

St Vincent's enriches lives



Volunteer Keith Newcombe and member Rachel Metcalf using the computer, which has a special keyboard with large, highly-coloured keys



St Vincent's hit the headlines in 2008 because it wants to build a new centre for disabled adults in Cheltenham. But what happens at the centre? Who runs it and who uses it? **WEEKEND** magazine reports

THE tune was *That's Amore*, sung by Dean Martin. The sound was tinny. The 'hi-fi' was the low-tech speaker of an office laptop.

But Ben Wythes was ecstatic. He clapped and cheered as this 1950s golden oldie echoed down the corridor, and added extra sound effects by tooting the hooter on his wheelchair.

This was the St Vincent's Centre on a day when 25-year-old Ben has a few hours away from the home he shares with his mum and dad in Stroud.

He is one of 50 severely disabled adults who benefit from the therapeutic centre in Central Cross Drive, Cheltenham.

The centre was set up in 1954 by the Cheltenham Spastics Society. Today it provides day care for adults for whom there is little other provision.

There's a craft room, hot tub, sensory garden, computer room, music sessions and a sensory room. Most of all, St Vincent's offers a day out for people who might otherwise spend 80 per cent of their waking hours in a wheelchair in one room.

For manager Becky Evans and her 22 staff, St Vincent's is a passion as well as a job.

"Our members are part of everything I do,



The garden at the St Vincent's Centre

everything I think of. This place has taken me over," she said.

At 27, Becky Evans is a wise head on young shoulders. The Gloucester girl took the helm four years ago, inspired by her nan, a psychiatric nurse who used to take Becky to work with her as a child.

She says: "For many of our members, coming here is the only bit of fun they get. All they want is encouragement that they can achieve something. Obviously there are boundaries, but it's important that they get choices – like choosing their own food from the menu instead of getting what someone else thinks is best."

She is proud that most of the 22 staff, many volunteers and members have a long association with the centre and rarely leave unless it's to retire.

One long-serving member of staff is head of the craft room Sue Gibbins. In the studio, she encourages 55-year-old Leon,

who has limited eyesight, to paint a self-portrait.

"I get the atmosphere going with music, scented candles and oils and they come in buzzing," she said. Examples of members' handiwork deck the walls and window sills: paintings, pottery, sculpture and cut-outs."

"This goes beyond art. In this room they are a person who matters. They've never had anyone who has taken the time to talk to them about what they can do."

It's noon and cook Betty Castledine has spent the morning cooking roast lamb for 15. She says it's nothing special. But as 15 variations on a roast lamb theme emerge from her kitchen, it's clear she knows each of her members' individual tastes by heart.

"It's my second family. I love it and I know I'll be here until I retire," says Betty who has spent 10 years at St Vincent's and is still 20 years from retirement age.

She is proud to have won four stars for food hygiene from Gloucestershire County Council.

Wheelchair-bound Jayne Davis, 42, has no doubt that St Vincent's is a lifesaver. One of 12 children, she is severely disabled with cerebral palsy and lives alone in Cheltenham.

"Everyone here is my friend. If I get into trouble with something like paperwork, they help me. And if anyone gets upset, they listen – they don't push it under the carpet," she says.

When Billie-Jane Mozley comes to St Vincent's she directs her wheelchair straight to the computer room. She always wears pink, and sports a lip stud and heavy tattoos on both arms as she surfs the internet, looking for pink fishnet tights.

"I've only been coming for three months but I fit like a glove," says the former Star College student. "What I like about this place is that it's about individuals. They don't try to stick a label on you."

It is for such reasons that St Vincent's has such a long waiting list.

Case study: Maggie Woolsey

AFTER retiring from her post as radiographer at the Cobalt unit in Cheltenham, Maggie Woolsey wanted to do something worthwhile.

Three years later, she's still at St Vincent's. "I came because I fancied helping with a few sessions in the hot tub and I ended up in the computer room. Computers give disabled people freedom. They can chat to their friends on Facebook. There are games which they can play by just using the space bar. Otherwise, so much of their time is spent in a wheelchair in a corner.

"I'm not a teacher or anything. I just love it here because they're so appreciative."

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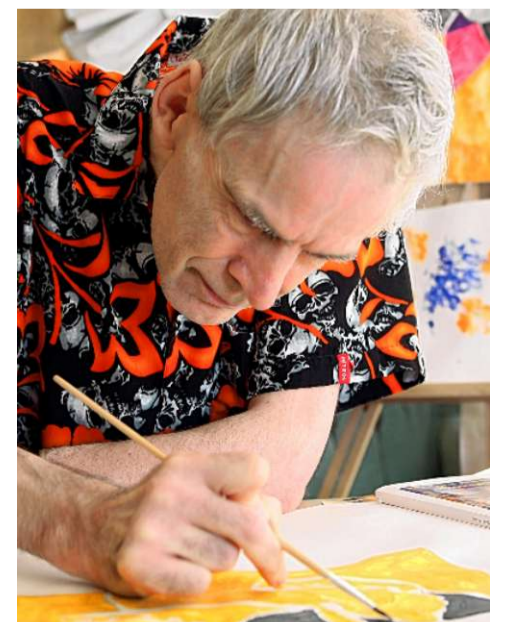
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Carer Lauren Oliver with Bonnie Beard in the hot tub



Stephen Thomas paints in the art room