

In this episode, Melanie Davenport from Highworth and District Lions talks about how members of her club together with the invaluable support from members of the community and businesses, renovated their Lions charity shop - all within a three week timescale. Next we hear from Vijay Arora of Stanmore Lions Club on the organisation of the annual youth party – a fun filled event for hundreds of young people with a range of abilities coming together to celebrate with their carers and family members.

Be uplifted, be inspired. This is Step Forward and Volunteer.

Welcome to the latest episode of the popular Step Forward and Volunteer podcast brought to you by Lions Clubs British Isles.

My name is Samantha Boffin and I'd like to thank you for tuning in.

If you haven't listened before, our aim is simple. We want to celebrate the positive difference volunteering makes to communities across the British Isles and beyond. To do that, we'll be speaking to those who give up their time to help others, inspiring more people to step forward and volunteer.

This month on the podcast, I'd like to welcome Melanie Davenport from Highworth and District Lions. Melanie, together with members of her club have renovated their Lions charity shop, within a tight timescale. They've received valuable community support with ceiling, lighting, racking, shelving, flooring and much more.

We also feature Vijay Arora, a member of Stanmore Lions Club. Over the last 14 years Vijay has played a key role in planning and organising an annual youth celebration – a fun filled event attended by hundreds of young people with a range of abilities to get-together with their carers and families for a day.

But first, I have a favour to ask. We'd like your help in getting the word out about Step Forward and Volunteer. Tell your family, tell your friends - and if you're a Lions member,

why not let other members of your club know about the podcast - and how easy it is to listen. All you need to do is either go on the website www.lionsclubs.co where you will see a link to the podcast, or you can search for Step Forward and Volunteer on apps like Spotify, Podbean, Apple podcasts and Google podcasts.

You can listen on-demand or subscribe so that you never miss an episode. We publish a new programme on the second Wednesday of each month, and we're really keen to spread the positivity and get as many people listening as we can.

Now let me introduce our first guest, Melanie Davenport from Highworth Lions Club.

Hello, Melanie. Hello. Now, Melanie, you and members of the Highworth and District Lions, you've managed to totally renovate your local Lions charity shop in just three weeks starting on Boxing Day this last year. So, can you tell us a little bit more about this, was the shop in need of refurbishment? Have you been planning it for a while?

Well, our shop has been there since 1994. So since then it's not really had much in the way of maintenance, painting you know. It's just had some touch ups but nothing extravagant. So it was looking a bit tired a bit worn. The shelves, and the racking was not in best shape. So we had the idea to give it a complete refurb, just modernise it.

Yeah. Well, actually after 30 years, I'm not surprised it was looking rather tired.

No, absolutely. I think I'm right in saying it involved members of the community and business people that support Highworth Lions. Can you tell me who sort of got involved and step forward for this?

Yes. So we had a lot of our members step forward to help out with clearing the shop, and helping with doing everything within the three weeks, we had a brand new ceiling and lighting donated by a company called Equinox. We had all new carpets, industrial carpets supplied by Carpets 4 Less which is local company as well. And shop fittings, brand new clothing and shoes were donated by a company called Magic Touch. And then we had a

company called S & T Works, which provided all the paints and all the labour to do pretty much the majority of the work in the shop. So they were in the shop for a complete three weeks. So the labour costs from that alone was just phenomenal.

Yeah. Now I can imagine, because that's a huge undertaking as you think about it, presume you had to take all this stuff out of the shop.

Yeah, so we had to completely empty the shop and take it back to basics. We had to take all the racking and the rails off the walls. So it was a complete shell. To be fair, we managed to do it within only a couple of days. But that obviously took long hours every day by a lot of people. So we managed to get that done quicker than we thought we would

Where did you store everything?

Well, we've got a garage attached to the back of the shop, so we could store bits and pieces in there. We also hired another garage for other stock that we use for our events in the year. And then luckily, a couple of our lions members and volunteers, they had some space in their garages. So we managed to kind of spread everything out.

It must have been fun actually those few days. Right at the beginning, particularly when you're full of all the joys of getting the shop redone, it must have been a few days.

Yeah, it was long hours for everyone involved and a lot of lot of hard work, obviously boxing everything up that was to be kept. And then putting stuff aside that may have been, you know, not so good, then we had to do tip runs for those sorts of things.

Yes. Oh, gosh, I can imagine. But how wonderful to do that, It must feel very fulfilling to do. Definitely.

