

RAS 200 grant helps carers 'Stepping Out'



Sue Bowler talks to the Care for Carers team about the surprising benefits that are coming out of their RAS 200 project.

Since 2015, Care for Carers, a small Edinburgh-based charity, has used astronomy to support local carers, with RAS200 support. Its innovative approach to outreach has begun to pay dividends – and reveal unexpected outcomes. “We at the RAS feel that Care for Carers is blazing a trail that is incredibly important for the health and well-being of these hard-worked people,” says Steve Miller, chair of the RAS200 Steering Group. “But we are also very pleased that the RAS support is enabling Care for Carers to raise even more funding. It was always the aim of RAS200 that our partners would be able to use our support to leverage even more. That way, more people can be reached and helped and the legacy of the project will be that much greater.”

Care for Carers has extended its Stepping Out programme to include tailored astronomy activities and breaks under the dark skies of Dumfries and Galloway Forest Park and the Isle of Coll. “The impact is huge,” says Care for Carers manager Ruth MacLennan. Her colleague Dipa Ward notes: “Some [of our carers] have dropped out of the education system, we have people who’ve had very little exposure to this world. But just the fact that they’re invited to come, they can ask any question they want and there’s nothing they can’t ask – that really makes a difference.”

The initial goal of this project was to harness the benefits of learning about astronomy for carers: boosting well-being and confidence – and that’s working very well. But it is also benefiting carers in the challenges of their everyday lives. “Individual carers use astronomy in different ways, but it works as a tool to help them get through,” says MacLennan. “A lot of people mention having a bad night at home. When things have been difficult, they can go out into the garden and apply the astronomy techniques that they’ve learned to calm themselves down and go looking for something in the sky, or go online or use an app – they’ve engaged with all of them so fully.”

The shared experience of travelling to Coll has also brought staff and carers closer together. “One of the highest scores we get is that people feel safe and they trust us and they feel valued,” says MacLennan. “We have been very much helped and supported by our partnership with Our Dynamic Earth and with Cosmos Planetarium, especially with RAS Fellow Steven Gray. His experience and involvement with the carers over a period of three years, together with a real understanding of carers’ issues, has helped us to work in a way that is responsive, accessible and relevant, as well as fun.”

That trust, of course, makes everything else the

charity does for their carers that bit more effective. But the astronomy breaks do the staff good too. “I think we’re probably in a similar situation to the carers in some ways,” says Ward. “We’re doing very intensive support work and it’s emotionally consuming. We all need a break, to have a wider outlook, to embrace the bigger world.”

Reaching out further

One surprising outcome for Care for Carers is that this programme has extended their reach. “There’s something about these breaks that appeals to our male carers,” says MacLennan. “It’s the astronomy, but it’s also their feeling that they can come to something that’s not talking about their caring role. But we are addressing that by getting them the support to be there. And then they’ll talk about it.” This is

.....
“With this project, we’ve had 36% of take-up from men. That’s a really big deal”

new for Care for Carers, but it is also new in their sector, which struggles to engage male carers. “The demographics of carers nationally are that 60% are women,” says MacLennan. “No carers’ organization that I know of gets 40% of take-up of services from men; it’s usually about 25%. But with this project we’ve had 36% of take-up from men. That’s a really big deal.”

RAS200 has also helped Care for Carers raise funds. “It’s been a step change for us. We started the project just at the time when the council and our statutory funders brought the word ‘innovation’ into absolutely everything they were looking for from us,” recalls MacLennan. “When we produced the first programme with astronomy breaks for carers, some people did not understand it and others thought it was the most amazing thing altogether.” The RAS200 funding made it easier to get matched funding elsewhere. “Because it’s secured funding, it’s got longevity,” says MacLennan, “and because it’s exciting and interesting, other funders like it.”

The programme is expanding to include carers from across Scotland, and there are plans to expand into meteoritics and geophysics – interested Fellows with expertise in the science or in potential funding streams should contact Sheila Kanani at the RAS.

One way that RAS200 projects leave a legacy is to embed astronomy into the life of the partner organizations. This has already begun at Care for Carers. “Everything that we want to get from a break – we want to take the carers away, we want to take the stress away and send them home recharged and having had fun, made new friends and done something different – we are doing with astronomy in a way that’s hugely effective,” says MacLennan. “We’ve opened this door and we’re not going to close it.” ●

AUTHOR

Sue Bowler is Editor of *A&G* and of *A&G Forum*, <http://aandg.org>.

MORE INFORMATION

Care for Carers

<http://www.care4carers.org.uk>

Cosmos Planetarium

<http://www.cosmosplanetarium.co.uk>

Interview with Steven Gray

A&G 2014 59 2.43, <https://academic.oup.com/astrogeo/article/59/2/2.43/4935786>

RAS200: Sky & Earth

<https://ras200.org>

Sheila Kanani, RAS Education,

Outreach and Diversity officer

skanani@ras.ac.uk