

A Multicultural Celebration

How an event celebrating diversity managed to raise the self-esteem of asylum-seeking young people in an area experiencing hostility and racism towards immigrants.

The Harambee Centre in Cambridge supported young asylum-seekers in organising and hosting an event to learn, share and celebrate with the local host community.

What did they want to achieve?

Immigration is a big issue in Cambridgeshire. The demography of the area is changing rapidly which has led to a backlash against emerging new communities and asylum-seekers. Fuelled by the local press, many local young people's opinions towards immigration and asylum are misinformed, prejudiced and hostile.

A group of young asylum-seekers from Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran, who had been in contact with staff from the Harambee Centre, decided to make a positive contribution and organise an event to bring different groups in the area together. They wanted to do, "what normal kids do", including making friends and showing off their skills. They also wanted to display some elements of their cultural backgrounds to the community of Cambridge and thank them for welcoming them to the area.

With the celebration event as the focus, the aims of the project were:

- for young people and residents of Cambridge to gain an understanding of different cultures
- for the group to explore the issues of trade and sustainable development through their preparation activities
- for the group to develop skills in organising events and communications
- to contribute to greater community cohesion in Cambridge
- to have fun.

How did they set about doing this?

A member of Harambee's staff had already worked with this group when delivering a 'positive activities' programme for Cambridgeshire Race Equality and Diversity Service (CREDS). When they were given the opportunity to develop their own project they were very enthusiastic to plan an event together and invite local residents.

The young people allocated roles and met weekly to plan the event. There was a team for publicity, a team for food, a team for music and entertainment, and one person took the role of logistics manager. Harambee planned some practical sessions for young people to practise their cooking, learn new techniques and do some trial runs; and there were art sessions for the group to design invitations and a poster. They were particularly keen to invite other young people, but with so little chance to meet them that was left to the youth worker and Harambee.

Shopping for food for the event was combined with explorations into fair trade, food miles, sustainability, and what implications people's choices had for them and the world. On the day of the event some of the young people took over the kitchen, while others decorated the hall and created a huge banner with the word 'welcome' in many different languages. It was also decided that the guests should get a name badge with their name written in Arabic – then the young organisers would be the only ones able to read the names and introduce people.

Twenty guests came, all the food went down extremely well, English, Arabic and Kurdish music was played, and once people started dancing they didn't stop! The Kurdish boys taught everyone Kurdish dancing and were pleased to show off a skill which no-one else had.

How well did they achieve their aims?

The young people involved demonstrated a huge increase in their levels of confidence throughout the project. At first it was very difficult to get a group dialogue and some individuals would not participate at all, but as the project progressed the young people interacted with each other more and more, especially in small teams. The group recognised that they had many skills which other people do not have: they could cook tasty dishes that others hadn't tried before, write a language that others could not read, and knew music and dances that others wanted to learn. They were also able to make the links between their lives and some of the global issues that they cared about. The learning curve was quite steep and the young people were extremely proud of what they had achieved.

The guests were exposed to elements of a number of different cultures for the first time. The event brought young people from across Cambridge together, built positive relations between them and gave them the opportunity to learn from each other. Everybody definitely had fun.

What do they plan to do next?

To build on the positive relationships established with the group during this project, Harambee have set up a regular youth club with the young people and will be doing more in-depth global youth work with them. Three of the young men are joining DEA's youth network that supports their national 'Global Youth Action' project. As well as providing opportunities for young asylum seekers to get involved in further learning and community action this will have the added bonus of allowing them to interact more with other young people, as the club is open to all and is a forum for young people from diverse backgrounds to meet.

Harambee has made good links with CREDS and the experience of this project has contributed to a wider council strategy for positive engagement of asylum seeking youth.

