



Sheffield Actionnaires

Stuart Woodhead

Background

After being blind for eleven and a half years, Stuart Woodhead was lucky enough to have his sight restored in one eye after a major operation, and is now club co-ordinator of Sheffield Actionnaires. The club is one of twenty-nine Actionnaires clubs nationwide and is part of Action for Blind People. The objectives of the club are to aid the development of each child's self confidence, social interaction and a range of physical skills, through regular participation in a variety of sports. Stuart says: **'Kids are so full of enthusiasm and energy. They need to be encouraged and given ways of using their energy, not restricted and told they can't do things because of their vision levels.'**

Responding to a need

During the time Stuart himself was blind, one of the things he found most frustrating was for people to lower their expectations or tell him that he couldn't do something because of his blindness. His response was to do everything in his power to prove them wrong.

Whilst blind, Stuart took up photography (a course he passed with distinction), ran marathons, played snooker and darts. However he was often given no encouragement and even discouraged from trying these things because he was blind. As a result he is very eager to encourage and support the Actionnaires members. He says: **'No-one can say "you can't do that" except yourself- only you know your limitations.'**

Stuart observes that children today, especially those with a disability are often over protected despite intentions for their safety, so don't get the chance to try new exciting things or learn from their mistakes. Sheffield Actionnaires lets children try adventurous activities such as climbing, karate, rafting and salsa dancing with fully qualified trainers who adapt their knowledge to the children's needs. There are always volunteers around to ensure the children are in safe hands.



PROFILE IN BRIEF

Sheffield Actionnaires

Services offered:

- A free of charge, multi-sports club providing visually impaired children and young adults opportunities to participate or compete in a range of sports

Who do you work with?

- Blind or visually impaired children aged around 8-16 in the Sheffield area, their siblings and friends

Contact details:

- Club coordinators
Stuart **07515 188045**
and
Faye **07912 999246**
Email:
phil.wagstaff@actionforblindpeople.org.uk
(Sports development officer –
North West region)

Stuart's motivation for running Sheffield Actionnaires is to help remove unnecessary barriers that are put around these children so they can gain independence and learn life lessons, whilst having fun and building friendships with other children in similar situations. Sheffield Actionnaires has at times been a victim of its own success – some members who have tried a new sport through Actionnaires have loved it so much, they've left to join a sports club which ran at the same time as Actionnaires. Stuart says: **'the point is to get children active, however, so if Sheffield Actionnaires opens other doors for them, it has served its purpose.'**



Volunteering

Stuart joined Sheffield Actionnaires as a volunteer before being asked to be Coordinator, and loves it so much that he has not missed a Sunday since he first volunteered.

'The buzzing feeling you get when the kids achieve something they wouldn't have done elsewhere, or thought they couldn't achieve, makes you feel so good.'

Stuart's desire to help the children at Sheffield Actionnaires recently extended to him embarking on a 220 mile sponsored cycle ride to raise money for a club member.

Emma developed a brain tumour through which she lost her sight when she nine. At thirteen she suffered a stroke and needed a motorised wheelchair, so up stepped Stuart.

It was a longer, harder and more emotional journey than he had anticipated - he even found himself in hospital briefly after being knocked off his bike, but soldiered on! He raised around £12,000 and although sadly Emma passed away before she could be presented with her wheelchair, she was there to see him cross the finish line.

During his experience of blindness, Stuart realised that many people are worried about offending disabled people by saying 'the wrong thing' or drawing attention to their disability. As a result, some avoid saying what they really think, or engaging with disabled people at all. Stuart doesn't want this to hold anyone back from volunteering with them, they are unlikely to be offended and would benefit greatly from the investment of more volunteers.

Looking Ahead

Just talking to Stuart, anyone can tell that he is hugely passionate about Sheffield Actionnaires and how much members benefit. He wants the club to become even more accessible to Sheffield's blind and partially sighted children and is confident that once they see how much their children love Sheffield Actionnaires, parents will bring them back every week!