So it must have come to quite a sum of money. How have the Highworth Lions been able to pay for the work and the labour, was it all donated?

Well, everything we had pretty much was donated. So all the labour costs. So the ceiling, the lighting, the carpets, the shop fittings, all the new clothing and everything that was donated, So we estimated with the equipment and items that we had donated as well as the labour, came to about 15,000 pounds - for what we were given. And then we had a contingency budget of our own for any extra things that we had to do. And so we worked out that we spent about 1,300 pounds, all in all, for extra work. So in the grand scheme of things, it was just fantastic to have so many local companies that were so willing and happy to, to get on board and help us.

So, did you have to overcome any challenges along the way? Did you have a deadline, for instance, that you, you knew you wanted to open the shop by?

We had a grand opening date set for the 14th January, which we had the mayor and we advertised for so we knew we it had to be done. So everyone was just phenomenal and worked really long hours from very early in the morning until very late at night, every single day, they gave up their Christmas by starting on Boxing Day, and working all the way through. I mean, to be honest, it was mainly due to one of our members, Sue Bodman, who was in charge of organising and planning everything for the refurbishment. So without her spearheading that, I don't think we would have got everything done on time. She, She was brilliant. You know, planned everything just perfectly, which enabled us to get everything done. Before time.

You, you were actually ready before time?

We finished it a couple of days early. But in the shop, we were pottering around just, you know, giving everything a final little tweak. But pretty much everything was done within a few days to spare.

That's absolutely incredible. Definitely.

I'm very impressed that you finished early as well. So how did you then get prepared for this new grand opening? How did the community support you with that?

Yes. We advertised on our Facebook pages or social media, and through our local link magazine, which is local community magazine that gets sent out throughout the town. We advertised that the shop was going to close for three weeks. And we advertised the grand reopening date, which obviously once you advertise it, you've got to stick to it. Which was obviously a worry, but we said you know, we'll get it done. Don't worry. We had faith. It was all kind of on schedule.

So that must have been exciting. Did a lot of people come out for it?

Yes. So on our grand reopening date itself, we had our town mayor, come along to cut the ribbon and officially opened the shop for us. We took photos on the day of it and we also had a local photographer from local the paper come along, and they did a story for it as well. So that was really good. The weather, on the other hand was absolutely horrific. It was pouring with rain, and the wind was just blasting the rain into our faces. It was so brilliant to see so many customers just standing out in that weather waiting for us to open. You know, we were so overjoyed, because a lot of us have made homemade cakes and tea and coffee, to give to people that came to the shop on the day. Once we've done our grand reopening with the Mayor, the shop was open, and just people were streaming in all day. It was just fantastic to see so many people come out and join in our celebration of our shop reopening. And we've had record sales that day. Yeah, we did. We took well over 1000 pounds on that day, for the six hours that we were open, it's never been heard of to have taken that amount of money in one day.

In fact, almost all the money then that you'd spent on it. Exactly first day, that's incredible.

It is. We had so many people coming in and all you can hear was Oh, I love this. You could just stand there and listen, you know, to the customers that were so fantastic. Oh, wow, look at this. Oh, it's amazing. Because it was a complete transformation. I mean, our front windows, they had film over the front window, so you couldn't actually see into the shop. So we had taken all of that off. We've got mannequins in the window now. So we can do shop displays themes, and you know, dress everything up, so now people can walk past and actually see what's in our shop, which has brought a lot more people in. Because before

people couldn't see what was in there. So they probably were a bit reluctant, you know, to come in. But now people can see how much of a well laid out shop it is, you know, we get so many more people in.

It's really big at the moment, recycling or upcycling things, it's a really important part of any high street now.

Of course, I mean, charity shops have become extremely popular over the last couple of years. Even after our grand reopening day, we've looked back at figures for those months, over previous years, and we've doubled if not tripled on some days that, you know just the days that we've been open since January. So we're actually seeing record sales in our shop at the moment, which is fantastic. Because obviously then we can put all that money back into the community.

Yes, absolutely. And, and actually, on that note. What do you think the difference will make? Is the shop now able to support the community in other ways as well?

Yes, so we've got more money at our disposal. So we're really excited about what we can do further within our community and internationally this year, and going forward. So, you know, we're just excited to see what's going to happen.

