

**‘I want Leyton Orient Football Club to win the
UEFA Champions League’**

Bob, 37

David Robinson

INTRODUCTION

'Here is Edward Bear coming down the stairs now, bump bump bump on the back of his head. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming down the stairs but sometimes he feels there really is another way if only he could stop bumping for a moment and think of it.'

(Winnie-the-Pooh, A.A. Milne, 1926)

We marked our 21st anniversary at Community Links with an invitation to a selection of friends. An invitation for them to stop bumping for a moment, to step back from the daily routine and to consider their vision for our community. Everyone interpreted the brief in their own way. To some, 'community' meant Canning Town; to others, it meant the world. Each piece in this book stands alone as an independent perspective. Some contributors work for big organisations but they have all, myself included, written in a personal capacity.

The responses to our invitation have reminded me that Community Links' friends are a varied bunch – they don't agree about everything. But they are also constructive and visionary, just as our founding Trustees were 21 years ago. At that time we had more beliefs than belongings. When we moved into our first permanent home – a tiny lock-up shop in East Ham – we had a Calor gas-fire, enough rent for six weeks and a clear mission: 'We all,' I wrote at the time, 'need help at some time in our lives, we all have something to contribute. Community Links will work on developing practical new ways of tackling our local problems and will involve the whole community in the process.'

The gas-fires were scrapped years ago and we have moved headquarters three times, but the same principles still underpin all that we do. Last year more than 25,000 people benefited from Community Links projects, run by more than 450 volunteers in 60 key sites. Crucially, 80 per cent of our frontline services were delivered by people who had first become involved as users of

those services. Our mission statement spells out the approach:

'To generate change. To tackle causes not symptoms, find solutions not palliatives. To recognise that we all need to give, as well as to receive and to appreciate that those who experience a problem understand it best. To act local but think global, to teach but never stop learning. To distinguish between the diversity that enriches our society and the inequalities that diminish it. To grow – but all to build a network not an empire. To be driven by dreams, judged on delivery. To never do things for people but to guide and support, to train and enable, to simply inspire.'

We no longer believe, as perhaps we once did, that Community Links will change the world. But over the last 21 years, hundreds and hundreds of individual worlds have been shaped and, day in day out, are being shaped, if not by us then with us. First, we offer support in times of crisis; then the opportunity to participate – in playgroups, supplementary education, training courses, counselling groups, advice services, and so on – and to discover, alongside others, the power within. One of the first 12-year-olds to drop into our little East Ham shop all those years ago is now a full-time worker on our detached youth-work team; and one of the early graduates from our Education programme has grown up to manage our Holiday programme – the biggest of its kind in the country. No flashes and bangs but steady support, determined belief, growth, fulfilment.

Beyond these personal achievements, we recognise the scale of the challenge: one in four households here in Newham lives on or below the official poverty line. Across the UK, 14 million people manage on an annual income that is less than half the national average, and beyond these shores one in five live and die in poverty.

Some can read these figures and say, 'I can't possibly make a difference to that.' But when we listen to some of the 4,000 people who use our Canning Town centre every week, we believe: 'We *did*



make a difference for Mustapha, we *did* make a difference for Janice...’

At the start of the new Millennium, it is time for us to reflect on our place in the world and our moment in history. We are of the generation that has wired the world. We *can* make a difference – individually and collectively. We have the technology and the wealth to include the excluded, here and across the globe. Have we the will?

This is no book of dreams. If some contributors build castles in the air, their foundations are in Canning Town. As Community Links comes of age we offer this compilation to celebrate, to share ideas we believe in and, above all, to *simply inspire*.

David Robinson is the director of Community Links

