

BEING GOOD NEWS TO THE COMMUNITY

Jo Gordon

JO GORDON SHARES HOW 'DANIEL'S DEN' IS GOOD NEWS TO THE COMMUNITY OF WEMBLEY.

'I sense there is a real Wesleyan spirit about Daniel's Den,' were words spoken to me a couple of year ago and they made me smile in more ways than one as I thought about being Good News to the community. Hear our story and find out why!

BUILDING COMMUNITY

I run Daniel's Den, a parent and toddler charity based in Wembley in North West London. I started it 24 years ago having worked as a teacher for 12 years in the London borough of Brent. When I was pregnant with my first child I would pray for the baby inside my womb and God would give me a picture of their feet and how the birth of this child would change the direction of my life. Little did I realise how true that would be and here I am almost 25 years later being the CEO of Daniel's Den.

The mission of Daniel's Den is to encourage and enrich family life in order to build stronger communities. We have two key vision statements - one is for people to know and be known in their local community, and the second is for people to build relationships that matter within and beyond their cultural and ethnic group.

At present we run seven sessions each week in different parts of London, recognising the importance of offering a safe, welcoming community within walking distance of families. We want everyone who comes through the door to feel an unconditional welcome and the love of Christ in a language they understand using their five senses. Each year, we work with over 300 families from 45 different nationalities, many of whom only know their husband or wife in this country. We offer that network of support, that place to belong and that 'family' which can actually be seen and touched.

Building community is what Daniel's Den is all about. I grew up on a sheep farm in North Yorkshire where everyone knew

everybody. It was a close-knit community where life revolved around the chapel and farming life. This is so deep within my roots and having attended a Methodist chapel 2 or 3 times on a Sunday (they had afternoon services in those days so people could do the milking) the comment 'I sense there is a real Wesleyan spirit about Daniel's Den' made me quietly laugh inside because it was a real identification of my roots. Wesley got into the edges of society. He took the message out into the community and I guess that is the absolute essence of Daniel's Den - getting alongside families, wherever they are, at one of the key times in their lives. Offering support and help as people give birth and as they nurture their young resonates so much and I really sense that call to shepherd families in the streets of Brent - a million miles away from the fields of North Yorkshire.

Here is a picture of one of the groups we run in Park Lane Methodist Church, Wembley.



In this group there is: a Domestic Violence survivor, an asylum seeker, a pharmacist working part time, a grandma, a mum living in bed and breakfast with no recourse to public funds, a dad, a Post Natal Depression survivor, a child with autism traits, a potential volunteer and of course, children!

Being Good News for these people is paramount and it comes in all shapes and sizes.

CHANGING LIVES

Coming to Daniel's Den was a life changing time for Florence and Ruella. They were 'dumped' in a bed and breakfast with little food and no recourse to public funds. We found out about them from a contact in Maidstone who rang the local Salvation Army. Within 24 hours, we turned up on their doorstep with bags of food, kitchen equipment, toiletries and an invitation to our group. They joined us and became part of our family - visiting the beach for the first time and sharing lots of fun activities. Advice was sought and within 6 months the change in status meant they could be placed in a small flat, a place of their own.

Lisa was a shy local mum who lacked confidence when meeting people she didn't know. One day she plucked up courage to walk through the door and has never left. Her confidence has grown, and she is now the paid session leader and has also gained another job because of her experience. These are just three of the people in that picture, but at Daniel's Den we are here to offer Good News to the community. We aim to live this message out and who knows the countless lives that have been changed because of Daniel's Den!

When the pandemic hit in early 2020, we had to close our sessions early because many of our volunteers were elderly

and vulnerable and so were our families. We took our work online as we wanted to bring the Good News to people in their homes. I think when John Wesley talked about 'Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as you ever can' it meant in any way and this includes Zoom, Facebook and of course Funny Bunny - our ambassador.

DANIEL'S DEN AT HOME

Here are a couple of stories of lives impacted by 'Daniel's Den at Home' in the pandemic - this is the tip of the iceberg.

One of our mums had a college friend who had moved to Manchester from India in November 2019. They didn't know anybody in England and because of the pandemic her little boy had never met any white person face to face. The little boy had real stranger anxiety and would not speak to anyone on a Zoom call with family members. An invitation was offered to them to join Daniel's Den and I remember the very first day that this little boy arrived at our Zoom session - he screamed and hid behind his mum for the whole 30 minutes. He was terrified as he'd never met new people, but we smiled, we offered a warm welcome. He popped his head out in the next session and started to smile. Since then, he has blossomed and flourished and his mum says 'you offered a welcome and safe place for him and now he will talk to anybody'. A two year-old's life impacted by Daniel's Den.



MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Another day we were giving out craft packs outside a church in a really challenging community. We were starting to pack our things away when I noticed a woman walking on the other side of the street, pushing a buggy. I waved at her and beckoned her to come over to collect a pack knowing that it was full of Good News fun activities. I don't know what that woman thought when she saw this crazy woman waving at her, but she walked up to the traffic lights, crossed the road and came to see us.

As she approached us, we smiled and greeted her, and we noticed there was a sense of anxiety about this lady. We looked in the buggy and there was a four-month-old baby lying there and immediately we thought of the session we were running called 'Bumps, Babies and Brushes' - a session for people who'd given birth during the pandemic and who might be feeling more vulnerable because they hadn't had the opportunity to meet with other people.

This lady started to share how pleased she was to see some friendly faces - she was living in a women's refuge having had to escape domestic violence. She shared how stressed and anxious she was about the future and we asked if we could pray for her and she said yes. As we prayed, tears rolled down her face and she went on her way and we promised we would be in contact. Within a week she'd moved into temporary accommodation and we took a car full of gifts and clothing donated by our families. I contacted the local Methodist Church and the Salvation Army in that community who were running food banks to ask them to offer food support for that family. It's being there for the one - for one family - making a difference - that's what Daniel's Den is all about.

It's not just children or families - it's also our volunteers. We have an incredible team of volunteers, many of whom came to Daniel's Den with their baby and have never left. One mum was too nervous to come owing to postnatal depression, but plucked up the courage with an invitation from a friend. She came; she loved it, she grew in confidence and volunteered for 8 years. She then went on to study for a degree and now has a full-time job as the head of a data team in a secondary school. She says: 'Jo - you gave me the opportunity to have a go, to

meet new people and gain confidence.' This is about being Good News.

Another volunteer was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer four years ago and she was determined to live life to the full. Having a purpose and serving the needs of others encouraged her to get up each day. After her sudden death from COVID-19 earlier this year, her family were astonished to see all that she had achieved. Thank you Emma!

Creating memories. Impacting lives. Building community. Making a difference to one family at a time. Being Good News to the community!

Daniel's Den is one of 20,000+ toddler groups across the UK being Good News in the community and we have a vision to see a toddler group being within walking distance of every family of the nation (or small car journey in a rural situation). We recognise that people need a place where they can feel welcomed, supported, encouraged and loved.

Jo Gordon is the founder and CEO of Daniel's Den, a parent and toddler charity. A Yorkshire lady at heart, Jo came to London to be a primary school teacher but is now devoting her time into bringing about her vision for having a parent and toddler group within walking distance of every family in the UK.



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