

Happy Slough!

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Summer 2005. I amongst around 50 other volunteers took part in a BBC experiment called '*Making Slough Happy*'. This social experiment led by six 'happiness' specialists, spanning a variety of disciplines from psychology to economics, used us 'guinea pigs' to explore issues around the '*Science of Happiness*', looking at how we generate happiness in our lives and communities.

This four-part observational documentary followed a team of 'happiness' experts; a psychologist, a psychotherapist, a workplace specialist and a social entrepreneur as they explored the different experiences of the 50 volunteers. The volunteers had been selected from over 100 'applicants' during recorded interviews which took place at what was then 'The Centre' in Slough.

One of the experts said "Our primary work involves a series of intensive workshops on the psychology of well-being and happiness and that the volunteers will take their newfound skills and attitudes out into the community, and in this way we will begin to change the psychological climate of Slough." A big ambition.

Once a week, on a Sunday we were taken to the BBC centre in Caversham, Reading. Here we were made to listen to various lectures by the experts and then divided up into smaller groups to take part in various activities such as the music group that I took part in. It was strange being scrutinised under the watchful eye of television cameras.

What suprised me was the number of us who had mental health issues and faced difficult life challenges. Our participation sometimes led to us looking deep into our own hardships. I befriended a young single mother, with two small children, who suffered from severe depression and anxiety. She spent much of the time crying - which was filmed but not shown in the final series. During weekdays, the cameras were out recording the various activities ranging from workplace workshops, singing sessions, photography projects amongst others.

The most 'weird' session took place in the graveyard of St.Giles' Church in Stoke Poges where the poet Thomas Grey wrote 'Elegy written in a country churchyard' in 1751. Here we were meant to explore experiences of dying and grief. Apparently, this experiment was supposed to inspire and instill feelings of 'happiness' due to not being dead yet!

The 'experiment' concluded with a so-called 'celebration' in Slough Town Square one Saturday afternoon. One of the activities involved the revealing of a giant photographic mosaic of volunteer Veronica, which consisted of hundreds of postcard sized photographs from the various volunteers. This was my biggest contribution. I volunteered to scan in the very many 'hard copy' photographs that had been donated. The 'choir group' performed on the stage as did the local tribute band !daft! As cameras moved around loads of bemused and bewildered shoppers looked on.

Am I 'happier' as a result of participating? No, and I doubt if many of the other volunteers were either. Did the televised experiment and experience succeed in 'Making Slough Happy'? I've not noticed any change. Have you?

-ENDS-

500 words

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