

Changing lives: traineeship helps Darren give back to his local park

18/07/2018



Darren Russell secured his dream job working in his local parks thanks to a National Lottery-funded traineeship with London Wildlife Trust. He tells us how Lottery funding changed his life.

Stuck in a rut

I had been working for about seven years as facilities supervisor at a local public hall. When I wasn't working, I would either be sat indoors watching TV or down the local rugby club, having a beer and watching the footie.

The main reason I liked the rugby club is not that I like rugby, but that it is in my favourite park, Hoblingwell Recreation Ground. Hoblingwell has been a home to me and my friends since we were kids. During the school holidays, we would spend hours playing football and messing around in the woods.

From new volunteer to unsung hero

When a public meeting was held to discuss the redevelopment of Hoblingwell, I spoke to council staff about the lack of activities in the park. One of the staff, Caroll Long, invited me to be part of a new Friends group.

I started volunteering with the group and set up their social media accounts. I then started to organise small events, such as Easter egg and Halloween hunts. We had started to become a familiar face in the community and I was thrilled to be awarded an Unsung Hero award by the council.

A new opportunity

Then in 2012, I lost my job. I was worried about what I was going to do and how I was going to support my family.

By this time, I was volunteering with Bromley Friends Forum and had been named Volunteer of the Year. I hoped to pursue event management, but the training course cost over £3,000.

Then an email arrived from London Wildlife Trust about a new opportunity – the Wild Talent traineeship funded by the National Lottery. It was a course aimed at those without a degree qualification, from a minority background or from a deprived area. It would be a full-time work-based course and you could gain new qualifications.

I sent off my application and was chosen for a three-day interview at Hutchinson's Bank nature reserve in Addington.

The interview process

I have to admit that I didn't sleep much that night before. It was the strangest interview setting ever, and probably the best. I was asked about my volunteering work and what I would like to do in the future, answering that I would like to train people in conservation.

It took about four weeks to find out if I had been picked. All that time I was convinced that I hadn't got it, but finally I got the call telling me that I had been accepted to the final six!

Getting stuck in

The first week we visited as many sites as we could, from woodlands and rivers to meadow areas and heathlands, so that we could get an understanding of the Wildlife Trust's work.

The next few months passed really quickly. We learnt new skills such as how to do a site check and use brush cutters. We had a week's residential at the scout camp, which was hard as I was not used to sleeping in a tent.

After Christmas, we started our chainsaw training. When I first started it up the power of the tool took my breath away. The instructor said that it was a good fear to have as it means you're aware of the danger. On 23 February, my birthday, I had my chainsaw assessment and I passed.

Back to where it all started

During March, I went out on a work placement, which I had managed to arrange with Caroll, who had originally got me involved in the Hoblingwell Friends' Group. I was really proud to become a staff member at Bromley Council Parks Department for a month. Most of them knew me from my work with Hoblingwell.

During my placement, I looked after a Friends group, designed pamphlets and maps, worked with autistic adults and helped to teach young people.

It felt like I was finally getting some respect from the guys. One of the rangers that I had got to know over the years told me that I had gone from an annoying volunteer moaning about the council, to a worker who knew the ins and outs of council business.

Next steps

As the course drew to a close, everyone was trying to get work, but I knew where I wanted to go. On the last week of my course, Caroll left the Council. At her leaving party, Caroll's former boss invited me to come for an interview the next day. We spoke of my volunteering work and what I had learnt from London Wildlife Trust. Whilst walking home I received the call that I had got the job and could start the following week.

So five days after finishing my course I started my job as a Community Team Leader. My first task was leading a group of unemployed people to work for four days a week.

Where I am today

Today I am a Conservation and Community Team Leader working in the countryside areas of Bromley and managing two urban parks.

I have learnt so much in the last seven years, but the knowledge that I have gained from working and learning with the London Wildlife Trust has really made me more confident.

But the people who I've really got to thank are those guys that go out and buy the Lottery tickets. You have changed, not just mine, but other people's lives who've done the course and are now working in the conservation sector. So to all those guys who bought a Lottery ticket, thank you very much, because you are helping to change people's lives for the good.

You might also be interested in...

Changing lives: Keeley goes from finance to forests

Changing lives: traineeship guides Danielle out of a dead end

Changing lives: Jack helps the community garden grow