

# **MOVING ON**

**SWOP's contribution to the  
Horticultural Therapy Conference:  
'GARDENING, MENTAL HEALTH &  
COMMUNITY CARE'**

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**Reading University**

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(given by Jessica Davies, Nursery Manager,  
Cherry Tree Nursery)

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I'd like to start by thanking Val for her most sympathetic introduction to SWOP in 'Growth Point' and to say that as Joy has covered so well the many varied destinations volunteers can go to on leaving a horticultural project such as ours, I would like to emphasise the other aspects of moving on, in terms of personal development and quality of life, which do not necessarily have to mean leaving the project.

Cherry Tree Nursery is currently the only project of SWOP, the Sheltered Work Opportunities Project, which fortunately for us is a registered charity. We are a wholesale shrub nursery now operating on nearly five acres of land with fifty-four volunteers on our books. Our income from Plant sales last year was well over £50,000. All the work in producing and selling these plants was done by volunteers who thus have a tremendous sense of pride and achievement to be part of a thriving and respected nursery. Because it is so large, it enables volunteers to stay as long as they want.

Two of our main criteria for success, as well as gaining horticultural and employment skills are: volunteers learning to laugh, especially at themselves, and learning to care for and look after each other.

When SWOP the charity was first set up it was written into the constitution that there should be no time limit to volunteers' stay at Cherry Tree Nursery. (Perhaps I should mention here that our workers were originally called 'clients' but at their request they are now called 'volunteers'). We have found that what volunteers most value is that there is no pressure, so that they can grow and recover in their own time and at their own speed.

This slide shows where our volunteers have come from, probably very similar referrals to many of yours, although we would like to increase the proportion coming from the community.

If I could now show you a slide showing what has happened to the first 100 volunteers referred to SWOP – you will see that only half of them have left the project for other destinations, the other half are still on our books, through not necessarily attending regularly. But our point is that this does not mean that half our volunteers have not moved on – in fact most of them have done so considerably in terms of everything from accommodation to social networks and interests.

Perhaps I could illustrate with an example of one volunteer, a man in his forties who I will call David. He has been in and out of hospital for over 20 years since he became ill while studying to become a chartered accountant. He never took his final exams and has been unable to hold down a job since. When he first started at SWOP he was introverted, isolated and lonely, lacking in purpose and direction. He was living in the YMCA. David now lives in his own flat, goes on holiday, has lots of friends with whom he goes to the theatre, to concerts and to social gatherings. His social skills and confidence have improved tremendously. One day a week he helps to cook meals for the

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elderly, he attends an evening class we helped him arrange at a local college, and he plays a vital role in helping with SWOP's bookkeeping, using the skills he learned all those years ago. He has done several radio interviews about SWOP along with other volunteers, many of whom have represented us to the media and attended meetings on our behalf. One of the things that used to worry David and many of his fellow-workers most was having nothing to talk about; now he has hundreds of conversational topics – for example recently SWOP built a Show Garden at a local Flower Show and won a Gold Award – and other recent event was when our local MP arranged a guided tour of the House of Commons for volunteers, for many of whom it was their first visit to London.

However, David like many of the others does not feel able to cope with the pressures and speed of work required by outside employment. At SWOP he can have a bad day and do very little and he knows he can get help if he has a problem, and he knows he has friends, stimulation and variety with no pressure to move on somewhere else unless he chooses to do so.

So how do we achieve this moving on within the project? We offer a variety of formal support such as literacy and numeracy training, and nearly half our volunteers have undertaken college courses, mainly at local horticultural colleges. 22% have gone on placements at our nurseries, with landscapers, at the local Parks Department etc. We also offer a wide variety of informal support and help in all the many varied problems of life, described by one volunteer as 'a complete care package'. One of the most valuable is our weekly Benefits Advice Clinic – we now employ a specialist Disability Rights Adviser.

Perhaps most important of all is that we provide a supportive family environment. We actively encourage laughter and music. Volunteers go on outings and have parties, sell plants at Shows and talk to members of the public visiting the Nursery. They are strongly encouraged to develop a normal social life – to meet for coffee and a chat, to have video evenings. As their lives become more interesting, they feel they are more interesting as people.

Volunteers feel that they are participating in the community; they are doing something worthwhile, and believe that they have progressed. They feel needed and cared for; that they can make a useful contribution and that they have a sense of purpose, direction and belonging. This restores their self-esteem and confidence and gives them a role in the world.

As the volunteers become more independent and self-reliant, as they move on in terms of their personal happiness and self-respect, it is important that the project moves on too, to continue to provide new challenges while maintaining a stable and secure environment.

At SWOP we have recently doubled in size in order to increase the number of volunteers we can accommodate. We have never yet had a waiting list. While many leave or stop attending for a while, their places remain open if they need

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to return. In the future we hope – if fundraising permits – to employ another nursery-worker (we have already employed three) to go out and take on contract work in the community. So, while sheltered work obviously works better for some than others, we hope and believe that all our volunteers have moved on in one way or another.

When SWOP first started five years ago we had four volunteers. Of these, one decided after three years that he didn't want to work and now attends Day Centres. The other three are still with us. They are all in their fifties and have actively expressed the wish to stay on until they retire. SWOP provides them with security, stability, companionship and self-respect, and we fully support their right to stay.

I, myself, have worked in many government training and employment schemes for the long-term unemployed and have seen the damage done by imposing a strict time limit. Some, especially the younger ones, outgrow their need for such a project and are actively helped to move elsewhere, but all those involved with SWOP feel, especially in view of current pressure imposed by certain statutory authorities to 'move people on' that the term 'moving on' needs to be re-defined in terms of quality of life, personal happiness and human dignity.

For many volunteers, full-time employment with its attendant pressures and demands for consistency of performance and speed of work, may not, in the current state of the country, be a viable option. This does not remove their need to give something back, to participate and contribute, but this basic human need can be filled in many ways while maintaining the help and support many volunteers need so badly. One way to do this is to work without pressure in a supportive environment and, if this is a person's choice, we have to develop strategies to circumvent government pressures in order to maintain our volunteers' mental health, happiness and dignity.

If I could make a final plea, although this looks very unlikely under the present government policies, it is to bring back the Community Programme as a voluntary scheme open to all the unemployed. This provides Job Creation Schemes designed to help the community where people have the dignity of a wage while doing worthwhile but unpressured work. These schemes, without a time limit, with special projects geared to those with special needs, are also the best hope of finding the large numbers of mentally ill who have fallen through the net and who are currently hidden, purposeless and alone in bedsits or cardboard boxes desperately waiting to be offered the chance to move on.