

New chapters, natural connections

Heather Hughes, 1:1 Awards Mentoring Manager, chats to E about her experiences with Awards Plus



What brought you to Friends of the Award/Awards Plus?

That was so long ago! I was 18 when I started. I got involved through Bridges Project where I was receiving support, I had gotten information about them from CAMHS [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service]. I needed support gaining confidence and new skills to be able to put myself out there. I always felt overshadowed in school and people didn't know I needed support, totally under the radar.

I have Dyslexia which went unnoticed until I was almost 22 years old, and I was struggling with anxiety and stress. I found out about Friends of the Award (now it's called Awards Plus) through a taster group and I thought, why not! I started to work on my Bronze Duke of Edinburgh's Award with 1:1 support from Friends of the Award.

What has your awards support looked like since it began? Has it changed at all?

It started out as 1:1 meetings in cafés where I would talk to my awards mentor about my different DofE sections, get support with anything I needed help with, and catch up. During the COVID lockdown it moved to over the phone, which was a bit awkward for me as it can be hard to understand tone.

When we came out of lockdown we'd meet regularly in cafés or go and sit by the River Esk – it was nice and peaceful. Later, with my current mentor, we started to talk about my interest in nature and conservation, so she said I might enjoy doing a John Muir Award alongside my DofE, which meant we started meeting in natural spaces chosen by me.

You've been involved in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award since 2019, having completed Bronze and Silver and now working on Gold. What did you do for your different Sections?

Wow, it's hard to remember! For my Bronze Volunteering Section I was working in a charity shop. I used the till, which was scary but fun! I did life skills and creative writing for my Skills Section, I joined a group at Bridges Project to do that. I learned Canva at that group and I still use it now. I have a permanent Canva tab open on my laptop, I use it all the time. For my Physical section I did walking. I remember being surprised by how doable Bronze felt with support, and how quickly it went.

For Silver level, I started my reading journey for my Skills Section. I got really into reading over lockdown, which was helpful for my Dyslexia that was undiagnosed at the time. I had found it difficult to stick to designated reading times at school, so it was much better for me to focus on reading in my own time. I set myself a target of reading different authors and genres and I read 39 books for that Section. I read my first classic book – Little Women – and such a variety of authors and styles. I spent 6 months volunteering with Natural Connections at Heugh Community Garden. I learned a lot there, and it sparked an interest for me which led to me doing a course in Rural Skills.



Now I'm doing my Gold DofE. I finished my Physical Section first – I was doing loads of physical exercise through my conservation that I did with college, which was more enjoyable. That's something I've learned about myself, that it's much easier to stay active when it's something I actually enjoy or want to do.

For my Gold Skills Section I set myself a target of reading 50 books. I'm just under half way and I'll keep going until I get there! It's been really good, I've branched out and read a selection of genres – horror, romance, fantasy.

I've just started my Gold Volunteering section last month, I'm volunteering at a community garden, using my rural skills to help out where I can. It feels a bit different going back to a community garden now I have these skills and experience, I'm quite a bit more confident and it's showing me that I know what I'm doing! I've also been talking to The Green Team about helping out leading some of their nature groups, we'll see how that goes! It would be nice to share my experience with younger people.

What were your favourite and least favourite parts?

Doing the Physical Sections has been my least favourite part, it was a struggle to find something I actually wanted to do. It's not something I usually feel excited about so finding ways of getting physical exercise through my other interests made a big difference.

My favourite part has been reading for my Silver and Gold Skills Sections. It's taught me to broaden my horizons because I like more genres than I think I do – even horror! I read a lot of Stephen King. When I was younger I didn't read at all, you couldn't pay me to pick up a book! It's been a big change for me to get so passionate about reading.

You've done outdoor expeditions for your Bronze and Silver DofE and are planning to do your Gold expedition in the summer. What have your Expedition experiences been like?

I met my best friend on my Bronze expedition, and it was her that gave me the motivation to carry on to do my Silver level, and I'm really glad I did. Expeditions were hard but they were worth it because I met her. We also did our Silver expedition together which made a big difference, and we want to do our Gold together too.



Any top tips?

Get to know your group before you go. It's useful for me to know things about people and feel prepared before going into an expedition, I don't like having things sprung on me. It helps to do ice breakers and get to know each other first.

You started a John Muir Award (Explorer level) earlier this year which you have just completed. What's that been like?

I did a John Muir Award at Discovery level with a group when I was younger and this was much different. That was very focused on one place and specific activities. This time it was more about building a personal relationship with nature. Me and my awards mentor met in different natural locations like Newhailes and The Bings and it was nice to keep it varied. I feel like I know the places much better and I'm more likely to go for a walk there on my own. We did things like creative writing in nature, reading by the river, identifying plants, and taking pictures of plants through the different seasons. I've enjoyed it!

You were funded and supported by Awards Plus/National Lottery Young Start to join The Green Team's 5 day Residential to the Isle of Eigg in the summer. How was that experience?

It was so much better than I thought. I thought it would be too stressful and that I wouldn't feel in the moment, but I really enjoyed it. I want to go back! It was a fun and special place. We did lots of conservation while I was there, which I also used towards my John Muir Award. It was so remote that it felt like we had the island to ourselves, very peaceful.

Me and my mentor spoke about the things that were a barrier for me going, things that I was worried about. My mentor spoke to The Green Team about it in advance so they understood, and I got to speak to the leader before the trip, which helped. The leader was curious about my needs and took them seriously, which made a big difference for me. There were different options and time to prepare myself so I didn't feel put on the spot.

What do you think is the most important part of a supportive working relationship with your Awards Mentor?

Having good communication and reminders between meetings, especially if something comes up in between. It's nice to have time to just be out together and have a catch up. Sometimes I come to a meeting feeling so stressed, and after the meeting I feel much better. I have something to do to take my mind off it, and someone to talk to who understands.

What do you hope to do once you've completed your Gold Duke of Edinburgh's Award?

It's weird to think about that time because I've been working on DofE stuff for so long and I want to stay connected to Awards Plus. I want to find ways to use my experiences to develop and maybe help out. It's led me to do lots more outdoor activities so we'll see where that takes me, I want to keep doing things in nature and keep up that motivation.

What have you learned about yourself?

I've learned I can do things I never thought I would. It's quite weird to reflect on that and remember all the things I've done which I didn't think was possible for me.

What would you tell another young person who's considering doing youth awards?

I always thought the DofE wasn't for me, especially the expeditions. I found out it was great for me and it wasn't what I thought. It's quite flexible so you can stop if you want to or change your Sections, there's not loads of pressure, which would put me off. I'd say, just give it a try!