

Waldorf Experience

Loneliness is one of the biggest challenges facing our society. It affects people of all ages and social backgrounds but is becoming an acute problem for the elderly as we live longer and often find ourselves living alone. Public sector services are under pressure and traditional family support is tending to be less common. However loneliness is unlike many debilitating challenges we face in life. The solution does not require major research into finding new drugs neither does it need changes in legislation or indeed for significant funds to be spent. Essentially this crippling pattern in our lives is shouting out for each of us to reach out to others and offer the hand of friendship.



Big problems are often best addressed by many people making small but meaningful contributions rather than championed by grand gestures. The trustees have discussed what the Foundation could do to contribute to relieving, at least for some people, the loneliness they endure. We came up with the idea of the "*Waldorf Experience*" which is a programme of special events for the elderly held in partnership with local schools.

It is important that these events focus on treating and entertaining our guests to the highest standards.

Waldorf is about making the elderly feel special creating an opportunity to make new friends, perhaps to rekindle memories of wonderful times in their lives but most of all to take away that feeling of isolation if only for a short time. Our guests are special and the challenge is to make that real for them. The structure of *Waldorf* embraces the vital element of bringing the older and younger generations together so both can benefit from the contact. The initial *Waldorf Experience* events are essentially an afternoon high class tea, reminiscent of the offerings found in our top quality London hotels, complemented by song and music. *Waldorf* is free to all our guests with all transport provided.

We had two primary aims in launching the *Waldorf Experience* namely to help tackle the invidious challenge of loneliness and to bring the older and younger generations together to build understanding and involvement. We knew the best way to achieve our aims was to work in partnership with

enlightened schools with great leadership. We approached two like-minded and forward looking schools namely St John's Academy, Marlborough and Windermere School, Cumbria to partner with the Foundation on four pilot events. The response from the schools was beyond our expectations. The students, catering teams, music teachers and senior staff from both schools were enthusiastic, imaginative and committed. It has been a great joy to work with such wonderful people. Ann, one of our trustees, co-ordinated and managed the events at St Johns and Jo, our chairman, did a similar role at Windermere where she is Deputy Head.



We set out in detail the Foundation's aims and how the events should be structured and function. The two schools were asked to interpret the *Waldorf* brief and leave their personal imprint on the afternoon events. This worked perfectly. The catering teams developed wonderful menus and the music groups came up with imaginative and varied programmes. Standards set for the food, entertainment and service were at the highest level. The Foundation is meeting all the costs of the programme but so much has been given freely by the people at the schools.

Ann and Jo are penning a separate blog telling us about the four pilots. At this stage I can say they have been a huge success. The feedback from guests, students and all the staff involved has been wonderful and on occasions quite moving. We have been told by one lady that it has restored in her mother the confidence to go out, mix with people and that she now knows she can enjoy herself. Everybody involved from the schools and the Foundation has reaped many benefits from a job well done and the pride of being part of an important initiative. Although it is early days, the reality of the events has more than delivered our aims and objectives.



Where do we go next? Often initiatives such as this once launched tend to develop and gain momentum influenced by all the people directly involved. It is important to be flexible and foster what works. We are repeating the afternoon teas with song and music at both schools in the autumn. In addition we are scheduling at both schools in early 2017 "Concerts with

Canapes" which will embrace a varied musical programme complemented with food and wine. It is hoped that the Waldorf will become part of the school calendar at both Windermere School and St Johns Academy. A school from Bristol has approached us asking to be involved and we are all working together to put on an event later this year.

The trustees are excited and pleased by the Waldorf Experience and hopeful that the programme will grow and flourish.