This is incredible, because you realize that actually all the money that goes in there, because it's run entirely by volunteers, presumably, exactly, you're able to then realise all that money is extra money that you can spend on other things that really make a difference as well.

Exactly. So obviously, we have some overheads in the shop, we do have to pay, a lease in the shop, from the council, obviously our utility bills in the shop. So you know, all the money that aside from that, for our bills, and everything can go straight back into the community.

Yes. I mean, it's just a win win, isn't it? Because it's got sustainability built into the shop, the idea, the ethos of the shop, it saves people money, but it's also really sustainable. And then you've also got everything that then makes that you can give back to the community. It's incredible. Really.

It really is. I mean, we all have a great deal of passion for our shop, and we're all excited for it.

Yeah. And it's superb advertisement for Lions. Of course.

Oh, definitely. It also gets the Lion's name out there more so because, yes, during the year we do many different fundraising events throughout the year within our community. But having a shop really puts your name out there, it really gives you a stamp in the community.

Have you got any advice to other Lions Clubs? If somebody else out there was listening to this and thought, you know, that sounds like something I could definitely do in my community, what would you say to them?

I'd say go for it. Before I joined members of the club, they, they started the shop up. And they may not have known exactly what they were taking on. But, you know, we've, we've had so much money raised from it, we can put back in the community and everything. But it's also where you have the community, you have your customers, and they come in and talk to people, they so it's like a little meeting point for people to come and have a little natter, our volunteers that work in the shop, most of them are elderly. And it's a way of getting them out and about and they enjoy it as well. They enjoy the social element of it, where they get to interact. So as well as them helping us we help them as well and they enjoy working behind the till. And, you know, just generally dealing with the shop on a day to day basis. So, you know, it works both ways.

Yeah. No, it is you're right. That, you know, everything that Lions do, actually, in that sense, is just, it's wonderful. It just all creates this lovely circle of people, you know, making a difference to other people's lives in all different ways.

That's exactly it.

Thank you so much, Melanie, it was fascinating. Thank you so much for sharing.

Thank you for having me on.

It's time now for a short break, we'll be back after this ...

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Next I'd like to welcome Vijay Arora from Stanmore Lions Club. Vijay with support from lions members and clubs in Greater London, North of the River Thames and the counties of Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire help annually to bring hundreds of young people with a range of abilities, their carers and families together for a themed party with lots of entertainment and food laid on.

Hello, Vijay. Hi, Sam.

Over the last 14 years, you have planned and organised an annual youth celebration and sort of event for young people and their families and their carers. And can you tell me a bit more about the event Vijay?

Yes. this started, this district youth celebration in 2008. And ever since we've been holding it, in November, at Allum Hall in Elstree. Our vision was very simple to provide an afternoon of fun for a few hundred young teenagers, and to bring the spirit of what we stand for, we serve, to those who need it just a little bit more. This event is wholly sponsored by Lions Clubs and many other generous individuals and businesses. So without the generous support, it would not be possible.

Wow, that's amazing. So what's the range of abilities of the young people that come?

Oh, they're the abilities. You know, mostly people are with learning disabilities, but many are in wheelchairs, and some can't move or say anything, but they come and their carers or, you know, their parents say that they had a wonderful time. So we have many people in wheelchairs, many, you know, need assisted, you know, in the walking and moving. So, it varies, but if you come and see, You will be amazed, they are all such lovely and wonderful people.

Wow, that must take a lot of Lions Club members, to actually come and help out?

Yes, so, so what we do is we plan everything beforehand, I've got a small committee of members. So we decided on the team. The first year when we organised in 2008, we chose the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. So I think first 10 years, we tried to do all the themes based on lions. And even during the Olympics, we had, you know, based on that, and so everything is organised. So on the Sunday morning, when we hold this event, early in the morning, you know, before eight o'clock, we have a team of volunteers, family members who come to help. And so the hall, the stage, the tables all beautifully transformed within three, four hours. And, and you know, we have a bare room, and within three, four hours lions have performed miracles. And everything looks so magical.

So how many people do you get year on year?

So last year, we held our event on November 2022. And as you know, we couldn't hold it for two years. And I was really wondering, do we need to start it all again. And then I wrote to some of our regular visitors. And I asked them just supposing we organise this event, would you participate? And I had 100%? yes, please, we really miss you. And actually, that gave me the energy. And we said we have to hold this event for them. So last year, we had nearly 600 people including, you know lions members as well. And we do invite you know, the mayor's from the local boroughs, as you know, from where all these our special guests arrive, so it's nice for them to meet them. So we have mayor's from Elstree and Borehamwood, Mayor of Harrow, Mayor of Barnet. And actually the Mayor's are delighted. You know, they, they are amazed, and they really loved to talk to all these people and their parents and carers.

