

The Starfish Way

A Gannochy Trust #CharityStory




The
Gannochy
Trust

As we look to build on the legacy of our founder A.K Bell - one of the great philanthropists of his time – The Gannochy Trust continues to invest in a wide range of local projects that not only address poverty and disadvantage, but also seek to improve health, wellbeing, and opportunity, especially for young people. Our latest #CharityStory highlights the important work of The Perth & Kinross Duke of Edinburgh's Award Association, who are helping disadvantaged young people through a range of initiatives, including the Starfish Way, an outdoor learning programme delivered at Megginch Castle Estate. The Association has received core and project grants from The Gannochy Trust since 1983.

Wendy Jackson, Perth & Kinross Duke of Edinburgh's Award Association, explains how the Starfish Way is changing lives: "We quickly recognised a need to offer a free skills development platform for vulnerable young people. These children and young adults often struggle at school, they may struggle with learning/behavioural challenges or have other support needs that include abuse, poverty or young caring roles. This is why we developed a programme of bespoke outdoor learning experiences that cater to their needs.

Our Starfish Way programme at Megginch Castle Estate is a great example of what we do. The "Starfish Way" is derived from a story by Loren Eiseley about a boy on a beach throwing stranded starfish back into the sea. When told that he wasn't going to make a difference to the tens of thousands of stranded starfish, he replied "It made a difference to that one." The concept is about changing the world one step at a time, and this is what we are striving to do.

Participants of the Starfish Way experience a range of outdoor activities, from working in the walled garden, to bushcraft, dry stone walling, green woodworking and many other activities. We also focus on positive mental health in the therapeutic surrounds of the estate woodland. Young people can relax in nature and quieten their minds with forest bathing, meditation, talking therapies, Reiki and much more. There is also a mediation labyrinth, utilising ancient sacred geometry to promote good mental health and healing."

Catherine Drummond Herdman, Megginch Castle Estate Owner and Active Participant in Megginch Activities said: "I see the Starfish Way like a glowing silver thread of hope for some children who find the world dark and difficult. When I describe the initiative to visitors, they are also touched by this silver thread; of hope that in this world you cannot help everyone nor change everything, but you can do something which will help someone. The practical side of delivering this initiative is only made possible by the committed team at Perth and Kinross Duke of Edinburgh's Award Association and their volunteers."

A Pupil Support Officer at Perth Grammar School said: "The team at Starfish Way had the group striving for progress, not perfection. The celebration of their achievements, however small, was an incredibly powerful tool to boost confidence and motivation for these pupils."

One of the key objectives of the course is to build trusted relationships with the young people. Many have suffered abuse, bullying, abandonment and associated mental health issues, so bridges must be built with close support and supervision. For example, the Association offer 1-2-1 'walk and talk' sessions where participants can have time away from the group and can talk openly about their issues should they choose to.

Wendy continues: "It is amazing to see the transformation in some of the young people once a feeling of safety is achieved and trust is built. Many thrive during the courses, because they can learn in a threat free, low stress environment, where they feel supported with no expectations placed upon them. Our success is primarily based on a high ratio of staff to young people, making sure each one receives the 1-2-1 care they need.

The programme not only provides a learning platform, it offers a safe place where participants can learn to trust and open up about some of the difficulties they face. What we do is as much about healing as it is learning.”

One of the parents said: “The people at Starfish Way have encouraged my daughter to do things out of her comfort zone and try things she would normally say that was too hard for her. She didn't want to go at first, but the staff there have made her feel so welcome. Now she really misses being there.”

The outdoor courses run over a full calendar year and are split into physical sections where participants take part in many different activities from archery, golf, climbing to horse riding, as well as skills sections where they go to different places such as Megginch and Dupplin Estate to learn a range of outdoor skills. Bespoke programmes for Perth & Kinross Councils Youth Services and other groups such as Perth Autism are also provided. Participants can achieve a range of awards and qualifications including the John Muir Environmental Award, Saltire Volunteer Award, National Navigation Bronze Award, First Aid certificate and Perth and Kinross Higher Achievement Standard. Many go on to achieve their Duke of Edinburgh’s Silver and Gold Awards, and work with the Association as peer mentors and group leaders, connecting with other local support organisations such as PKAVS Youngs Carers Group or the ASN Open Group.

Wendy said: “Many of our young people face the prospect of leaving school without any formal qualifications. We encourage them to think about their aspirations for the future and provide an opportunity for them to learn practical skills and gain a range of meaningful qualifications. We also work with local partners to find volunteering and work experience opportunities where possible.

As with many charities and support organisations, providing core services during the Covid-19 lockdowns presented a major challenge. The Perth & Kinross Duke of Edinburgh’s Award Association tackled this by setting up an innovative Distance Learning Hub on their website. The service offered blocks of 12 hours of activity, covering volunteering, physical activities, skills and expedition challenges.

Wendy said: “Lockdown was tough, but like many of our partners, we used an online platform to offer distance learning opportunities for our participants. We kept in touch via video conferencing, text and phone to offer the support needed, and were delighted to achieve 88% participation over lockdown. We’ll continue to use the platform to connect to people who may struggle to attend our programmes, or for supplementary learning opportunities.”

The team are incredibly proud of the opportunities they have given to many children and young adults across Perth and Kinross through their outdoor learning courses. Wendy concludes: “Some of the stories we hear are very hard to digest. The trauma that some of these young people have suffered is often unimaginable. We believe in the potential of every young person and try to help them realise this potential through close support and a more holistic way to learn. School can be a one-size-fits-all solution that doesn’t work for everyone. We try to offer a bespoke provision, individual to each person, in an environment where they feel valued and supported. There are no quick fixes, but we know through our achievements that this approach works, which is hugely gratifying for all the team.”

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