Editorial

Many of my earliest memories involve music. My father, uncles and my grandfather were all very musical and had their own Dixieland Jazz band. Thumping banjos, pianos, guitars, clarinets, and other instruments were common. However, it is the voices I remember most. Grandma Kelly was always singing an Irish song and she had an enchanting and sweet soprano voice. Dad was belting out the Dixieland boogie-woogie or crooning with his sweet Irish tenor voice. Music was always in the air. Well except when my mother tried to sing. But could she ever dance! I always thought I took after mum.

Despite thinking for years I could not sing I joined a community choir in my village eighteen months ago. The advertisement in the local paper stated that no singing skills were needed, just a willingness to have fun and sing along. A woman with years of experience working with community choirs and helping groups of people learn to sing led the initial sessions. Of the 15 people who showed up that night, only three or four had ever sung in a choir before. By the end of that first evening we were all signing a song in three-part harmony. Amazingly, I was singing out loud – with other people in hearing range. Not only was I singing with people near me, we were actually singing *with* each other, listening to others while also hearing ourselves. It was exhilarating. Since that exciting beginning we developed into a real choir and have given several performances in the local area.

When I look back over this experience I see many groupwork principles in action. There was a clear purpose explained in the recruitment materials. The leader was very skilful at making everyone feel comfortable and helping us make connections with each other. All abilities were welcomed and accepted. Everyone started 'where they were' and then were helped to improve. We learned to listen and really

hear other people, while also learning to hear our own voice. Over time our skills and confidence improved and we became involved in the decisions that affected the group.

As we were nearing our first performance I began to reflect on the membership of our group. We were a true *community* choir, reflecting the community. We came from all walks of life: men and women, older people (in their 70s) and younger people (in their 20s), gay and straight people, employed and unemployed people, and members also had a range of conditions or life circumstances that placed them in at-risk or vulnerable population groups. For example, one woman lived with chronic schizophrenia and had a psychotic episode just prior to joining the choir requiring a significant stay in a hospital. Another woman was clearly dealing with a progressive dementia. Another member was physically disabled and had a learning difficulty. As a groupworker I could not help but be fascinated by the dynamics of the group and how the group incorporated these more vulnerable members into the heart and life of the group. Each vulnerable member had a role within the group and group members helped them function within the group. As would be expected, this was not a one-way street. The more vulnerable members also helped other members of the group and mutuality was evident. The choir was not a service provision group, nor designed to be an enterprise in mutual aid. Yet, when a group comes together for a common purpose and functions well enough to meet that shared purpose, there are many potential unintended benefits like mutual aid.

The choir had an unintended consequence of helping to support vulnerable people living in the community. I am not for a moment suggesting that the choir as group was responsible for ensuring the successful integration of vulnerable people into the local community. We were, however, part of a larger picture. Each vulnerable person was well connected to local social work services and the National Health Service. Family carers were heavily involved with two of these members. The local community also helped make sure these people were looked after, kept safe and enabled to continue living independently. The group nature of the choir was just one element, yet an important part of their lives.

Building the Big Society is one answer to the current financial situation proposed by some in politics. The collective approach I witness on a daily basis in my local village and the group support provided

by my choir could be used as examples of a Big Society that takes care of its own citizens without relying on the Government. While I wholeheartedly believe in the power of groups and the importance of community support for all residents, I would despair if we were ever held up as an example of the Big Society. This would be a distortion, as the local community is only able to support and integrate our vulnerable members because of the good health and social care services provided by the state. Naturally occurring groups *and* formal groups and services are required. A good society requires a supportive government as well as local groups and community support.

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The articles in this issue of *Groupwork* carry on this theme of the importance of groupwork and finding or using groupwork in unexpected places. Simon and Stauber discuss the role of groupwork in technology. They point out that the two have not always gone together easily. However, they make a clarion call for groupworkers to embrace technology and to take a leadership role in the development of online groups and to contribute to the burgeoning scholarly literature on best practices in the development of online communities. Olshever, in her systematic review on groupwork and hospice teams highlights the importance of groupwork skills in interdisciplinary hospital teams. She calls for further research into and the application of groupwork theory and skills to interdisciplinary teamwork. The third article continues the theme of applying groupwork theory and skills to new areas. Here Brown, Garvey and Harden describe the relevance of groupwork theory with athletics and sport. They argue for the use of sports in groupwork programming as well as for the use of groupwork theory by sports teams. They particularly highlight the importance of this combination when working with inner-city youth. Our final article by Chilton, Parrish and Crone highlights the power of groupwork when working with vulnerable people. They provide some early findings from an on-going evaluation of a group for people living with severe mental illness and substance misuse problems. Early indications suggest that there are high treatment completion rates for participants in their groups specifically for people with a dual diagnosis. In addition, participants are able to disclose previous serious trauma and abuse.

Each of the four articles in this issue of *Groupwork* remind us of the importance of groups and groupwork in the lives of the people we serve, treat or work with. Groups and groupwork can be found in many, many different places. Each author has called on us to better understand groupwork theory and skills in new and different ways. This message is music to my ears.

Tim Kelly
Co-Editor
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