Gosh that's, that's a huge community of people. That's a very wide footprint. That's amazing. So, so you found all these people, have they contacted you? Or how did you get to hear about them? Where are they from, sort of schools and care homes, or individuals?

Right, so what we do is we prepare the form once our team is set and everything, so we send it to all our Lions Clubs. We encourage Lions Clubs to bring their own guests, but you know, I write it personally to a lot of the special needs schools and care centres. There are many organisations, so we write to them. So over the years, we have built up. So when I send them when the form is ready, we send it. So we send it to all these organisations, in addition to our clubs, we have a majority do come from public, but we have a large group coming through lions from Redbridge area, from Biggleswade and from Letchworth. And this time, the first time we had some guests arriving from Thames area, you know, in in Oxfordshire. So, so I think it said they come from, you know, London and the home counties.

That's amazing. I mean, with that many people attending, how long does it take to plan and prepare each different event?

Yeah, I think over the years now, it's like clockwork, you know, because we, we laid the foundation was very strong in the first year. And we have carried on the same vision. And of course, every year we learn and improve and add. So over the years, we have added a lot of things. And we have improved now what we do is, everybody knows their table number before they arrive, just imagine putting all those people on 50 tables. Now we tell them, your table number is this before they arrive, they know their table number of which gate to use, one or two. So I think we have, we planned it well, in the beginning it was otherwise they don't know where to sit, all the table plan is on the board, they can see their name and every persons name is there on the board. But it does take a lot of effort. And as you can see, to organise all this, but as you know, lions are very good at it. So you will be amazed, you know, when they come in the morning. Our stage is all set. You know, my committee member Alastair, who has been with me from day one. So I leave that task to him, he has his own volunteers, and they bring stuff from his you know, where he works. So by 12, everything is ready, and we'll look at it. And then our volunteers can have a bit of rest and

have something to eat. And before one o'clock, the guest starts arriving. And I can't tell you within minutes, the room is buzzing with happiness.

But I mean, do you go back to the same venue every year?

Yes. Yeah. I mean, I think finding the venue was the main, you know, most important. So in the first first year, I found once I found the venue, it is just right for us. It has you know, everything is on level - flooring, the big room, and we have kitchen facilities, we have a stage, so corridors and things. So the venue was perfect for our, for our needs. And so we have continued at the same venue. And in the first year. I think there was a lot of things, oh, it won't happen it, you won't be able to do it. But I think I was determined and had a very, very good group of people with me on the committee. So within six weeks the first event was organised. No, in six weeks! Yeah, in the beginning, we used to dress up as well. So we all dressed up in the costume. And so it was, it was a lot of fun. And actually, I think it's the dedication of our committee and you know myself leading it that we have, we have carried on and it is a, it is a wonderful event and long may it continue.

So although you've got the venue and you know, all of those things, actually all the organisation. Are you already thinking about it now for next November? Oh, yes.

Yeah, the date is already booked for next year and the year after.

Gosh, that's amazing. And I suppose the people come back year after year, so they're expecting it? Yeah, yes. Absolutely. Yeah. So, what actually happens at the event? Do you have entertainment, food? What sort of things happen?

Oh, yes. So what happens? You know, we laid everything on the tables already, you know, all the food, all the drinks and everything. So when, when they come, they can have it, then we have two very good DJs they give their time freely. And they are amazing. You know, they just get involved and get them all dancing. Then we have a Bollywood dancer, he brings his troupe of dancers, and then he shows them those moves and everybody loves him as well.

Do they all join in? Does everyone, yes.

I mean, they love music and dancing if you see them, even in the wheelchairs, they will be there. And then we have, two or three balloon modelers. So there is a long queue, I don't know how many hundreds of balloons they, they provide, you know, different shapes. And they also come in beautiful costumes which really adds to the, you know, all the atmosphere. Then we have face painters, magicians, and clowns. So I think, I think our vision was right from the beginning to give that few hours of real magic. Sometimes people say, Oh, you put too much food I say, it doesn't matter. It matters when they come and see the tables beautifully laid, and they feel very good. And I can't tell you the messages we see or they leave messages on the tables or afterwards by email, I say we just do it for two, three hours. They say Vijay you don't realise they remember it for the rest of the year. And they just can't wait to come back. You know, and some people say, oh, you made my daughter's, you know, she was beaming all day.

