

# Aik Saath celebrates 10 years

More than 10 years ago, Slough's young people were going through a very bad time. Tension between Sikhs and Muslims and serious racial violence had occurred leading to national newspaper headlines portraying a negative image of Asian youngsters and the town.

Working with the council, Channel 4 brought Dr Dudley Weeks, an expert in resolving conflicts and crises to Slough to talk to young people and find out how the problems were impacting on them.

What they found were young people who were fed up with how they were being portrayed in the press, fed up with the tensions affecting their lives and who wanted to take action, to do something to make things better.

Dr Weeks recommended a conflict resolution and anti-racism group be set up by the young people for young people and undertook intensive training with 10 to 15 Muslim, Sikh and Hindu youngsters from across the borough – teaching them how to help themselves and others.

And Aik Saath was born.

From one part-time worker and council funding, Aik Saath has grown into an organisation that has trained more than 100 young people in peer mentoring and anti-racism skills and through them has worked with more than 10,000 others.

Mandeep Sira has been with Aik Saath for nine years. She said: "The young people wanted to do something and that forced something to happen.

"Their dedication, and the dedication of all the young people who have joined Aik Saath over the past 10 years, has had a massive impact. We have not seen tension like that of the mid 90s since and that has a lot to do with the messages and actions the young people themselves have spread and the work they have done."

Jawad who has been a volunteer since 1998, said: "I was a youngster when all the conflict started and I felt that by joining Aik Saath I would be able to gain the skills and knowledge to be able to resolve situations if I was ever to find myself in that position.

"The training provided is of a high standard and is easily understandable by all kinds of people. We feel that by targeting the younger generation, and training them with the skills and



The current Aik Saath volunteers get anti-racism training from Birmingham based group Rewind and an ex-member of the BNP.

knowledge we will be able to stop conflicts from starting.

"Over the past 10 years Aik Saath has helped me personally and I feel the skills and knowledge I have gained will help for a long time to come."

Since the beginning, Aik Saath have helped teach young people from all backgrounds how to resolve conflicts in a positive way, working with schools and youth groups – providing positive role models and passing on their skills.

Over the past five years the team have also been working on community cohesion projects, helping young people look at differences between them while giving them a sense of community.

And alongside this has been getting the young people to reach

out to the wider community, running activities and projects that reach beyond their own age group including The Same Difference Film Festival, Roots for Change charitable activities and heritage projects such as the Partition Project – which explored the 60-year anniversary of the separation of India and Pakistan through the eyes of local residents who had lived through it.

They have also done anti-bullying work with schools, helping them create child-friendly bullying policies which help all involved and teaching primary school children friendship games to help include children who might otherwise be left out.

Mandeep said: "10 years on our core work is still conflict resolution and anti-racism and I don't think that will ever change but we have widened our work to involve more people in more ways so the young people can spread their message to as many as possible."

Aik Saath now has 25 volunteers who give two hours each week. They range from 12 years old to 23 and are at school, university, college and in work. One of these volunteers is Jawad's brother Fawad who has just joined. He said: "I joined the group after my brother left and I was interested to check it out.

"We have a lot of fun in the meetings because it is a great opportunity to chill out and work with other young people from different ends of Slough.

"By joining Aik Saath I have learnt a lot of new skills such as how to deal with conflict and how to challenge racism.

"I did my first presentation in April to more than 50 people and I was very nervous but since then I have got more confident and now I feel more comfortable doing presentations.

"When I am working with Aik Saath I feel really good about myself as I believe I am making a difference to the community."

So what will they look like in another 10 years? Mandeep has an idea.

"Bigger and better," she said. "I would like to see us working with all schools in Slough, institutionalising some of the work we do so it becomes mainstream.

"I think we will always be necessary as wherever there is difference, wherever people are different, there is the possibility of conflict and tension and the need to manage and overcome it in a positive way. And that is what we are here to teach people."



There at the start - The original Aik Saath group with Dr Dudley Weeks.