

A World of Difference



Mark with one of the kites he made for European Day against Racism.

For Mark Smith, July 2011 marked the end of a year with a difference. Mark swapped his high-flying career of 15 years as a fashion show producer, which saw him work in Milan and Paris, for life as an Arts Co-ordinator with RehabCare in Navan, Co. Meath.

WITH HIS WORK keeping him out of the country for eight months of the year, Mark decided to use his time off to get involved with the local community on one-off projects. A number of years ago he signed up with the Meath Volunteers and his first call came from RehabCare, which needed help with a mural. Over time, Mark put his artistic talents to good use and despite never having worked with people with disabilities before, he immediately embraced the experience.

During quiet periods of work, Mark, from Kells in Co. Meath, continued

his involvement as a community arts tutor with various community groups in his local area. He applied for the Vodafone World of Difference programme, which offers people the life-changing opportunity to work with their chosen charity for 12 months. With RehabCare, Mark went through various stages of written applications, phone and in-person interviews and presentations, and a large public vote. Mark successfully secured both a salary for one year, as well as expenses for the projects he would carry out during that period.

Mark's aim for this year-long role was to run projects that created a bigger picture of RehabCare for the

public to see. "We used as many different art forms as possible, which meant we could interact with a wide variety of people in the local community. Over the year, we worked with 45 local community groups such as sports clubs, youth groups, active retirement associations, culture groups, etc. That wouldn't have been possible without the Vodafone World of Difference. We created a network of people who all used art to deliver a message. At the start we had to knock on a lot of doors but now people come looking for us to do projects!"

Mark co-ordinated over ten different projects for people who use

RehabCare's service in Navan over the course of the year. Here he explains some of them. "For 1 Day for Rehab, we made a big image (30ft x 10ft) using 1 cent, 2 cent and 5 cent coins in the local shopping centre, which spelt out 1 Day for Rehab. We got coin donations from family, friends, local shops and even the banks. We then asked the public to change the colour of the image from brown to silver so as someone donated a silver €1 or €2 coin we swapped it for a bronze coin in the image. Slowly the colour of the image changed as we raised more money. The public loved seeing the colour of the image gradually change with their donations.

"For the European Day against Racism in March, we came up with the concept of kites as almost every child has used a kite, even if it's only a plastic bag and string! We got other local groups involved and made 20 kites ranging in size from 2ft to 7ft in different shapes such as peacocks, bumble bees and dragonflies. We flew them on the Hill of Tara where in ancient times the High Kings would have welcomed people to Ireland. There was fantastic colour and we got a brilliant response with national media coverage. The Vodafone World of Difference organisers were so impressed that they used one of the photographs of our kite-flying as the main image of the competition.

"One of the final projects I worked on was for the summer solstice on 21 June. Meath is home to Newgrange, a Neolithic site which is best known for the illumination of its passage and chamber by the winter solstice sun. We made five different stained glass light boxes to showcase the different aspects of the nature of Co. Meath such as the meadows, hedgerows, the fruit of the land, the river's edge and walkways. Each 2.5ft square light box was placed in a different shop-front around Navan town. We created a trail around the town as each light was on a timer so when one light would switch off, the next light would go on. The trail led to the Solstice Arts Centre in the town."

So how was the year for Mark?
 "Before this, I only had experience of the fashion industry. This opened up a whole new world for me. I go into RehabCare in the mornings with a smile and I come back out with an even bigger smile at the end of the day. I can see that the projects have helped to make a difference – I think people in the area know more about what RehabCare does now. It was so rewarding to see the personal development of the people who got involved. At the beginning of the year some of them would use a lot of dark colours in their work. Now there are bright colours and vibrancy in their pictures, and they sketch



Changing the Coin Colour – 1 Day for Rehab.

with a lightness of touch.

"I had no idea what a fantastic journey I would take when I won the competition. Through each project, both the people I have worked with and I have all learned something. For me, one of the best things was experiencing true community spirit for the first time."

Mark's year with RehabCare is now finished but a relationship has been built that will continue for a long time. He continues to work on small projects with the centre in Navan, the current one being a mural. He is also involved in community arts projects with other local groups. Mark now has the perfect mix of freelance fashion work and community work and he is enjoying the balance that brings to his life. Mark was shortlisted for a worldwide Vodafone Award, the Grahame Maher award. Despite topping the poll in the Irish section of Facebook voting, Mark was unsuccessful in the final stages.

Overall, the projects that Mark has run in RehabCare in Navan have been a great success and it's thanks to the Vodafone World of Difference competition that the dream could become a reality. As Mark says, "The World of Difference is an apt title for the competition because it really is about the difference that you can make to a person, a service and a community." ■



People who attend RehabCare in Navan working on the Kite project.