

Lessons in leadership from the

Groups helping young Londoners into work have been given £500,000 in the latest grant round from the Dispossessed Fund.

David Cohen meets an inspirational mother of six who founded one of these groups

THE DISPOSSESSED FUND

BATTERSEA Park Road in Wandsworth is the border. To the north are the multi-million-pound mansion blocks of Prince of Wales Drive, to the south loom the overcrowded tower block estates where 10,000 people, mostly single parent families, live in poverty.

Chances are, residents on the northern side of the divide will have never heard of Marie Hanson, 47, but on the sprawling Doddington and Rollo estate, this single mother of six is a local hero: hoodies clamour to carry her groceries, teenagers and young mothers say she has turned their lives around. They call her "the Queen of the Doddington estate".

It has been an unlikely journey. Ten years ago she was a victim of domestic violence and in no position to help anyone. "I had such low self-esteem that I just took my partner's beatings for years," she said.

"The breaking point came when he dangled our three-month baby from the second floor window and threatened to drop her. I gathered up the kids and left, but I had no plan and for three nights we slept in my car."

But Ms Hanson tapped into an inner strength and after being re-housed in a council flat on the Patmore Estate (adjacent to the Doddington), she decided to start the Storm Family Centre to empower abused women.

In 2008, when her 18-year-old son Earljay was stabbed and nearly died trying to protect a friend, she expanded their focus to help guide young people – such as her son's attackers – away from knives and into jobs.

Today her centre on the Doddington

estate is a port in a storm for more than 1,000 women and 400 Neets, young people not in education, employment or training.

She employs a team of highly-skilled youth workers and runs accredited numeracy, literacy and IT classes for jobless youths, as well as a weekly "jobshop", but cuts in funding meant this provision was in jeopardy.

The Evening Standard Dispossessed Fund has stepped in to award Storm a £50,000 grant to deliver a skills training programme over two years to 100 local jobless young people aged 16 to 24.

It is one of 13 grants amounting to £593,787 that the Dispossessed Fund is giving to grassroots groups that are transforming young lives across London and it will be paid out of the £1 million we received from the Big Lottery Fund in November as part of its People Powered Change approach.

The balance of just over £400,000 will be awarded this year, in consultation with our fund administrators, The Community Foundation Network and The London Community Foundation. So far, of £9.3 million raised by the Dispossessed Fund since July 2010, 650 grants totalling £4.6 million have been given out.

Dharmendra Kanani, England director of the Big Lottery Fund, said: "Marie Hanson is hugely inspirational. She noticed that young people on her estate were in need of support and put People Powered Change into action by creating a project that helps them get the best out of their lives. Today's awards of grants through the Dispossessed Fund out of Lottery funding will create opportunities for many young Londoners as they take their next steps on life's



ladder." Ms Hanson is unequivocal. "Without this money, I could not continue to employ the youth workers we need to run this programme," she said. Like many of the grantees, she started her group fuelled by passion but with no financial backing. "Locals called me 'Miss do-gooder' and laughed at me, saying, 'Who does she think she is?' At our first coffee morning at the community centre, just four women pitched up. I gradually put on numeracy, literacy and self-esteem classes, helped by a small grant from Wandsworth

council, and it quickly grew by word of mouth and soon we had 50 and then 100 women."

Simone Ujah, 25, Storm's lead youth worker, said locals liked the way Ms Hanson led without judgment and by example. "The people we help are very vulnerable. Marie is a strong role model – she's dyslexic, she was homeless, she nearly lost her son, she's been down but showed you can still come out on top."

It was her son's near-fatal stabbing and the London riots that led her to expand to help young people. "At a

post-riots Wandsworth town-hall meeting, everyone was angrily blaming the kids, but I said, 'Look, if you give them a chance, you will see that not all kids are the same'." Nick Goble, a local Winkworth estate agent, took up the challenge, offering eight young people from Storm in-work training and classes in CV writing and teamwork. Later Waitrose in Clapham Junction came on board as work placement partners for Storm as well.

Gavin Brown, 17, who lives on the Doddington estate, said her interven-

Queen of the Doddington estate



tion had changed his life. "I was brought up by my nan and left school with no GCSEs," he said. "I came to the Storm youth club with a lot of attitude but not much else and Marie taught me how to focus and tackle interviews – sitting up straight, making eye contact, turning off my mobile phone, things like that. She helped me to sign up for plumbing college and got me an apprenticeship. Without Marie I'd still be on the streets. She is like a mum to me. To all of us."

Loved: Marie Hanson and, left, with users of the Storm centre including Gavin Brown, with his arm round her, and Natalie Huggins, front left

son got her an apprenticeship and a job at Waitrose in Clapham Junction. Natalie Huggins, 22, was homeless before she enrolled her in literacy and art therapy courses. "She is like a great aunt because her care goes very deep and she has been through a lot," she said. Ms Hanson, modest and unassuming, was born in London to Jamaican parents – her mother was a nurse, her father an engineer – and she grew up in Basingstoke, the seventh of 10 children. She became pregnant at 17 and is immensely proud of her six children,

aged nine to 30, especially Earljay who overcame dyslexia to become a manager for a gas company.

Two years ago, Ms Hanson was invited to the Queen's summer garden party. "I have gone from the pits to the palace," she laughed. "Who would have thought? But really, I don't feel comfortable being in the limelight."

"It's these amazing young people who should take the credit. They have to overcome so much. All I do is wake up the leadership in them and help them choose a better path."

GRANTS FOR MORE GROUPS

STREETS OF GROWTH

What they do: Founded in 2001 by Darren Way who grew up in poverty on a council estate, they work with teenagers at risk or involved in anti-social behaviour.

Grant: £50,000 over two years

Where: Tower Hamlets

How grant will be used: To fund their 360 VisionXcite programme, training 120 young people in business development through creative enterprises, including one that restores old bikes.

CODE 7

What they do: Founded in 2004 by local Brixton musician Peter St Aubyn, they engage young people in creating music, film and multimedia projects, and help them into training and employment.

Grant: £49,234 over two years

Where: Lambeth

How grant will be used: To deliver accredited workshops in sound engineering, ICT, video technology and radio production for 68 hard-to-reach young people.

SUPERKIDZ COMMUNITY TRUST

What they do: Founded by Helen Russell in 1999 on the Ferrier Estate, they provide a youth club and mentoring for poor children.

Grant: £37,928

Where: Greenwich

How grant will be used: To provide training for 125 Neets and those at risk of becoming so to gain Construction Skills certification and help them onto the first rung of the career ladder in the construction industry.

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www.dispossessedfund.communityfoundations.org.uk

THE STORM FAMILY CENTRE

What they do: Founded by Marie Hanson in 2004, Storm is the main youth provider on the Doddington and Rollo Estate.

Grant: £50,000 over two years.

Where: in Wandsworth.

How grant will be used: To deliver employability skills training – including accredited literacy, numeracy and IT classes – for 100 local jobless youths aged 16-24.

BIG LOTTERY FUND

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