

Find Your Voice

Finding High Spirits By Hitting High Notes

Ray, A Note To Follow So...

Melodies, Movement, and Mood-Boosting

Emma Baines first became interested in singing as a way to address her mental health in her early 30s. She had moved to London in 2011 to work as a theatre manager in the West End, but a sudden redundancy left her feeling socially isolated. “I was healthy in every other way,” she remembers. “But I found that being socially isolated was somehow a social taboo.”

Emma comes from a family of singers. So one day, before her time at work ended, she sat down and made some fliers advertising a singing group and handed them out to people on her lunch break. The following Monday, ten people turned up at 5pm to sing, paying £10 each. “That’s how it started,” she says. “I began to think if this was making me feel better, it might also be making other people feel better. That was the start of this being a social impact business.”

Eight years later, Find Your Voice is a thriving social enterprise with a focus on giving vulnerable people the opportunity to learn a skill, no matter what their stage in life. Find Your Voice programmes enable adults to learn singing in multi-sensory sessions. “They’re noisy, messy chaotic and user-led,” Emma says. “From session one we ask the group to lead us in what material they want to hear and sing.”

After her early success with singing classes, Find Your Voice was commissioned to provide sessions to a cross-section of communities in London, from adults in later life to parents, guardians and children. She had developed an interest in the scalability and replication of organisations during her time as a stage school principal in a franchised stage school. But she quickly realised she would need support to build a new social enterprise. In 2016, the School For Social Entrepreneurs helped her grow the business through a “scale-up” program. It was through this programme she discovered the Transform Ageing programme, a first-of-its-kind initiative to change the way society approaches and designs services for people in later life.

Transform Ageing offers both new social entrepreneurs and established social ventures funding and tailored support to deliver lasting social impact in the South West. Find Your Voice does not work exclusively with elderly people. But Tim Lages, venture and award manager for the Transform Ageing programme, encouraged Emma to apply, believing that her early success in London gave Find Your Voice the potential to make a big impact with elderly people in the South West. In 2018, Find Your Voice was awarded £50,000 by Transform Ageing. The organisation is now working with Learn Devon, to deliver programmes to adults living with disability in the county.

“We designed a programme of learning that is singing and learning combined, so no one is a beneficiary, everyone is a learner,” Emma says. “So often, we’re told that

people with a disability are unable to learn, when the impact of someone engaging in adult learning is immense. It improves the health and well being of each participant.”

Emma says that interventions in social care often focus on medical or financial benefits, rather than the impact of a creative intervention like singing and movement. Find Your Voice has conducted independent research in care homes that revealed many have a multitude of options for someone singing at them, but fewer opportunities for the residents to participate through singing and motion. “As someone who loves to sing, the thought of someone not having the opportunity to do that keeps me up at night,” she says.

Find Your Voice is borne out of the desire to give people the opportunity to learn something to a high standard – and not just the same old war era songs that so often the only option for adults in later life. “One thing we notice is that war-era songs are used so often for adults in later life,” Emma says. “But some adults want to hear glam rock! It’s not about prescribing the music and songs, but about letting them take the lead.”

The early results of this work is promising. Each year Find Your Voice reaches over 1,500 vulnerable adult learners of which 85 per cent are over 65 and living with disability. Emma says the process of working with Transform Ageing has enabled her to focus the organisation's work to reach in to communities where there is a greater need for creative and cultural engagement.

“It’s helped them scale,” Tim says. “They have a brilliant delivery model, employ great people and work in a really creative and fun way, but the thing I find myself thinking about when I discuss it with other people is their approach to collecting data and research on their impact.”

Find Your Voice has also developed service level agreement to help them provide their programme in a suitable environment, with clean and tidy rooms. “It’s a strange thing for a small company to lose work but to be comfortable with that,” Tim says. “But ultimately they knew if an organisation challenged the service level agreement then Find Your Voice might not be able to work with them in a positive way.”

Emma says training with Transform Ageing has helped her develop the kind of leadership skills to make these tough decisions and to take the business forward. “They are really good at challenging my ideas, which I love,” she says. “I take a questioning approach to problems, so I respond well to tough questions.”

Since working with Transform Ageing, Emma has expanded the team, including employing a programme manager to help redevelop the programme. In August, Emma and her programme manager, Emily Little and James Galbraith, partnerships manager, joined with Tim for a training workshop to help them sharpen their vision for Find Your Voice, so they are ready to take it to the next stage. “I’m so excited to do a full company values training workshop with the whole team,” Emma says in anticipation of the workshop. “When you consider this time last year it was me on my own and now there are four of us, we have come a long way!”