world's a better place.

Only a couple of years ago, Marie was working in communications at the homeless charity, St Mungo's, when her 'aha' moment came. As a saxophonist who also directs a gospel choir, she'd experienced the therapeutic power of music, so why, she asked herself, wasn't there a choir for homeless people? Perhaps she could start one up? To her surprise, her office colleagues pledged their help.

Around the same time, she changed jobs to a more hands-on role in a homeless hostel in Covent Garden. The opportunity to make a real impact on the lives of homeless people each day, whether getting them a doctor's appointment or making sure that they were receiving the right benefits, provided her with extra motivation. Here were real people with problems she could help them solve.

The idea of the choir didn't go away, but the stalling point was where to meet up. So Marie kept talking and eventually serendipity kicked in with the offer, from a creative arts company working with ex-offenders, of a disused church in King's Cross.

Have venue, get a date, start to publicise. Marie went round the homeless hostels she knew: 'If you can sing, great, if you can't, come anyway,' read the leaflets. An extra lure was added with the offer of a decent meal.

Marie's founding premise is that 'singing makes you feel good; it distracts you from all the nonsense in life and helps you to build up your confidence and abilities'. She also used a large dollop of charm on friends in the gospel choir to persuade some of them to help. On the first evening, two supportive friends from St Mungo's arrived to help Marie: so did four homeless people.

It was a curiously intimate evening, Marie recalls. I asked her what the first song they sung was: 'Bob Marley's "One Love", several times with energy!'

Five weeks after the choir's first meeting, a mutual friend introduced Marie to Annabel, a music graduate who was in the process of starting up the youth arm of The Funding Network and was on the hunt for good causes for the launch event.

The still-nameless choir got through the selection



Mike Dickson



INSPIRATIONAL
Marie Benton dreams of starting choirs in other British cities

Useful links:

YouTube:
www.youtube.com/choirwithnoname
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process, wowed more than 100 young people in its first audience, and raised more than £2,000 to pay for food, music and instruments.

Three weeks later, the choir (which had by then voted to call themselves 'The Choir With No Name') was discovered by Daniel Smith, who was visiting homeless charities in London for Channel 4's *The Secret Millionaire*. Within three months, Marie and the choir were on national television and an astonished Marie had received her first large donation of £5,000.

The Choir With No Name now has 35 regular members and Marie is their chief executive. They have sung on ITV's *This Morning* show, and put on several gigs. Negotiations with a major recording label ended in disappointment, but Marie is looking for backing to put an album out for Christmas. She has returned to St Mungo's as a locum project worker, and manages to combine the choir with shifts at a 40-bed homeless hostel in Bermondsey. Her immediate plans include raising money for her own salary so that she can expand the choir and pilot one in another city.

The bottom line is that singing works. Being part of a community that's mutually encouraging and supportive works. I've heard the choir and some have wonderful voices, but that's not the point. For many, the choir has become an emotional home base. Members talk genuinely of how it is like a family and how singing makes everyone feel good about themselves, gives them all more confidence, and is good fun. Proper opportunities to sing in public help change perceptions of homeless people and show the public just what they can do. Getting together on Monday nights for rehearsals and food gives a place and a space for informal support. And as confidence builds, people get their lives back together again.

'When I set it up, I dreamed of members and volunteers supporting each other through tough times, forming friendships and coming together to bond over the joys of rehearsal and performance,' says Marie. 'That happens all the time. Just ten minutes of rehearsal is proof enough of how singing really does improve our members' confidence and skills. We must somehow harness that stuff, and get it going in cities that have a problem with homelessness.'

I have to add that Marie is the key to all this: warm, funny, encouraging, rabble-rousing and, yes, definitely inspirational. She now has the bigger picture in her sights, with a dream of starting choirs in other cities in Britain.

She and a group of colleagues have been drawing up a plan for world domination; there is only the small problem of finding money for a salary so she can give up her day job and take on the choir full-time without being in danger of becoming homeless herself.

So if there is a 'secret music millionaire' out there who wants to support Marie, why not get in touch? The choir's next gig, to celebrate its second birthday, will be in June, date still to be fixed. ●