



THERE ain't no river deep enough, no mountain high enough, to keep the Leeside Seratones away from their Monday morning choral project at the South Parish Community Centre.

Even during the worst of the recent city centre floods, all 25 members of the singing group turned up for their choral practice, despite the fact that Sawmill Street — where the centre is based — was under water at the time.

"The road had been cordoned off but we pulled up the tape and waded through, because people wanted to come more than ever," says Leeside Seratone member, Carol Tobin.

The Arts + Minds Choral Project might have been set up by HSE mental health service staff to provide service users with a high quality singing experience — but that doesn't make the Leeside Seratones a mental health choir.

"The Leeside Seratones are first and foremost a singing group, and we want to be based in a community setting," says Arts + Minds chairperson, Mary Dineen, who is also community mental health nurse for the Mahon/Blackrock area.

Carol Tobin is proud to be the service user representative on the Arts + Minds Steering Committee for Cork city and county.

Outgoing and happy by nature, this mother of four grown-up sons became ill in 1994 and was hospitalised twice with clinical depression.

Thankfully, Carol has been very well for many years. She attributes her recovery to the support of her family, the wonderful care provided by HSE mental health staff and the

Choral music is a soothing balm for angelic Seratones

MARY HASSETT finds out about a remarkable Cork choir that raises the spirits of all its members

phenomenal benefits of the Arts + Minds Choral Project.

The choir is such a source of joy and happiness for all its members that tears of relief were shed when HSE South announced that it will provide funding for the project for an 11-week period in 2014.

Cork City Council and the HSE South had jointly funded the Leeside Seratones from August to December 2013.

Renowned choral leader Liz Powell was first invited to get involved in the choral/singing project on a six-week pilot basis at the end of 2012. The group bonded from the outset and they took on a real sense of identity and pride when Liz came up with the name Leeside

Seratones. It's based on the fact that mood-enhancing serotonin is released when people sing.

Arts + Minds got up-and-running when Mary Dineen joined forces with arts co-ordinator Ann O'Connor to see how they could encourage people with mental health difficulties to get involved in the arts.

Mary's overall aim was to help combat the crippling effect that social isolation has on so many mental health service users.

"Getting the choral project off the ground was like pushing an open door. Everyone loves it," says Mary.

She has seen individuals grow in self-confidence and pride as the choir gets better and better.

Lives blossom as friendships develop and bonds strengthen.

"When people walk through the door for our choral session, I don't ask if they are a mental health service user or a HSE staff member. We all just get on great, they are all fantastic people," says Liz Powell.

She encourages members to get involved in choosing the songs,

the formation of the Leeside Seratones, none of the regular choir members have had to go into hospital for in-patient treatment.

The choir did make a visit to the South Lee Mental Health Unit, in Cork University Hospital, for a concert performance last December.

"We wanted to give hope to the patients in the unit and to the staff who would have seen us at our worst during our time there.

"We wanted staff to see us with our Christmas hats and tassels to show them how far we have come," says Carol.

CUH mental health nurse, Eleanor O'Riordan, brings a number of patients from the unit to the choral session every Monday. Everyone is always in great form on the way back.

"I'd still be in bed if I didn't have to be here for 11am on a Monday," admits Richard Coleman, who is attached to the Togher/Ballyphehane Community Mental Health Service.

Drink gave rise to a lot of problems for him but he hasn't touched alcohol in ten years.

"I love music, learning new songs and having the chat," says Richard. His mother is in a nursing home and he visits her every day. She did the same for him when he was sick.

Pat Corcoran from Glasheen says he feels very much at home with the Seratones.

"I enjoy the singing, meeting my friends and having the craic," he says. He regularly joins other members of the group for a walk around The Lough. "I live with my mam and I get great support from my family," Pat points out.

"The good that something as simple as singing does for the 25 members of the choir is phenomenal," claims Helen O'Donoghue, community mental health nurse for the Mahon/Blackrock area.

"I hope the powers that be realise the benefit and impact that this singing group is having on people."

● See www.artsandmindscork.com



Choral Leader, Liz Powell, was first invited to get involved in the choral project.
Picture: Ger McCarthy

singing solo and directing. The choir's repertoire ranges from Emeli Sandé's *Wonder* to old favourites like *When You're Smiling*.

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