So do people remember that? Presumably, this is a one time of year where people meet people only once a year, but do they sort of make friends?

They do, they do, I think, because what I asked them are when people are booked? Do you want to sit with somebody, you know, if you know somebody's coming? Some people have made, you know, new friends as well. But we have you know, a large group of people coming from a particular school or organisation. So they are all together. But they do meet up and say, oh, we met somebody after so many years. Or you know, and like somebody has moved to a care home this time somebody said, oh, we had to unite them both at this party.

How exciting. Can you remember what was the theme was last year?

We kept it simple, you know, winter frozen extravaganza all our balloons and everything and the table decorations. We had cakes with that theme and the stage was beautifully lit with, you know, fairy lights and, and all those amazing things.

What an exciting time of year though. It's a, it's a wonderful way to start that festive season, isn't it? Yeah, with this, it's perfect. Yeah.

See, we didn't want it to make it a Christmas party, and we didn't want to make it a Diwali party which happens a lot in our area. So we just wanted to do it in November and ever since we have kept in November. And you know, when they come in, we put garlands on everybody's neck. So there's a lot of the Lions are standing outside. And then you know, like a sort of welcome them once they come and just ask you know which table you are on, and then just guide them. And so it's an idea and you know all our families, my children all come and other Lions, you know, children come to help in the morning, we are trying to have young people, my grandson comes and helps as well.

So what an amazing event it sounds like. So this event you've been doing for, as you say, 14 years, in fact, to be your 15th year this year. So have you got any advice that you could give Vijay to other Lions that might be listening out there who are interested in planning an event like this? If you've got any tips or advice for them?

Yes, I think first and foremost, you know, to get a group of people Lions who are thinking, you know, same wavelength, what you are trying to achieve, then find the suitable venue, and then see what you want to do on the day. So plan your event. And, and I think, I think you have to, you have to really dedicate and, and you know, to see it through and I think Lions are very good at organising this this kind of event. But yes, you have to get in touch with the you know who your guests will be. So then yeah, I think guests are the most important thing. That's what I keep on stressing. And, and I always thank the guests, and I only say to them without your participation, this event will not be possible. Because I think we have to admire the parents and the carers who bring them actually without them. We won't have a party, we can organize everything but if they don't come, so I think that that is the most important element. So you have to find your sources of where your guests will be coming. Organize event well and for this kind of event. I think it is good to have everything already ready on the table, you know, because we have like a tea party. So food is all there and all the day we have tea and coffee, you know, serving during the afternoon. So, so plan it well, so that the afternoon once the guests are there, you are enjoying you, you know, helping them. Yes, taking care. And yes.

Because it sounds amazing. And that's incredibly good advice as well. And presumably, you, you started smaller than you are now and it's just grown, you know, enormous.

Yes, I think first year we had about 350 people. So actual amount. Yes, I think we all worked very hard. And, and we are grateful to many lions who brought the guests as well. And it's word of mouth as well. Sometimes the leaflet has gone to a parent, oh, I've given it to my neighbour, but they have also got a special needs child. And I always say to them, oh, please pass it on to anybody you know, who may also be interested to attend, I think that is very important. And then people get in touch with you directly if they wish to attend. And we have to stress that it's all free. So we probably say to them, it is free to them, carers and parents, and we always encourage to bring any brothers and sisters, because we want to make it a family occasion. And I think that is very important. And sometimes people have said, you know, for their age group, there isn't anything like that. So they feel very free. You know, the music is going, they're dancing, and they're happy. Yeah.

Gosh, what a wonderful, generous, amazing event. It just sounds. I mean, it just sounds just so much like a Lions club thing just yeah, the epitome of what Lions stand for. Yeah.

Amazing. Well, thank you so much for talking to us today, Vijay.

Thank you.

That is all we have time for on this month's podcast. Don't forget you can also listen to past editions of the Step Forward and Volunteer podcast any time via www.lionsclubs.co or on Spotify, Podbean, Apple podcasts or Google podcasts.

Thanks once again to our special guests Melanie Davenport and Vijay Arora and a big thank you to you our listeners as well. Take care and goodbye.