

Career Guidance in Disadvantaged Communities

Justice Prince Community Interest Company (CIC) is a small none government organisation (NGO) based in the north east of England. Justice Prince work in disadvantaged areas in the UK supporting the active engagement of local people in social action projects; identifying needs / concerns and working collectively to develop appropriate solutions. Target groups include: low income families, women, single parent families, carers, offenders / ex-offenders, long term unemployed, excluded young people, vulnerable older people, people with disabilities and mental health issues, alcohol and substance misusers and minority groups.

Justice Prince is governed by a board of directors, people with vast experience of work in disadvantaged areas in the UK and internationally. The organisation employs a small highly skilled and experienced staff team which includes youth and community development workers, tutors / trainers, mentors and career guidance practitioners.

Justice Prince was named in the Fortuna 50 Index 2016; an annual index of the fastest growing women led small businesses / enterprises in the UK. The Fortuna 50 is a government initiative in celebration of International Women's Day aiming to celebrate achievements and success of women led businesses, to inspire other women to take the entrepreneurship route.

The organisation was set up in 2006 by sisters Karen Clark and Julie Cruddas; founding directors and employees of the organisation. In the discussion below Karen and Julie reflect on their motivation for setting up the organisation and their approach to career guidance.

Karen: Remember how we used to dream of one day setting up an organisation to support disadvantaged people in the area we grew up? We talked about it for years and even had the name agreed long before we actually took the plunge and set up Justice Prince.

Julie: Yes - we'd both been involved in similar lines of work for years but employed in different organisations working all over the place - the UK, Europe and Africa. Every time we met up back home people would ask us to come and work with them and we'd always say yes, one day we will definitely do that! It seems strange to think now we have actually done it! I always find it odd that people question why we choose to work with people in disadvantaged areas?

Karen: Yeah, but it shouldn't be that surprising considering our own background and personal biographies. Growing up in a deprived area in a low-income family and seeing the impact this had on our parents certainly raised my awareness of poverty and inequality from a very young age. I think I've always had a strong sense of things just not being fair and this makes me feel angry! I think that fuels my passion and motivates me into action; I feel compelled to do something about it!

Julie: I totally agree it is definitely about personal biography, it shapes who we are and how we see the world. I suppose it would seem odd for us not to do this type of work. I do find it totally amazing though that many people living outside the UK – and in fact many people living in the UK - don't realise that 'disadvantaged' communities and people actually do exist!

Karen: I can understand why it may be difficult for people from less wealthy countries to believe that poor people exist in the UK; the UK is after all one of the wealthiest developed countries in the world.

Julie: Remember when our friend Sue from Africa came to visit? Sue was genuinely shocked to see that some people in the UK were homeless, living on the streets in cardboard boxes and people on low income were struggling to pay the rent, heat the home and buy food for the family.

Karen: Yeah, Sue really did think everyone in the UK was rich and lived in castles! Many people don't realise that the UK may be one of the wealthiest countries in the world but that doesn't mean everyone in the UK is wealthy and the gap between the rich and poor in the UK is increasing.

Julie: Who would believe that people living in the wealthiest parts of the UK, certain areas in London for example, will on average live up to 20 years longer than people living in the most deprived areas in the country! Why should anyone accept this or think it's fair?

Karen: When you understand the context of inequality both in the UK and elsewhere in the world, what we do and why we do it makes total sense - we simply don't think it's fair that many people are marginalised, stigmatised and living in poverty!

Julie: Our target groups are often seen as problematic by wider society and by many mainstream service providers often being described as 'hard to reach' or hard to help' but I think this may say more about the nature of society and mainstream services than it does about the target groups. It's not that people are hard to reach as such – it's that services are either not accessible / available or not organised in appropriate ways for our target groups which then highlights the need for an alternative approach to engage people in appropriate ways.

Karen: Yeah, I think a real strength of our approach to career guidance is the fact that our services are community based – we take our service to the people; we deliver in places where people live their everyday lives such as the pub or the local community centre. They don't have to travel outside their own area so they feel more comfortable and confident and don't incur travel expenses!

We also adopt a genuine person centred approach, developing services in direct response to the needs and concerns identified by our target groups. Engaging target groups in conversations to gain understanding of how they see themselves, their views about employment etc. is about valuing and validating the voice and experience of target groups, we see them as the experts in their own lived experience.

Julie: Working with people in groups is another characteristic of our approach and a really effective way to build confidence; people realise they are not isolated individuals but actually share a common experience with others. Its supports development of collective solutions to shared problems.

Karen: Many target groups are shocked when we engage them in this type of conversation; identifying the nature and type of support they consider appropriate and meaningful. Usually because no-one's ever asked them this type of question before.

Julie: The voice of the service user often gets lost and this can be very disempowering.

Karen: It's ultimately about serving the interests of service users; we're not simply trying to fit people into jobs – especially not jobs they're not interested in, low paid jobs or zero hour contracts – our approach is more holistic, we're trying to support people to have the best chance in life.

Julie: Yeah, and I think it's important for people to know someone believes in them and will speak on their behalf if necessary. This links to the issue of social capital which I think is really important when it comes to getting a job, it helps to be well connected or to know people who can give you a reference.

Remember when we were setting up Justice Prince, one of the biggest challenges for me was breaking down hidden barriers - it took a long time for me to realise the nature of those barriers. A good example of this and one that really hit home with me occurred during a meeting we had with our Member of Parliament (MP). Can you recall? We were sitting with our MP at his home drinking coffee in his kitchen. We talked about the difficulties we were facing in relation to securing public sector (council) support and we were really frustrated that we kept hitting what felt like brick walls!

The MP listened carefully nodding empathetically and then stated “you women are very passionate and excellent at your work; I've seen nobody better. The problem you have is clear – you have no social capital” I remember thinking what does that mean? No social capital? Then I realised it meant because we'd grown up poor, we didn't have professional family or friendship networks.

Karen: Yeah, and he was absolutely right! We didn't have any elite friends to help open doors or make introductions to influential people - it was just us – and let's not forget our lovely mam who used to cash flow the organisation in the early days, ha ha! I don't think we'd have got through year one without her!

Julie: I feel really proud when I think about everything we've overcome and what we've achieved. One moment I recall which is very personal to me, is a time I was sat with my mam at the family home, the house we'd grown up in. Mam had suffered a lot over the years particularly with anxiety and stress which on reflection was directly related to living in poverty. My mother worried most days when we were small children whether she had enough food to feed us bless her and she always worked so hard. Anyway, we sat talking in the sitting room and she said “who would have thought my three children would have grown up to run their own business” Mustn't forget brother Tom who has set up his own business in the construction trade! The pride on mam's face is something I will never forget; she was so proud - bless her.

Karen: I know, both mam and dad were so very proud and so supportive. It makes me feel really proud to know we have made a real difference to the lives of so many people. That's what makes it all worthwhile; that's exactly why we set up Justice Prince!