

Josie Dear – a campaign update.

As a supporter of Josie Dear I wanted to write to you and tell you how our first campaign is going.

As you know, the first fundraiser was to get musicians in to prison settings. I have worked in prisons for over 10+ years and I strongly believe that for rehabilitation to take place we need to make prisons environments where people feel safe, respected and supported. Music has a massive role to play in supporting rehabilitation from bringing people together and allowing people to relax & express themselves to learning transferable skills for employment.

Our prisons are doing some fantastic work and to make sure the funds had the best impact I wanted to work alongside them. I decided to focus my funding on working alongside our equality teams. The equality teams are usually made up of both uniformed and civilian staff and also residents (prisoners). They work to make sure everybody is equally represented, not facing discrimination and has a chance to celebrate, and have recognised, their own culture/lifestyle/religious beliefs.

Our first event was for LGBT+ History month. It would be naive to suggest that homophobia isn't an issue in our prison system. A report in The Guardian Newspaper in 2012 suggested there is likely up to 8000 male prisoners in the UK who identify as homosexual and these men are often VPs (Vulnerable Prisoners) Although our prisoners have support systems it is inevitable that these generally mean removing these men from regular regime activities and asking these men to "play down" or hide their sexuality for their own safety, often resulting in more "time behind their door"

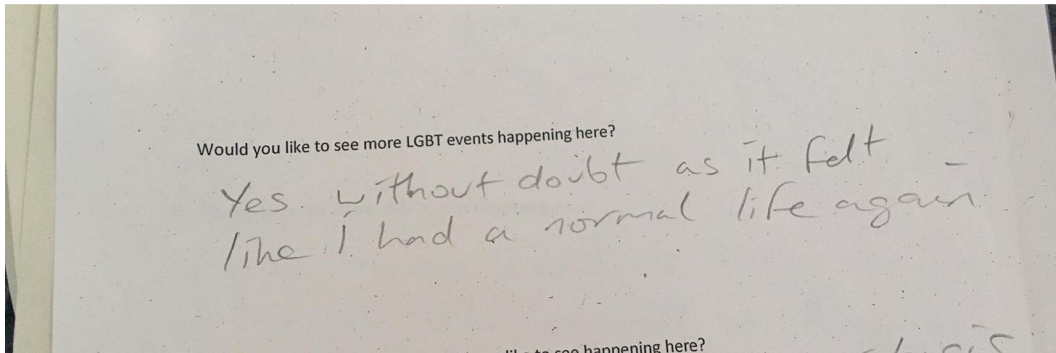
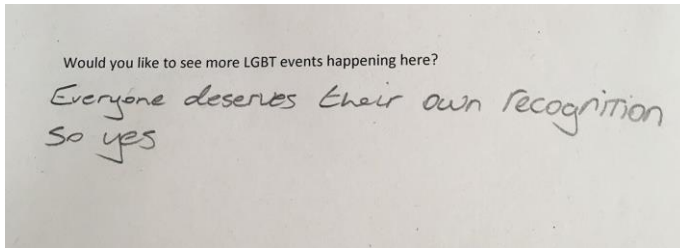
The idea of Josie Dear is to shed a bit of light in dark times, to grow a little joy.

So my idea of putting on an LGBT+ event was to try and show those residents that someone considers and recognises them. It was also to try and share with other residents what it means to be Gay to challenge some stereotypes they may have in mind and to create more understanding. To show that music can bring us all together and we can enjoy it as equals regardless of background, sexuality, race, age, gender etc.

I was pleased to say our events did just as I had hoped. I worked with Miri (miriofficial.com) a singer songwriter who not only happens to be a fantastic performer but also a musical activist who has been involved in running one of the most successful LGBT+ music nights in London.

We visited two establishments to do a performance and a QandA. Residents helped to promote and run the event, they performed with Miri and as her support acts and they hosted the QandA. There was a really good feeling at both sessions and residents are still commenting to me that they enjoyed the event, got something from it and learned something too. Of course, this event wasn't for everybody, it wasn't meant to be, it was to shine a little light in the dark and that is what it did. I can't thank Miri enough for her time, talent, patience, understanding and commitment to the whole idea. I am pleased to say that based on feedback I was contacted by another prison asking for Miri's details to do another performance with them.

