

Turning away from crime to help the community

A Community Payback team from Herts have been working at Digswell Nursery to learn horticulture, make items for sale, build a pagoda in the children's play area and carry out general grounds maintenance.

The partnership with the nursery started in 2013. Service users are referred to the project as part of the Herts IOM scheme in partnership with BeNCH and HACRO (The Hertfordshire Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders).

The project gives them the opportunity to develop themselves through learning new skills, working as a team, and instilling a work ethos with the ultimate aim of encouraging them to find full time employment and turn away from crime. They are also working towards a City and Guilds Award in horticulture and two of the group have recently found full time work in grounds maintenance.

Will is 20 years old and lives in Watford. He was released from prison after serving a sentence for assault. For the past 18 months he has spent three days a week on the project. As part of his license he had to commit to completing a number of months on the project, however when this ended he continued to attend, every day, because it kept him on the straight and narrow. Through the project he completed a City and Guilds certificate and went on to complete the City and Guilds Award in Horticulture. He also recently found full time employment in grounds maintenance.



Will said: "When I was in prison, they came to speak to me and offered me to join the project. I wanted to change. It was different at first but I got used to it. After my license ran out I wanted to stay on. I loved it that much.

"It kept me out of trouble as I was doing a days' work. It gives you something to do in your spare time. I was always early because I wanted to be there as it is brilliant. After the hard work, I've got a proper job looking after parks and cemeteries. It's a full time job for six months to begin with, but I'm hoping they will make me permanent."

Talking about the scheme he said: "I really like it, they were teaching me new things each day and as I was more and more trusted I was given more things to do, such as driving machinery. Recently at Digswell Nursery I finished my horticulture certificate. I would encourage others to do this. My mates are on it and I have encouraged them. I tell them 'if you want to keep going to jail it's your choice. It's time to grow and up and think about getting money.' I feel so proud that I now have a job. Wearing the uniform makes you feel official and waking up at 6.30am makes you feel like you have a purpose. It's about changing how you live."

Sarah Wilson, Manager of Digswell Nursery, said: "When I joined the nursery they were putting together a poly tunnel, which was an old area we used to plant and wasn't being used. It was too dark and not fit for purpose. So they covered the whole thing and made it a useable space so it could be used for something else. They now use it as their workshop and it's really good for them to have a proper base from which to create the garden furniture. They make children's sand tables, benches, tables and chairs and coffee tables. During the Christmas period they made outdoor ornaments, such as sleighs. They designed them themselves and people loved them.

"We support vulnerable adults here at the nursery. That's what we do. We are a charitable organisation, which helps those who may not have help elsewhere or who may not be given a chance elsewhere so it really fits in with what we do. It's nice because they can see and speak with the other people we work with. They are not scary offenders, they are people.

"We wanted to give something back. They do gardening and lawn mowing and maintenance. We are a City and Guilds registered centre now and for us it made sense for them to get the qualification so they have something to take away with them when they finish."