

Singing from the heart

Joanna Breheny tells Shanelle Manderson about her experiences volunteering at Wood Green food bank and singing with the ACM Gospel Choir



Royal British Legion Festival of Remembrance

WITH a national lockdown in place and many people working from home or furloughed at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, some found that they had more free time on their hands. Maybe they worked on a passion project, spent it connecting with their family, helped their community or learnt a new skill. Joanna Breheny, a professional singer and part-time personal assistant, decided to volunteer at Wood Green Corps food bank.

'I was placed on furlough and suddenly I had all this time – there are only so many times you can go for walks or clean the house,' says Joanna. 'I felt a little bit useless, like I wasn't really doing anything to help with the pandemic. So, I reached out to a few places to see if they needed any help.'

'My cousin is a member of The Salvation Army at Wood Green. I would often go to their Christmas carol concerts and various other events throughout the year. She said the corps was starting a food bank and asked if I wanted to volunteer. I said yes, of course. I grew up around the area and wanted to help because I found it extremely upsetting knowing that families were struggling to feed their kids and wanted to do my bit while I had the time. That was a year ago and I'm still helping out!'

Joanna currently works part-time and volunteers half a day at the food bank every week. During the lockdown, when it was really busy, she would help out a couple of days a week. Her main role was to pack food.

Corps officer Major Paula Knight,

Joanna and the rest of the team would pray together and then Joanna would go to her socially distanced packing station and put parcels together for a few hours.

'I'm number one fastest packer!' Joanna jokes.

'Some weeks have been different from others,' she adds. 'Sometimes we'd get a lot more people requesting help, and other weeks we'd pack about 16 food parcels. 'This pandemic has affected every class of people. It has completely changed a lot of lives, but Paula is very good at connecting with the local communities and schools to find out if families are struggling. The numbers have definitely increased over the year.'

Of all her time at Wood Green food bank, Joanna particularly enjoyed Christmas.

'It was lovely because I got to be Santa for the day,' she recalls. 'One of the main halls at the corps was filled with thousands of toys. Social workers, members of the community and people The Salvation Army helps gave us a list of families who were struggling, not only needing food parcels, but also not having enough money to buy presents. We had a bit of information about what each child liked, so we were able to pick out gifts. Christmas music was playing all day, and it was just so busy!'

As well as giving her a sense of purpose, Joanna has found that giving her time to help others has been immensely rewarding.

'It's kept my spirits up because I was anxious about the future,' she explains. 'I felt a bit low about what the state of the music industry was going to be and whether I'd get another job. Volunteering has been an amazing experience and the



Dhol Foundation Drummers

team at Wood Green are so lovely.'

Despite her initial concerns, Joanna had a few opportunities to sing throughout the lockdown as a member of the ACM Gospel Choir.

'We most recently performed during the Commonwealth Day celebration at Westminster Abbey,' she enthuses. 'It's definitely my favourite performance to date. We sang a cover of Aretha Franklin's

Wailers with the Dhol Foundation Drummers, and that was really special.'

The choir was formed in 2005 by vocal coach Mark De-Lisser and rose to fame after appearing on the TV programme *Last Choir Standing* 13 years ago. They then released a Christmas album with the *Mail on Sunday* and have since gone on to be part of some amazing projects, including singing with Sheridan Smith



Lianne La Havas and ACM Gospel Choir

"Say a Little Prayer" with Lianne La Havas. She's so lovely and talented, and I was a huge fan before, but to be able to perform with her was just incredible. We also sang "One Love" and performed "Three Little Birds" by Bob Marley and the

for BBC One's *VJ Day 75: The Nation's Tribute* at Horse Guards Parade last year, with Ariana Grande for *Ariana Grande at the BBC* in 2018 and at the 2020 Royal British Legion Festival of Remembrance.

There are 25 core members of the

“Volunteering has been an amazing experience”

choir, but sometimes extra people are brought in for bigger projects. Joanna sings soprano. She explains how she became a member: 'From a young age I think I knew I could hold a tune. I loved Whitney Houston. My dad bought me the *Bodyguard* soundtrack album when I was about seven and I listened to that until I knew everything back to front.

'My mum realised I liked performing and singing and so she sent me to Bodens Performing Arts College. I just loved it. I went on to college to study music and dance, and then I eventually went to the Academy of Contemporary Music. That's where I met Mark and then became a member of the choir.'

The group have just released a new single called *Bump in the Road*, under the name of Mark De-Lisser's Singers. It was originally written by Swedish singer Erik Hassle but Mark wrote a gospel arrangement of it. It was recorded just before the first lockdown.

'It's a lovely, uplifting song about not giving up and knowing you're going to make it despite anything that life throws at you, which I think speaks volumes to a lot of people after the year we've just had,' says Joanna.

Although the future is unknown, she hopes to continue to perform, release music and volunteer at the food bank.

'I want to focus on singing full-time; it's my passion. I just feel alive when I'm singing,' she says. 'But I also want to continue volunteering. I was so busy before, working in the city and singing, that I never had the time. But now it's become part of my life. In the future I want to help out as much as I can.'

SHANELLE IS EDITORIAL ASSISTANT, SALVATIONIST

