



Janet's Appetite Story

Meir Consumerist Christmas Tree

Introduction

Janet is the Chair of the Meir Christmas Events Board and worked with Appetite for the Consumerist Christmas Tree to be constructed for Christmas 2014. The Tree's construction brought together a range of local people, with community involvement one of the project's key aims. The Tree received a mixed response from local people, the press and on social media, with Janet facing some personal criticism because of her involvement.

Project information

The Consumerist Christmas Tree was organised by the Meir Christmas Events Board and Appetite, and was displayed in a prominent place in the Stoke-on-Trent suburb in December 2014. Local people helped with the creation of the tree, transforming 5,000 used carrier bags into giant light-up baubles.

Janet's story

Janet has lived in Meir for over forty years and founded the Broadway Community Association in Meir in 1998. For the past fifteen years she has arranged a Christmas tree for Meir. Back when planning the first tree, she was met with some negativity from people in Meir, who would comment, "Why do you want a Christmas tree in Meir? It'll be vandalised". However Janet succeeded in making a Christmas tree in Meir an annual tradition.

For Christmas 2014, there was no funding available for a traditional tree. Then Rebecca from Appetite showed Janet a photo of the Consumerist Christmas Tree

at the 2013 Lumiere Festival in Durham. “I was absolutely blown away by it,” says Janet. The Meir Christmas Events Board agreed that they would like a Consumerist Christmas Tree for Meir, with Appetite then arranging with the artists to make it happen.

Getting the community involved in the creation of Meir’s Consumerist Christmas Tree was a priority for the project, hoping that local people would have a sense



of pride and achievement in the Tree. Schools, churches, pensioners and other local residents created the Tree’s carrier bag baubles during a series of workshops. Janet remembers how a group of children with learning difficulties enthusiastically set themselves challenges for how many baubles they were going to make.

When the tree was lit up at an event of the 5th December, Janet watched as children in the crowd pointed out, “I put that bag up on there!” The children enjoyed the activity of making the baubles and liked the look of the finished tree itself.

Janet found the community engagement aspect of the project “amazing” and the Tree was something many people cared about. A lot of people “were heart and soul into it” says Janet, highlighting the success of the project in involving local people.

Janet was excited while the tree was being constructed, and even then she knew that it was going to be a “Marmite Tree” that would divide opinion.

After Meir’s Christmas Lights Night, negative letters and comments about the Tree began to appear in The Sentinel (the newspaper for Stoke-on-Trent and the surrounding area) and on social media. Some saw it as “a pile of rubbish” and various rumours spread about the supposed cost of the tree to the Council. There was also the perception among some that it being a non-traditional tree had an anti-Christmas sentiment.

Alongside the negative comments there were also positive ones praising the Tree’s appearance, uniqueness and the community involvement. A local head teacher phoned Janet while the tree was being put up, telling her that it looked amazing. “Then on the night she threw her arms around me and said, ‘It’s totally and utterly superb’,” remembers Janet.

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The Consumerist Christmas Tree has had an impact on Janet, especially during the height of the criticism.

Janet is well known in her community for being the person who has organised a Christmas tree for the past fifteen years, and a lot of the negative comments about the Consumerist Christmas Tree were directed at Janet personally. Janet's longstanding commitment to community volunteering means it has been the case before that people come to her with complaints and criticisms, but often not when things are positive.

Because of the response to the Consumerist Christmas Tree, Janet organised an open meeting for local people to discuss the situation. She faced criticism from attendees, with one woman saying she now feels ashamed to tell people she is from Meir because of the Tree. Janet came home heartbroken, thinking "I can't take this anymore". She felt ready to quit her role in the Residents' Association.

During the planning and construction phases, members of the Appetite team were in regular contact with Janet. Once the Tree was up, however, Janet did not hear anything from them. "I just felt as if they'd gone on holiday, though it was Christmas so why shouldn't they?" she says. She was left to deal with the response. Although Janet was very pro-active in coping with this, such as holding the open meeting and writing a letter to [The Sentinel](#) in response to the criticisms, it would be useful to consider how future volunteers could be supported if having to deal with a negative response to a project.

Reflecting on the experience, Janet thinks that, if she were to do something similar to the Consumerist Christmas Tree again, it would have to be on a grander scale, with more decorations around the area. The 2013 Consumerist Christmas Tree in Durham (*pictured, right*) was part of a bigger festive display, whereas



Meir's Tree was on its own. Janet feels that if the Meir's Tree had instead gone to somewhere like London, Manchester or Birmingham, and with more of a display, it would have gone down really well, as opposed to the negative response it received in Meir. Meir is an area of Stoke-on-Trent that is sometimes perceived

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quite negatively by others in the city, and this may have added to the frustration from some local people.

Janet felt that many of the Consumerist Christmas Tree's critics could not get their heads around it being a piece of art made out of carrier bags. Janet explained to people that, "It won't be a typical Christmas tree. It's a Consumerist Tree and this is to show you how you can make art from what you'd usually just dump in the bin." It could be frustrating when some did not view the Tree in this way.

After last year's experience, Janet arranged for an open meeting to be held about the 2015 Tree, allowing the Meir Christmas Events Board to consult with local people about their plans. They are again working with Appetite to create a Christmas event for Christmas 2015.

"I am not sorry I did it," Janet says of the Consumerist Christmas Tree. "I honestly believe that people from all round the city came just to look at it. It certainly put Meir on the map!"

What themes would you use to categorise this case study?

Community decision-making; sustainability; supporting volunteers; definitions of quality art

Photo credits:

Durham Consumerist Christmas Tree, 2013 (image on p3). Available from: http://thecreatorsproject.vice.com/en_uk/blog/over-4000-plastic-bags-recycled-into-giant-illuminated-tree

Meir Consumerist Christmas Tree photos, 2014 (p1 banner and image on p2). Available from: <https://twitter.com/appetitestoke/status/540984411962232832>



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