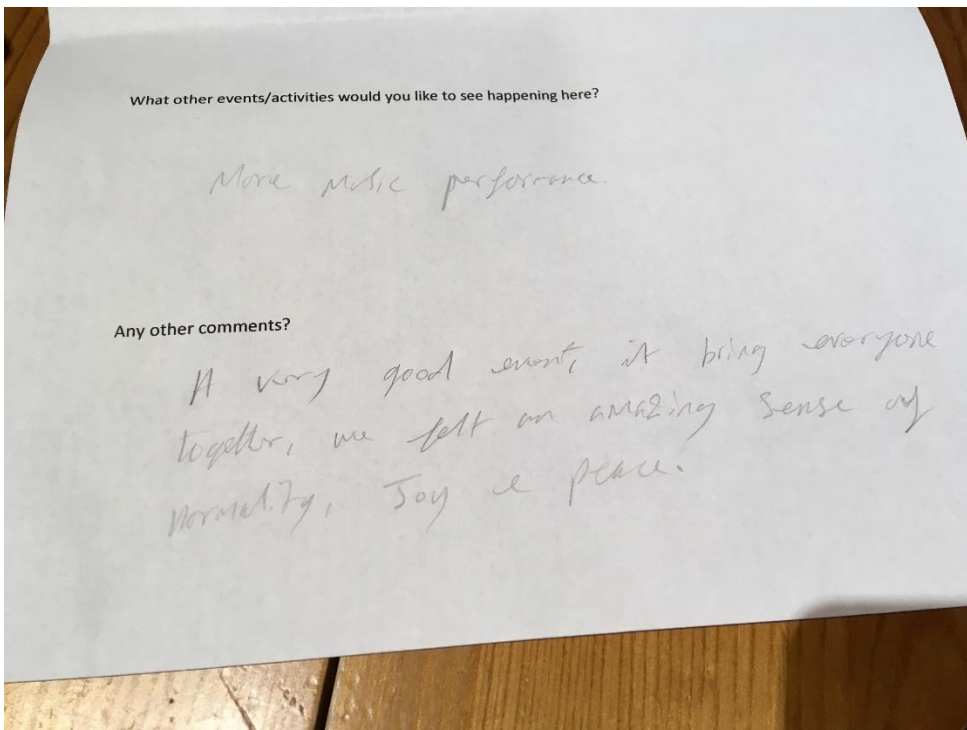
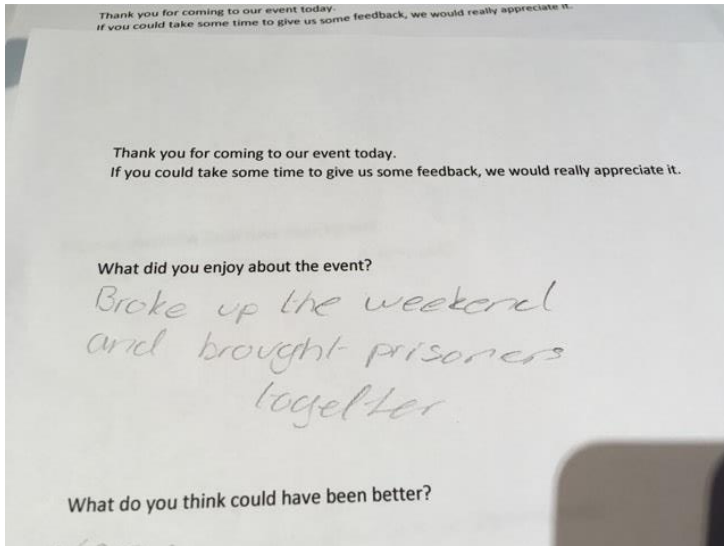
Here is a little feedback from the day



Our second event was for IWD – International Women’s Day. Working with my good musician friends Lizzy Hardingham (lizzyhardingham.bandcamp.com) and Jess Distill (saidthemaids.co.uk) we put together a vocal harmony group version of some songs for the occasion (such as ‘Nana Was a Suffragette’) we did a performance followed by a singing workshop. The day was lovely. I had some concerns we’d see a bit of a walkout after our performance but I was surprised at how many residents were willing to have a go at the singing themselves. We got them singing a lovely three part round together by the end and I think we all left feeling we really had spread a little joy. Again I was moved by both Jess and Lizzy’s approach, support and talent for this project.

We ended the International Women’s Day event with some of the residents performing for us which was lovely. We also asked the men to think about a woman who has inspired them and write it on a sticky note to go on the wall. We had mums, sisters, the president of New Zealand, Niki Minaj a pornstar – so quite a mixed bunch! One resident said to me “Thank you for asking me to do that. You made me think of somebody I have chosen not to for a long time. And I am glad I did”

Here is a snapshot of feedback.



That is just our first two events, we still have funds left to do a lot more and I have been speaking to residents and staff about what they'd like to see. There are plans for mental health awareness, Asian heritage, traveller history and plenty more.

I hope this update shows you just what a difference your donation has made. I can't express my gratitude enough. The events stand alone as a positive action which helps to bring normality and joy and also to open people's minds but they also play a part of the bigger puzzle of all the work going on. Prison is an intense challenging place to work and to live. For the residents everything is under a microscope and stress and anxiety is high. If an event like this can send someone back to the wing feeling uplifted, perhaps they will be in a better headspace to deal with the challenges that will face

them for the rest of the day, week, month and years.

Thank you for everything, I look forward to being able to share more good news with you.

Emily (aka Minnie)

Team Josie Dear.