ACE Story Podcast: Episode 1 Summary

Introduction to ACE and the Podcast

- The podcast explores the story of Action in Caerau and Ely (ACE), one of the most successful community organizations in Wales.
- It shares insights from 20 years of community development in Ely and Caerau, featuring voices from residents, community workers, and local politicians.
- The aim is to inspire listeners to take action in their own communities by providing both audio and written materials, including essays, anecdotes, and photographs.

Setting and Hosts

- The episode is recorded in the Dusty Forge, a vibrant community building in west Cardiff.
- Two key guests who have been involved since before ACE's founding are Dave Horton and John Hallett, both with extensive backgrounds in youth and community work.

Personal Journeys and Backgrounds

- Dave Horton

- Arrived in Cardiff around 30 years ago to study physics but shifted to youth and community work.
- Worked initially in Llanedeyrn, then in Cape Town, South Africa, before returning to Ely and Caerau nearly 20 years ago.
- Began working on the Welsh Government's Communities First programme, later moving into community development roles in Ely and Caerau.
- Committed to supporting local people and building community strength.

- John Hallett

- Born and raised in Cardiff, attending local schools including Canton High School.
- Initially reluctant about living or working in Ely and Caerau but grew to love the community over 20 years.
- Started youth work with the Prince's Trust around 2000-2001, working in local schools and as a detached youth worker.
- Worked at Amelia Trust Farm and later returned to Ely to work on Communities First and then ACE.
- Left ACE in 2021 and now works as a freelancer in West Wales, maintaining strong ties to the community.

Understanding Ely and Caerau

- Community Overview

- Ely and Caerau are two distinct wards politically but form one large neighborhood with about 26,000-27,000 residents.
- Historically, the area was supported by strong local manufacturing industries like a brewery, paper mill (once Europe's largest), jam and pickle factories, and brickworks.
- These industries provided secure, well-paid jobs but declined from the 1980s onward, resulting in high unemployment and socio-economic challenges by the 1990s.

- Social and Economic Challenges

- Shift from stable manufacturing jobs to insecure, low-paid service sector roles, including gig economy and zero-hours contracts.
- Issues such as poor mental and physical health, educational underachievement (only about 6-8% go on to higher education compared to 68% city-wide), and stigma from negative media portrayals (e.g., the 1991 Ely riots).

- Community Strengths and Stigma

- ACE's work focuses on shifting from a deficit model (seeing the community as a problem) to a strength-based model, recognizing local talents and resources.
- The community is diverse, increasingly welcoming refugees, and full of unique individuals with stories and skills.

The Origins and Nature of ACE

- From Communities First to ACE

- ACE originated from the Welsh Government's Communities First programme, which targeted deprived areas with a somewhat paternalistic approach initially.
- Over time, ACE developed a model focused on local leadership, participation, and empowerment rather than outside "solutions".

- What is ACE?

- ACE is a community-led organization run by local people, employing many local staff and volunteers.
- It manages community buildings like the Dusty Forge and the Gospel Hall (converted into a heritage center) to provide spaces for local activities.
- The organization embodies a balance between relational, flexible community work and the need for formal structures, policies, and governance to sustain its operations.

- The Dusty Forge Building

- The Dusty Forge, once a pub and youth centre, was taken over by ACE in 2015 after extensive renovation.
- It serves as a community living room, a welcoming and vibrant space where people can connect, learn, and participate.

Working with People: Stories and Approach

- Relational and Participatory Work

- ACE focuses on building relationships and recognizing every individual's potential contribution.
- Example: A man initially unemployed and agoraphobic became a key caretaker and friendly face at the Dusty Forge, transforming his life and that of his family.
- Another example: Caroline Barr, who started volunteering in a difficult place, grew to run the local pantry and food projects, leaving a lasting legacy.-

- Values and Community Impact

- ACE offers simple things like a cup of tea and conversation as entry points to engagement.
- It employs many locals, nurturing and training people for roles within the organization.
- The work is often joyous and creative, though it involves navigating complexities of people's lives, including some sad losses.

Governance, Partnerships, and Planning

- Governance Structure

- ACE is a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity, governed by a board of trustees who are local volunteers and experts.
- Trustees play a vital role in steering, challenging, and mentoring the organization, ensuring local ownership and accountability.

- Key Partnerships

- Strong collaborations with Cardiff University (notably archaeology and heritage projects), Cardiff and Vale Health Board (for health and social prescribing work), and His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) (applying ACE's community-based approach to probation services).
- Partnerships provide resources, expertise, and opportunities, helping ACE to innovate and sustain its work.

- Strategic Planning

- ACE uses iterative strategic planning including theory of change exercises, annual operational plans, and individual work plans.
- It employs business tools like Key Account Management to manage relationships with funders and partners.
- Balances formal planning and structure with the organic, relational nature of community work.

- Final Thoughts and Invitation

- ACE champions a strength-based, community-led approach to tackle challenges and build opportunities.
- The podcast encourages listeners to look at their own communities through a lens of strengths and potential.
- ACE offers training, mentoring, and visits, welcoming those who want to learn from their experience or get involved locally.

For more information or to connect with ACE:

- Visit the website: www.acceplace.org
- Email: ace@aceplace.org
- Drop in to the Dusty Forge community building in Ely