

CHASE

FEATURE

Where there's brass there's hope, art and music...

Brass bands have always been big in South Yorkshire and, after listening to Emily Wraw's inspiring story, ROAR CEO SHARON GILL believes there's a great future ahead



ROTHERHAM, as an ex-mining centre, is synonymous with brass bands, and many are still going strong whether they are connected to a former colliery and its neighbouring villages or not.

For these stalwarts of a musical tradition to still be in existence requires younger musicians to take an interest and to learn how to play a brass instrument, in a time when the arts and music are being cut from education. Not so in Rotherham.

As with all local authority areas, the Arts Council support Music Hubs whose purpose it is to ensure all children and young people have an opportunity to have a first-hand experience playing music. This investment along with Brass Band England's work may just see the Brass Band survive, by providing opportunities to young people, which brings me to Emily Wraw's story.

Emily recalls her primary school days here in Rotherham, when she was offered the choice of learning a woodwind, string or a brass instrument. Such a significant decision to make at such a tender age with life changing implications. Emily at the age of eight years chose to learn the cornet, as no one in her family had played that instrument (For those who are unsure, the cornet is a valve-based compact brass instrument similar to a trumpet with a more mellow tone, that evolved from the continental post horn in the 1820s – Encyclopedia Britannica).

Having played the piano and singing in her very early years, it was not surprising the chance to expand her musical knowledge was embraced. Unlike many children, (myself included) Emily stuck with her chosen instrument and then picked up the trumpet along the way, studying and passing exams until she finished her formal schooling. This commitment to music naturally led to performance, participating in what was then the Rotherham Music Services' various ensembles and attending their summer schools.

Emily reflects on this time of her life where she made fantastic lifelong friendships that are still important to her today.

Having been born in Hereford, and after a few moves due to her dad's work, including Sheffield, Emily's family settled in Rotherham when she was six years of age. While her family have since moved on, Emily has chosen to remain in Rotherham for a variety of reasons, not least her strong

support network of friends. When it came time to study at university, Sheffield offered the right History degree, enabling Emily to pursue her interest in the Early Modern period, culminating in her thesis on the Social Purpose of Stories of Divine Vengeance in Sixth century Gaul. Perhaps this offers another insight into why Rotherham feels so much like home with its own history of rebellion and non conformity. This choice of study allowed Emily to stay rooted in Rotherham, and maintain a good quality of life.

Not unexpectedly, university life also saw a suspension of her musical studies and commitments. It offers so many distractions leaving little time for other activities, the details of which we did not explore! Then life has its own demands including the need to earn a living. Emily was strategic in her thinking to spot an opportunity through the NHS Graduate scheme in the human resources department where her love of writing and analysing would be of use, and promptly secured a position in Rotherham. Emily still works for the NHS as a diversity and inclusion manager, and is a firm believer in a universal health care system that is free at the point of delivery, something that we have all come to appreciate in recent times.

It wasn't until 2016, when Emily's

personal life changed through divorce that music came back into her life, knowing it had the power to make you feel better, a kind of mindfulness, immersion in the moment. A comment on one of our social media sites was seen by the head of Rotherham's Music Hub, who invited Emily to a new group for adults returning to music called Replay. As often happens, one thing led to another, and Emily applied to the emerging Rotherham Symphony Orchestra and was accepted once space was available for a trumpet player; not content with that an invitation to join a Barnsley-based brass band followed.

I can only imagine you are asking the same questions I did – how much of your time do you spend playing music? In response, and in addition to personal practice, there is four hours a week brass band rehearsal, one hour with Replay and three or more for the orchestra, plus performances which are not necessarily local. Surely that alone is testament to the transformative power of music and the sense of family and kinship playing in a group brings as well as the joy an audience experiences. Of course, all of that has been suspended under the current Covid-19 lockdown situation, and while communication and collaborations are

possible digitally, it does take away from the visceral experience.

Emily is now a governor of the Music Hub and is passionate about what learning and playing music can bring to people of any age. For young people it can open doors to travel and experiences vital in personal development, and for older people it brings sociability and keeps you active. One gentleman in his 80s recently learnt to play the saxophone, for example. There are so many options from the technically accurate delivery to more free form jazz, providing for all interests.

Her role as diversity and inclusion officer is also relevant in the world of brass bands, most now admit women into their ranks, but not all have a training band to teach younger people to replenish the ranks. There are many possible barriers to joining a brass band from the historic association of military marching bands, to rehearsal locations and transport, and it is generally acknowledged there is a considerable marketing exercise to do. Emily was quite convinced that they are warm and welcoming groups and would embrace people from different cultures and from the LGBTQ+ community.

We discussed looking forward to what Rotherham could offer to encourage more people to take up music and for musicians to have a quality experience and settled on the need for a decent-sized performing arts centre, one that accommodates an orchestra and an audience, so you can have a concert venue where you could do live recordings, which may become more pertinent in the post Covid-19 era, for remote access.

Emily also volunteers her time with the Rainbow Project, a volunteer-led organisation that supports the LGBT community trying to combat isolation, provide social opportunities and support. This group has been running since 2014 when the two organisations merged. They do amazing work and they welcome all relevant enquiries.

I came away from this interview feeling that I had met an incredible individual who has found a work life balance that satisfies her own passions and interests while ensuring opportunities are there with support for others. A rare combination indeed.

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