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Stand Together

Stone Soup Academy is a secondary school in the centre of Nottingham that works with troubled students, helping them do better both inside and outside of the facility. We spoke to Headteacher Kerrie Henton and Head of Engagement Oliver Sillito about its recent **Stand Up to Knife Crime** comedy event and how it engages its students...

In the European folk story *Stone Soup*, a hungry traveller arrives at a small village. The villagers cannot offer him any food, saying they had a poor harvest. He says not to worry – he plans to make them all stone soup. Stone Soup Academy has this story pinned up in their reception area. You may have walked past their black door on High Pavement and not thought much of it, but tucked behind it is a school — one that works a bit differently.

"All the students have all either been excluded or have been at risk of exclusion at their previous school. A lot of schools have to create their curriculum to meet government targets, whereas we look at the needs of the students and work out what needs to be put in place," says Kerrie Henton, Headteacher of the academy. "This is based on our core vision of creating unimagined futures; that underpins everything we do because our learners come to us thinking they cannot achieve anything. They come to us looking at the floor, both physically and internally."

Building trusting relationships with their students is a key goal of Stone Soup: "If a student knows that you care whether they're successful, and you care about whether they had a good night last night or if they had a meal with their family, they become more engaged, and start to buy in to what we are doing," Kerrie continues. "These students have been punished enough, so we want to show them what a difference their choices will make." The school clearly knows what it's doing – earlier this year it maintained its Ofsted Outstanding status.

Tailoring lessons to students is how stand-up first made its way into the school. When he first applied for a Media teaching job at the school, Oliver was offered the chance to meet with a student who was at risk of exclusion to teach him all about stand-up, after Ollie had mentioned his past performance at the Nottingham Comedy Festival. "I had to embed English into it – he wrote it while I taught him boundaries." If the student didn't turn up to school, he offered his time to the engagement team, which he was later asked to join full time. Last year, he was promoted to head of the department.

Finding innovative ways to draw in students is something the school is always keen to do. Over the past year they've worked to combat concerns over one of the most pressing problems in the country today – knife crime. Unfortunately, many of the students at Stone Soup have had experience with knife crime or have seen it happening around them. "I think it's spoken about so much that it gets watered down. But when you look at the reality of it, that's another person affected or another family affected or another young person in jail," Ollie tells me. "If you're not coming together as a community or think of it as just another thing on the news, it's going to carry on."

From this thought came the idea for the first Stand Up to Knife Crime event. Ollie wanted to ensure the event was still as positive as possible: "It's not about making a joke of it, but about getting parents and others involved too," he says. Kerrie agrees, saying, "Engaging the parents is actually more challenging, because their only experience of being invited into schools is negative. We wanted to turn that on its head."

With Ollie being a stand-up comedy pro, he is used to organising events. "The point of Stone Soup Academy is that everyone gets involved and one

person isn't left with all the work. But everyone chipped in. Everyone knew why we're doing it," he says. Considering the nature of the event and their target audience, Ollie was nervous about how it was going to go down with the audience on the night. "I hid behind a door for the first half of it! But then I squeezed in the back and just watched. The audience and the students all loved it."

The importance of events like this was made clear by the people who attended. Not only did they have students, staff and parents in the audience, but there were also appearances from Police Commissioner Paddy Tipping, members of the executive team at the council, and CEO of the Ben Kinseller Trust, Pat Green.

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While there are plans in the works to make Stand Up to Knife Crime bigger and better – Ollie is keeping hush hush about big comedians he has been in talks with – the school are continuing to find alternative ways to raise awareness about knife crime. They've worked with the National Justice Museum and Nottinghamshire Police, and even took students down to the anti-knife crime exhibition in Islington dedicated to murdered teen Ben Kinseller. However, they are keen for local businesses to help them as well. "Ideas like the stand-up event – ones that are based in Nottingham, collaborating with Nottingham people and businesses – are amazing for the students because it gives them a different viewpoint," Kerrie says. "We want students to experience things they've never had before."

The staff at Stone Soup hope that hosting events like this will encourage the kids to become more invested in their own lives and focus on their studies. As a school, 84% of their learners achieved GCSE English and Maths – students that for all intents and purposes had been given up on. At the end of each academic year the school has a Suits Day, where the students achievements are celebrated at a special ceremony. As well as individual awards, every student gets a plaque congratulating them on finishing their journey. Kerrie tells me: "We put belief back into them. You see the difference in them. They're looking up, and they see that they have a future."

That old folk tale doesn't end with a bowl of watery dirt. In the story, the hungry traveller convinces the people of the town to each share a small amount of their food in order to make a meal that everyone enjoys. The school fosters the same sense of community both inside and outside the school. It wants more people to be involved in its community – especially when it comes to talking about knife crime. Ollie says: "There's no quick fix, and if you can save a couple of people, then you've done your bit. If more people do their bit, it will be spoken about much differently."

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