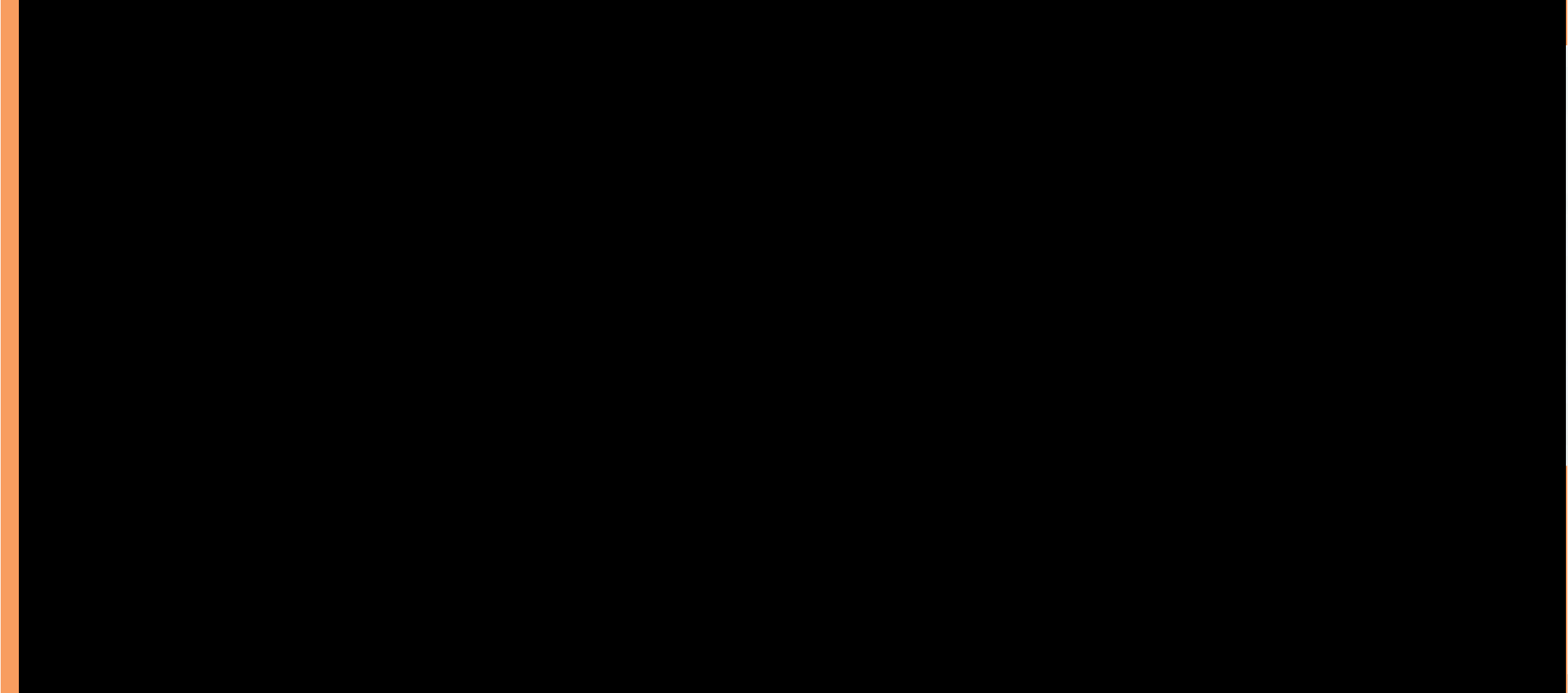
“ Before I came here I couldn't even boil an egg and now I have prepared food for forty people. ”

“ I feel I have been welcomed by the local community - I want to do something to say 'thank you' to Cambridge! ”

Reflections:

- This project demonstrates the importance and potential of engaging marginalised groups of young people, for their personal and social development and for their global learning, but also as educators and change makers.
- Global youth work contributes to young people's achievement of all Every Child Matters outcomes, particularly 'making a positive contribution' and 'enjoying and achieving'. This case study highlights the importance of the 'enjoy' aspect of the outcome which is often overlooked.
- This project's approach contributes to the local and national agendas of integration and community cohesion, helping young people to develop an understanding of the wider context to these issues and to deal with the changing local environment and cultural landscape.

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More information:

- Harambee Centre website: www.harambeecentre.org.uk.

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