

AFRO-BEAT ISOLATION PROJECT

We developed this project in accordance with our strategic aim to promote diversity by fostering good relationships, knowledge and mutual understanding between different racial groups. The main aim of Afro-Beat Isolation is to encourage lonely people to attend sessions of African culture as a way of reducing isolation and meeting new people.

Thanks to a **grant of £8,500** given to us in early December 2009 by **Big Lottery Fund** through its Awards for All Programme, we were able to start implementing this project in the area of Medway, Kent. We advertised the news of the grant and the forthcoming start of the project on our website; we also sent press releases to local media including BBC South East, BBC Radio Kent, Kent Messenger, Medway Messenger, and Kent TV. We also printed hundreds of leaflets which we left in many places including local churches, community centres, libraries and the Medway Council. In addition, we met with the leaders of several groups and organisations to enlist their support for our project.

We launched this project at the 44TWO Social Club in Gillingham, Kent, on 11th February 2010. The **Minister and MP for Gillingham and Rainham, Paul Clark**, gave the keynote speech, and commended us “for promoting community cohesion in Gillingham and other areas of Medway through this project”.

There were firebrand performances by **Kanko Arts**. In addition to the Minister, other high profile speakers included **Ms. Jocelyne Ngassa**, CEO of Cameroon Forum, Goldsmiths’ **Professor Tim Valentine**, and the Life Coach and Lecturer **Ms. Ngozi Keri**. They all encouraged attendees (42 in total) and all interested Medway people to participate in this project.

The news of the launch featured in several media, including Medway Messenger (http://www.medwaymessenger.co.uk/medway_messenger/news/2010/february/24/project_to_help_you_learn_about.aspx) and Nubia Magazine (March / April 2010 issue).

APA hosted the first of the planned four series of free African culture sessions in the Medway areas from April to May 2010 in **Gillingham**. The second series took place in **Chatham** in July, and the third series, which we hosted in **Rochester**, ended in August. We are finalising preparations for the start of the last series of African culture sessions. We will be hosting them in **Gillingham** throughout October, to coincide with the Black History Month.

The lessons have, so far, proved to be a major success: given that no other organisation had ever carried out such activities in either Gillingham or other Medway areas, we thought we would be lucky to get an average of 18 participants. But, to our surprise and delight, **the average number of participants has been slightly above 30.**

The first series of sessions took place twice per week, with sessions lasting 2 hours.



However, following feedback from participants, who came from a wide variety of ethnic and social backgrounds, we decided to host only 1 session of 3 to 4 hours per week. Attendees had a unique opportunity to meet new people, and received free first-class lessons in topics such as African History, African Story Telling, African Languages, African Peoples and African Philosophy.

Dr. Ama Biney (standing right, with a white coat) with participants.

The African History lessons, delivered by **Dr. Ama Biney**, who has 15 years of lecturing experience in the areas of African and Caribbean History at Oxford University, have proven to be particularly popular. The African Story Telling sessions, given by the Cameroonian-born writer **Susan Akono**, the African Language sessions, delivered by **Dr. Seraphin Kamdem**, Lecturer in African Culture and Languages at the School of Oriental and African Studies, and the African Philosophy lessons, delivered by **Ms. Sylvie Aboa-Bradwell**, Director of APA, have also received very positive feedback.

Feedback received from the 96 people who have so far attended our African culture sessions reveals that they have benefited enormously: many have expressed their satisfaction because they have managed to reduce their isolation by making new friends; others have become more active by volunteering for APA, many others have discovered African culture, and deepened their understanding of African communities. The latter demonstrates that there have been wider benefits, including strengthening of social cohesion and establishing better relationships between African and other UK communities.



The benefits for our organisation so far have exceeded all our expectations: we received an invitation from, and were **congratulated by the British Prime Minister Gordon Brown** for “promoting community cohesion in Medway” through this project when he visited several Medway Towns in April 2010.

APA Director with Paul Clark MP, Prime Minister Gordon Brown, Sara Brown, and 2 assistants of Paul Clark

In addition, we have raised the profile of our organisation and substantially increased interest in our work throughout Medway. For instance, we have been invited to talk about our work to several groups, including the **Medway Multiple Sclerosis (MS) Society** in July 2010. We have increased the **number of volunteers, from 4 last year to over 10 this year.**

Thanks to the Afro-Beat Isolation, we have been acknowledged by local authorities and communities as one of the organisations serving Medway communities with professionalism and dedication. For instance, we were invited by the **Medway Council** to participate in the **Medway Independence Fair**, which took place on **17th March 2010** at the King Charles Hotel in Gillingham.

Participation in the Medway Independence Fair gave APA an opportunity to advertise the Afro-

Beat Isolation project, and talk about our organisation and work to the high profile guests who attended the event. These included the **Disability Minister Jonathan Shaw MP**.

