

FEEL GOOD FACTOR

People from around the Northwest are finding that green volunteering brings its own rewards.

Words Helen Clifton Photograph Karen Wright

Kevin Smith has a passion for plants – and as a project manager working with children with special needs, it is a gift he carefully nurtures in his pupils.

Christopher Brown and Alex Edwards, both pupils at Oaklands School in Cheshire, look on in wonder as Kevin, a trained horticulturalist, works with them in the school's unassuming wildflower nursery. He patiently explains that the pretty purple flower they are holding is actually wild onion.

As Kevin explains, learning to nurture and grow is an important life skill for Oaklands pupils.

"When you see a child planting something, and they are chuffed about it, you can see it in their face. They love it. It might be something small like a daisy, but they are proud of it.

"You can't beat that."

The garden is just one of a bewildering array of projects that makes the school a hotbed of environmental action. It all started over a decade ago, when Kevin first got involved with Mersey Basin Week at the nearby Weaver Parkway, the valley running between Winsford and Northwich.

The motivation and inspiration provided by the annual volunteering event – and the advice and support of local action coordinator Ann Bates – encouraged pupils to go on to bigger things. By completing their own applications and research, the students have secured thousands of pounds worth of funding.

Through their efforts, the Weaver Parkway now features stone seats, sculptures, pond dipping facilities with wheelchair access and microscopes that allow students to investigate plants. Other local schools have helped with the building of a bamboo den for Oaklands' latest exhibition at the RHS show in Tatton Park, their fourth year at the event. And three years ago adults with learning difficulties from local day centres took part in an arts and science week.

"It all stems from the likes of Ann. She came in and gave us the support when we needed it. The only thing we can give back is our work and our time. And it's paid off," says Kevin.

"She helped us with everything. She helped us with applications for small grants, she helped organise events. We got a £5,000 grant for the arts and science week.

"Without Ann we would have been stuck. She has helped the kids realise bigger goals. If you had come to this school 15 years ago, no one would have believed that we would be entering the RHS show.

"If anyone is interested in environmental work, Mersey Basin Week is a brilliant stepping stone to move on and take it more seriously. Our kids get as much out of environmental projects as they do from sitting in a classroom."

The school still gets involved in Mersey Basin Week every year. "I think Oaklands epitomises what Mersey Basin Week is about," says Ann. "It's about involving people of all ages and abilities in their local environment in as many different ways as possible."

Other Mersey Basin Week events have helped bring neglected areas of the region's city centres to life. Kin Chen, of the Manchester Oriental Organisation Association, wanted to get involved in the regeneration of Manchester's canal network, which runs past the city's vibrant China town.

So in 2007, Mersey Basin Week saw the first canalside walk for members of Manchester's Chinese community. Three years on, the two-hour walks for the over-sixties have become a popular monthly feature with up to 20 regular participants.

Mersey Basin Week has also been recognised by some groups as having a crucial part to play in tackling social problems.

"Given some of the issues on the estate, with anti-social behaviour, drugs and crime, we are always looking for ways to promote inclusion," explains Zul Hussain, who works at the Inland Revenue but volunteers with the Fishwick Rangers Youth Development Scheme in Preston.

Last year, he received a £100 grant from Mersey Basin Week to organise a clean up around a local recreation ground. The 15 local volunteers, aged from 12 to 21, dressed up as superheroes and cartoon characters, including Spiderman and Yogi Bear. And as Zul explains, participants took real pride in their costumes.

"People were being very picky. It took us about three and a half

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The Mersey Basin Campaign arranges for a guide to talk walkers through the history and wildlife of the waterways – and with Kin translating through a megaphone, it's a genuine cross-cultural exchange.

"The walk brings the residents together," says Kin. They take it as a health exercise, but they also treat it as a social gathering. Afterwards, they go for dim sum at one of the Chinese restaurants."

"We always encourage integration into mainstream society, so this is a very worthy exercise for us. We know more about the history of Manchester and the whole of the UK. Every time it is different, and it is very informative."

The spirit of volunteering fostered by

hours to get the outfits from the shop," he laughs.

Bolstered with enthusiasm after winning a Unilever Dragonfly Award for their project, Zul and his volunteers plan to design and build a sculpture as part of this year's Mersey Basin Week.

"It was fantastic. Perhaps some of the older people feel that younger people don't contribute anything positive, but it gave young people a chance to give something back to their community."

PHOTO: KEVIN SMITH AND OAKLANDS PUPILS AT WORK IN THE GARDEN.



Mersey Basin Week began as a two-day event around 15 years ago as a way to get people involved in practical activities around the waterways of the Mersey and the Ribble.

Since then it has grown massively, and last year 5,000 people took part in almost 300 events over ten days. Events take place across Merseyside, Lancashire, Greater Manchester and Cheshire.

The Week makes hundreds of small grants of under £100 to get local people involved in a range of events from cleanups to guided walks, and wildlife surveys to arts and crafts projects. It is sponsored by Viridor Laing.

This year's event takes place from Friday 2 to Sunday 11 October.

To get involved contact Bev Mitchell on 0161 242 8212 or email b.mitchell@merseybasin.org.uk