

Elaine interviewing Michael Sheehan on Men's Sheds

Elaine: Back in the day most men wanted or had a man shed. Somewhere they could escape to away from domestic chores, or where they could work on a project or tidy their tools. But I understand Michael that 'Men's Sheds' is something quite different.

Michael: Yes, so 'MenShed' in the form that we look at it today was set up in the 1980s in Australia where they had lot of single men, with a lot of depression, a lot of alcohol problems, and it was to get men to sort of come together for the social aspect, that they could sit down, they could have a chat, they could work together on a couple of small projects and really sort of try to give them a sense of purpose... and the projects, everything else would give them something to focus on. Actually something different to their selves. In 2011 this was then taken up in Ireland, umm, and having lived in Ireland for a long time I knew the problems that existed there particularly with single men and this has been very successful, to the point where they have nearly 500 locations in a small place like Ireland, with a population of just over 4 million and they have actually conducted a significant amount of medical data looking at the benefits, which is quite clear... they see the benefits for the men from sort of a well-being, depression, a retard in the onset of dementia, because they have a focus, they have a purpose. So at this point in time the Men Shed Association in Ireland is well, very well grant aided by the Irish Government. In 2011 they started the Men Shed off in the UK. There's now close to 800 locations, very much part of the local community and really giving that sense of focus within the local community, that there's a place so many times a week that the men can go and just generally for their well-being it's improved significantly because of the social aspect.

Elaine: So they actually have a building where they can meet?

Michael: Yes, a cup of tea, cup of coffee, have a chat. They might just sit down, and have a game of cards or draughts, whatever, but it's social contact... which is one of the things that is the aim of the Men Shed. They also in a lot of instances work on particular projects there. One Men Shed that I know in Ireland, in the Autumn and Winter months when the weather's not so good, they make nest boxes, in the Spring they put the nest boxes up. They look at environmental projects like that. That gives the men a project to aim for, you know

Elaine: Something, something to get out of bed for.

Michael: That's right..yes, you know. So I think that's important, particularly when you get past a certain age, you know... you've finished your working life but that's not the end of it, is it?

Elaine: I think when you were talking earlier you said that men are not very good at socialising

Michael: No they're not

Elaine: Women will go out and have a good old chat

Michael: Yes and if you just look within the AIKB environment, there's a lot of activities that the women get involved with, but there's very little that the men get too involved with. Probably a little bit more with the camera club. We do have a lot of men in the gardening club, but again now, how can we take it to another level then. Could we put a Men's Shed in there and then you know, that gives the men some focus. I think it's particularly important now, post covid. People have tended to stay in for quite a long time. They actually get used to that.

Elaine: I think that, yes I would say absolutely, that 2 years of keeping out, keeping away from people and not being able to travel, has made many people are quite reticent now about going out again.

Michael: Yeah, people have become introverted, you know in that respect, a bit concerned about the contact, and you know, and any travelling, and anything else like that. So again I think now we need to be creating the opportunities, that now it's post covid, and start getting people out.

Elaine: you also said that currently there are no MenSheds in France, although it's a country that seems to need it being so spacious and under populated.

Michael: When I started researching all of this, and umm, it's going down very well now in the Nordic countries, Sweden in particular. They've just finished a pilot scheme in Spain which has gone very well, but I couldn't find anything in France at all and in fact some of the medical surveys and data that was generated, throughout Europe, France wasn't even included in any of that, so I thought that was a little bit strange, considering the amount of effort and finance they contribute into general health and welfare so, But nothing there at all.

Elaine: Absolutely. So what's happening here in Gouarec?

Michael: So we have an opportunity now to look at the MenShed with in conjunction with local Marie's office and the AIKB gardening club. So Gouarec at the moment has a 3 flower status which is under threat, and so the gardens, everything else need a complete refresh. So we've met with the Marie and looking at, the gardening club actually looking at replanting and just giving the gardens a bit of a lick over, but there's much more.. the infrastructure of the gardens and everything else needs to be addressed, ah..the pond, they want to look at a fountain, so there's quite a lot more work involved. So, so we're probably in the position there now today where we have got a very distinct gardening

club that the men and women from the gardening club can get involved and give the focus for the gardening club, but there's a real opportunity to set up the Men's Shed with the support of the Marie and the local council to do the other parts of it like the mini golf course...it could do with a total refurbish.

Elaine: Down by the canal as well... projects going on there that will attract people.

Michael: Yes, ... So there's a lot going on locally that the MenShed could contribute to. The Marie now, cos one of the main problems in setting up a MenShed is trying to get a building where the men can meet and have a cup of tea, cup of coffee and just sit down and have a general chat about the projects, and perhaps at a later date then start internal projects, like some wood-working projects, or something like that. The Marie is actually looking at somewhere locally that we could start this off. I think there's real benefits then for Gouarec, in that they could get some of the things that have perhaps been a bit neglected, or something else brought back up to the level that it should be.. and for the MenShed and the gardening club, it that gives them a focus and also an opportunity to give something back to the place that we live, so I think that's important.

Elaine: Do the people who would be joining in this, or taking part in it, the MenShed thing.. do they have to be members of AIKB or could they be invited in as as a guest?

Michael: Well I think that's some of the discussions we need to with the AIKB board as this starts to develop. I think initially because we've a lot of male members it makes sense to kick it off and feel our way through a little bit with the AIKB. We've already got a French person, Claude, off the council that's going to liaise and be the link between the gardening and the MenShed, so that's a positive step forward and then, obviously then, it would be great then to start getting equal numbers of French men coming into the MenShed, as well, because the same problems exist locally, in the French community, as well as the English speaking community and that was the reason they set up the MenShed in

Ireland, because it's still predominantly an agriculture based country with a lot of bachelor farmers. So again you can see a lot of similarities in the way things are done but also the culture as well. So this is an opportunity for us to give a little bit back to our adopted country, and in the long term I think it would be good for the integration as well.

Elaine: Absolutely, that's the key word.. Integration and purpose. Thank you very much Michael. It's been very enlightening and it's completely changed my image of what a ManShed was and I wish you the very best of luck and we will include details of how people can get involved.