

Sport Relief helped charity which turned our lives around, say young people

They fear they may not have survived without its help.

Young people whose lives were turned around by drug and alcohol charity the Matthew Project have spoken in support of the Sport Relief-funded group.

They are telling their stories ahead of this year's Sport Relief weekend, in March, to highlight the good causes that it supports.

The Matthew Project is a charity based in Norfolk and Suffolk working in innovative ways with adults, young people and communities affected by drugs and alcohol.

Some of its staff and service users met Radio One DJ Greg James earlier this month, as he completed his Sport Relief Gregathlon in Norwich and showed support for the project by posing for pictures with them.

The charity offers professional

advice, support, care and education to young people and adults, with staff helping in various venues from schools and youth venues to police stations and courts.

As people are urged to sign up for next month's Sport Relief games in Norwich, reporter **SAM RUSSELL** spoke to a charity that has benefited from donations in previous years

Sport Relief is funding a project for 16- to 24-year-olds which offers a full package of support including life coaching.

Jess Barter, 22, of Dereham, was helped by the Matthew Project. She left her family home in Brighton at 14 following arguments, and began to drink heavily and take cannabis while in halls of residence at Easton College, where she was on a sports course.

She moved onto harder drugs to suppress an eating disorder and became addicted to heroin at 19 years old, without a family or home. A hospital admission for a blood infection served as a wake-up call and she was put in touch with The Matthew Project.

Miss Barter, who has been wheelchair-bound for the last two years, has had Ehlers-Danlos syndrome (EDS) since birth. This is a disorder of connective tissue, and her condition has deteriorated.

She said the Norfolk Recovery Partnership helped her kick the drugs habit, and the Matthew Project helped her focus, boosted her confidence and helped her secure her own flat.

"It's setting up my hopes," she said. "I want to get back involved with sport."



Members of the Matthew Project with Greg James following his Gregathlon.

Picture: DAVID TOWNSEND



Dee Hillum, left, has also received assistance from the Matthew Project. Right, Esther Heybourne is the charity's youth-team manager.

Pictures: SIMON FINLAY

"I want to get back to rowing." Her dream job would be as a teaching assistant in a complex needs school, and she hopes to join a wheelchair basketball club in Bury St Edmunds once she has raised funds for a sports wheelchair.

Dee Hillum, 25, of Diss, also received support.

"I've always had problems with mental health," she explained. "Before the Matthew Project was involved I was in an abusive relationship with physical violence on both sides."

She said that her three-year-old son was taken into care, and while social services tried to pin blame on her partner she wanted to explain her own situation.

She was a cannabis user, but the Matthew Project helped her stop, and staff helped her get a mental health diagnosis.

In time they helped her build her confidence, and to speak with staff in coffee shops instead of clinical settings.

"Without the Matthew Project I would still be in a really bad way," she said. "I don't think I was far from death before."

She maintains contact with her son, who is looked after by her mother, and hopes to use her experience to help others when she is further progressed in her own recovery.

Esther Heybourne, youth-team manager, said the key of the Matthew Project was that it was an overarching service, looking at well-being as well as health, drugs and alcohol.

→ For details, see matthewproject.org

Sport Relief games

People are being urged to sign up for the Sport Relief Flagship Games in Norwich. They will be hosted at the UEA from Friday, March 18 to Sunday, March 20.

With a choice of a one-mile run, swimathon or family cycle in Norwich, organisers say there is an event to suit all ages and abilities.

There will also be entertainment, offering a mini festival atmosphere at the UEA.

The mile winds its way through Earham Park, the swimathon takes place at the UEA Sportpark and the cycle ride follows a course that ends at Eaton Park.

For further details, see www.sportrelief.com



Jess Barter, who left her family home at 14, has been helped by the Matthew Project.

Community Cash grants

Today is the last opportunity to apply for a slice of a £37,500 fund to support vital community groups in and around Norwich. Grants of £500 to £1,000 are available to small grassroots community organisations in the Norwich area that are doing great work to help local people living tough lives. Norfolk Community Foundation

works with Comic Relief and Sport Relief in alternate years to get the cash to the groups that need it most. This year the partnership is with Sport Relief. Applications to apply for Sport Relief Community Cash grants close today (Thursday, February 25). Interested groups can apply at www.norfolkfoundation.com

