

# Eco-therapy - the Root of Well-being



Pictured: (back, left to right) John Buddie, Employment Development Worker, Momentum Skills; and Peter Neely with (middle, left to right) Joe McCarron, Alex McLean and George Lewis and (front) Lorraine Murray, Employment Development Worker, Momentum Skills' Pathways programme.

There's growing evidence that being outdoors and being active greatly benefits our mental and physical well-being. So, when the opportunity to set up an allotment project for people who attend Momentum Skills' acquired brain injury programme, Pathways, in Glasgow came up, Employment Development Worker Lorraine Murray grabbed it with both hands.

**S**INCE THE PROJECT commenced in May at Glasgow's Bellahouston Park, participants have learned a range of practical gardening skills from planting, cropping and composting to building fences and laying paths. But, as Lorraine explains, individuals are reaping other benefits too.

"It's taken several years to get the allotment project off the ground,

from sourcing the land to raising funds for gardening equipment," says Lorraine. "But the hard work has been worth it, because not only are participants improving their physical health from undertaking manual work outdoors and eating fresh produce from the garden, they're benefiting in many other ways. For example, learning about horticulture has enhanced some individuals' concentration and memory skills, which quite often are affected when

someone sustains a brain injury. It has also improved some people's mobility and stamina, as well as increasing confidence and self-esteem. I'm proud to say that each participant in the project has progressed in one way or another, including moving on to further education, training or employment."

One such individual is former industrial cleaner Joe McCarron, who sustained his brain injury when he

fell from a ladder and fractured his skull. He began the Pathways programme in March 2009. "When I joined Momentum Skills, I did things I never thought I'd be able to do," says Joe. "It was through its programme that I got involved in the allotment project. Despite having completed the Pathways programme in February this year, I still help out at the allotment one day per week and I work two days per week at another allotment in Glasgow. Working outdoors helps blow the cobwebs out of my head because I'm just concentrating on the work I'm doing. As well as learning how to grow different plants and vegetables, the project also teaches people to work together as a team and to sort out any problems."

Peter Neely joined Momentum Skills in September 2010. He sustained his brain injury when loose scaffolding fell on his head. "After my accident, my life was turned upside-down and I had to learn everything again. Beforehand, I was easygoing; I played football and golf and I enjoyed work. Now, despite looking physically fine, I have problems that people can't see, problems that are in my head. As a result of my injury, I have poor concentration and am easily distracted by noise. Even the

telephone ringing or people talking can be distracting. I find working at the Momentum Skills' allotment relaxing and peaceful. It's really helped me to improve my teamwork skills and talk to people again. It's also good being able to use my brain for things like planning and problem solving. All the staff at Momentum Skills in Glasgow, from the receptionist to the managers, are brilliant. They go beyond their job title and provide a great service."

Alex McLean, a former labourer, joined the Pathways programme in May this year. He sustained his injury in 2008 after a blood clot in his brain. "I really like being outdoors and doing manual work so I'm enjoying working at the allotment. The staff at Momentum Skills also helped me to get a job at a wood-recycling project two days per week, where I help to create home and garden wood products. As well as this, I work at another allotment in Glasgow, where I'm teaching new volunteers gardening skills I have learned through Momentum Skills."

George Lewis sustained his injury when he fell and hit his head. He joined Pathways last August. "Working at the allotment gives me a reason to get up in the morning. I



Joe McCarron (left) and George Lewis (right) proudly display the fruits, or rather vegetables, of their labour.

thoroughly enjoy it, because it makes me feel useful again. I didn't know anything about gardening when I joined, because I've never had a garden, having lived all my life in tenement buildings. I've learned a lot about gardening since taking part in the project but, more importantly, it's given me self-worth. I hope that working at the allotment will demonstrate to employers that I'm ready and willing to work."

Momentum Skills' Pathways programme provides specialist training and support for adults with an acquired brain injury who want to return to work, training or further education. The programme is offered in Glasgow, Ayrshire, Aberdeen and the Scottish Borders. ■



Pictured: Alex McLean (kneeling) and Peter Neely (standing) hard at work laying a new path at the allotment.

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