



Press Release

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Ex drug offenders prepare for Royal visit

A group of ex drug using offenders prepare to meet the Princess Royal in September when she visits a project they are involved in as part of their community orders.

The Good Soil Project, based at Top Barn, just outside Worcester, has been running for the past 18 months and is proving a success. It is based on a 'back to the land' project launched in 2005 by West Mercia Probation and local TV gardening presenter, Monty Don. It is aimed at drug using offenders whose habit has led them to persistently offend.

Offenders can spend up to 5 days a week at the project and are taught how to grow their own produce and work off the land. This provides them with a real opportunity to break their cycle of drug abuse and offending. The healthy daily structure and meaningful work the project offers helps to improve their health, increase their confidence and teach them new skills which can help them get a job when they leave.

One of the offenders on the project, Paul Raymond, 27 from Tolladine, has been taking heroin for 11 years and was using 4 bags a day when he first joined. He said, "The simple reason I am out here is because I want to get clean off drugs and I have done it this time. Being here has taken me out of the environment I was in. That's the whole point you come here as a drug user and come out drug and crime free".

Elaine Pritchard, 35 from Malvern, says the project has been a life saver for her. She was using heroin and crack cocaine and her weight had plummeted down to about six and a half stone when she joined. She said,

“I was a mess; if I hadn’t come here I seriously believe I would have been dead or in prison. This gives you the motivation to get up every day”.

Elaine’s physical health has improved dramatically since joining the project. She now cooks healthy meals each day for the group using the fresh produce they grow.

Rocky Hudson, project co-ordinator has worked alongside the offenders and volunteers to transform the six acre plot from scratch to a productive enterprise.

Rocky welcomed the Royal visit, he said,

“We are really excited to have Princess Anne visit us to recognise what we do and we hope she sees a normal working day here”.

David Chantler, Chief Executive of West Mercia Probation Trust is keen to encourage more projects of this sort, he said,

“Probation remains responsible for managing community orders but we are increasingly looking for community based projects in which people can get real experiences and develop their skills in ways which are relevant.

Projects such as this ensure that offenders are supervised for long periods of time in constructive activities. We select offenders for whom lengthy periods of supervision away from the temptations of crime are particularly relevant, for example the serial shoplifter, stealing to fund a drug habit.”

The project is jointly funded by West Mercia Probation and Police and the land is given on a peppercorn rent by landowners David and Di Harper. The equipment was initially bought by West Mercia Care Trust, a charitable organisation that works with probation.

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PHOTO/INTERVIEW OPPORTUNITY

The Princess Royal will be visiting the project between 11.45 am and 12.20 pm on Monday 22 September 2008. There will be an opportunity to photograph the Princess Royal meeting with the offenders. The Princess Royal will be planting a black pear tree to commemorate her visit.

Staff and offenders at the project will also be available for interview.