

They need a youth club, I said.

Camden-based GOAL is the first grant recipient to benefit from the £1m boost to the Dispossessed Fund from the Big Lottery Fund. The group helps 'Neets' onto the bottom of the career ladder but was not exactly welcomed by the nearby Hampstead residents who had suffered a spate of robberies, its founder tells **David Cohen**

MALCOLM WROE had no intention of starting a youth club for marginalised teenagers. He lives in Hampstead, his house backing onto the heath, and enjoyed a career as an actor and stage manager for West End hits such as *Noises Off*, *'Allo 'Allo* and *Evita*. He

THE DISPOSSESSED FUND

schmoozed backstage with the likes of Tim Rice and Elaine Page, spent time with similarly affluent people, and admits he was "quite unprepared" for

his own suggestion at a meeting 20 years ago of the local Neighbourhood Watch. "There had been a spate of afternoon robberies and the neigh-

bours were complaining that the thieves were teenagers from the nearby council estates in Gospel Oak," said 67-year-old Mr Wroe. "I put my hand up and said, 'The problem is that there is nothing for these youngsters to do after school.' Before I knew it, the words youth club popped out of my mouth and three of us had decided to give it a go."

Despite the misgivings of his Hampstead neighbours, they set up Gospel Oak Action Link in a freezing Scout hall and offered table tennis and dancing every Friday evening to 30 youths. They were the only youth club for about 1,000 families, but unknown to the youths, Mr Wroe, the only founder to stay the course, faced a daunting personal challenge. "I had just been diagnosed with bone marrow cancer," he said. "I was on chemotherapy and supposed to be taking it easy, and I often became quite fatigued."

But Mr Wroe persisted, despite his health problems, and two decades later GOAL is still the only youth club in the Gospel Oak ward that, with a child poverty rate of more than 50 per cent, is among the most deprived in the country. Since then the club has evolved to offer a structured programme for 250 young people a year, and has been praised by local police for helping young people into employment and reducing crime.

Tonight at an event hosted by the Big Lottery Fund, known as BIG, at the Southbank Centre to celebrate grass-roots projects tackling poverty, GOAL will receive a £47,029 cheque from the Evening Standard Dispossessed Fund. It is the first project to be funded out of the £1 million boost to the Dispossessed Fund from BIG that was announced this month.

BIG was inspired by our Ladder for London campaign, which helps jobless young adults into work through apprenticeships, to make £1 million available to support "the base of the ladder". It is part of their People Powered Change approach, which backs community-led action in poor areas. GOAL will use its grant to fund its two flagship projects – a music production course and a community sports leadership programme started last year – which provides ways into further education, training or apprenticeships.

"This grant is a two-year lifeline without which we would have to shut these programmes by Easter," said Mr Wroe. "It will give 120 young Neets the confidence and skills to get onto the first rung of the career ladder."

The local youths enrol themselves or are referred by Connexions, Camden's Youth Offending Service or Jobcentre



Plus. One beneficiary is Tipu Sulthan, 21, who arrived from Bangladesh speaking little English two years ago. Through English for Speakers of Other Languages, he took English and maths classes, as well as their community sports leadership course, and recently secured his first paid job and a place at college.

"I arrived here unemployable but thanks to GOAL I am strongly moving forward with my life," said Mr Sulthan, who lives on the Gospel Oak estate. "I am doing a business management course at St Peter's College and working two days a week as a cashier for Iceland. I want to use my sports leadership badge to run a sports programme for disabled children. It has been my dream from when I was little."

In the last few years, GOAL was invited to sit on Silver Group, a Home Office funded group set up to tackle serious youth violence. "The Kentish Town police chief has given us glowing reports," said Mr Wroe. "He says that our centre has made a significant impact on reducing local crime, including knife and gun offences."

Mr Wroe said the credit should go to their crack team of youth workers.

So far, of a total £9.3m raised by the Dispossessed Fund, 637 grants amounting to £4m have been given out. The balance of the latest million from BIG will be disbursed in grants of up to £50,000 over the year by our fund administrator, the Community Foundation Network and its affiliate The London Community Foundation

Then everyone looked at me



"Early on I used to help out, but one day a teenager doused me with a fire extinguisher and completely soaked me, ruining my jacket. It was unprovoked and as I went to confront him, quite shocked that he had done that, he tried to run past and I tripped him and he went flying."

"The youth workers were appalled at my behaviour and I was banned for six weeks." He laughed. "I learned then about the high professional standards

of our youth workers and how adept they are at working with impulsive young people from challenging environments, and channelling them in the right way."

Youth worker Nigel Doyle, 35, who runs the music production project, said the programme has already delivered success, with several people doing apprenticeships, one signed up to a record label and another, TJ, who goes by the rapper name of Snatch, getting

100,000 hits on his YouTube and Twitter pages. "When TJ started he was very aggressive, but after six months working with us and producing half a dozen tracks, he calmed down and became a considerate young man who has become very focused on his career."

Football coach Nathan Yarnie, 24, who helps run the sports programme, grew up on the Gospel Oak estates and got his Football Association Level 1 coaching badge through GOAL. "I would

come here as a teenager on a Friday night to play pool and deejay," he said. "It was a place to be social and enjoy ourselves, but today it is so much more. It helped me, and it helps many young people with nobody to turn to."

In the early days, said Mr Wroe, his Hampstead neighbours thought he was crazy. "They told me, 'It's a drop in the ocean, you're wasting your time, these criminals are the children of welfare scroungers and they will never change'.

GOSPEL OAK ACTION LINK (GOAL)

What they do: Founded by Malcolm Wroe 20 years ago, GOAL is a youth organisation working in the severely deprived Gospel Oak ward, offering formal and informal education.

Amount awarded: £47,029 over two years

Where: Camden

How grant will be used: To fund a sports and music project for 120

Neets aged 16 to 25 that will move them into education, training or employment. The Community Sports Leadership Project is a Level 2 award accredited by Sports Leaders UK. The music project teaches young people to write, record, edit and mix music in their fully-equipped studio and leads to AQA accreditations in music production.

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standard.co.uk/dispossessed

Dedicated: Malcolm Wroe, centre, with youth workers and members of the Gospel Oak Action Link at the Queen's Crescent community centre

They wanted the youth club to be run as far from where they live as possible. But today many of them write out direct debits to help fund us.

"I am proud to say that we have come a long way since that first Neighbourhood Watch meeting. And thanks to the Big Lottery Fund and the Dispossessed Fund, we can continue to give young people who might otherwise end up jobless, or in prison, a shot at a better life."

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