

# Garden of delights

Source talks to Ailsa Holmes of the Friends of Platt Fields, overall winners in this year's Unilever Dragonfly Awards for environmental volunteers.



With a herb sofa, a working pizza oven and a customised VW Beetle to hand, Ailsa Holmes could almost live in the eco-garden at Platt Fields Park. Indeed, at the moment it seems that she more or less does. The 26-year-old founder of PowWow Eco Arts is responsible for

the upkeep of the space, which she maintains with help from the rest of the Friends of Platt Fields.

The Friends' impressive achievements in the park, of which the eco-garden is just one, were recently recognised when they were

crowned overall winners of this year's Unilever Dragonfly Awards.

#### MORE INFORMATION

Details of next year's Dragonfly Awards will be available shortly on [www.merseybasin.org.uk](http://www.merseybasin.org.uk)

**Q How did you become involved with the Friends of Platt Fields?** Originally I did arts workshops on behalf of PowWow Eco Arts in the lead up to the first ever Garden of Delights festival, and then almost overnight we were given this whole space to look after. After that I was out here digging every day and got to know people, so my involvement with the Friends came from there.

**Q How did the Friends group first get together?** There used to be a pets corner here in the eco-garden space, which was very badly vandalised and then shut down, more or less overnight. A group of concerned residents came together and formed the Friends group as a result of that. That was in 1997, and we think we were the first Friends group in the country.

**Q Who would be your typical member?** We get absolutely everybody. We host regular open meetings that are really popular, with over 120 members now. We're getting more young people these days, from every ethnic background. This is a multicultural area, and that's reflected in the group. The park itself is like a little community too, you see the same people every day.

**Q What's the most rewarding thing about your work with the Friends?** The way that the group has embraced and supported other community groups that hold events in the park, especially recently,

like the Enchanted Evenings and the Garden of Delights. And local people have written to tell us they've seen marked improvements in the park, from community planting pots to the clean up of the lake. That really makes it all worthwhile.

**Q The eco-garden is your domain, what have you done there?** We wanted to put permanent arts features on the pets corner site, starting with the amphitheatre for performance groups. Local children created a composting unit in the shape of a worm. We've also got a herb garden; raised beds; the beginnings of an insect sculpture; and our latest project, a beautiful cob oven with a growing grass roof. Anyone can hire the oven door and cook pizza and bread in the oven.

**Q What's the idea behind the project?** It's a preventative measure against vandalism. We encourage young people to get involved with projects in the park, because there's a huge issue with ASBOs here, and not much for young people to do. We work with young offenders every week. They created a lot of this space, and they feel a sense of ownership and pride in it. They made a rustic bench, and you should have seen their reaction when it was vandalised!

**Q How have the Friends cleaned up the lake?** Last summer there was a serious algae problem, and the fish were dying. It was partly the

heat, partly people throwing bread to the geese. We try to discourage that, because it's bad for the geese, and aggravates the algae situation. So the Friends really pushed for a pump to aerate the water. It's now in place, and has dramatically changed the lake. We're now looking into draining it completely for a little while so we can install an oxygenation plant.

**Q How would you like to see the park being used in the future?** I'd like to see it being *the* events park in the city. To achieve that we need improved infrastructure, such as power points and better recycling facilities. There are lots of groups who'd like to work in the park, from secular funerals to military fitness groups, and we'd like to support that. Also, to host more community events, treasure hunts, cycling maintenance, concerts. And I'd like to develop a green resource, making everything here as environmentally friendly as possible. Parks are the last open spaces where people come together and interact with one another. It's vital that we look after them.

**Q Congratulations on your Dragonfly Award...** Thank you, it's just the icing on the cake. There are so many amazing, active local people, and we have such fabulous events here. The real reward is seeing people enjoying themselves in the park.