

SNOW WHITE



AND THE SEVEN STEEDS ON THE RANCH



**Building Confidence, Connection, and Belonging
Through a Community Pantomime**

DECEMBER 2025



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THE PANTOMIME IN NUMBERS

> 800
AUDIENCE

100
CAST AND CREW

40
COMPLIMENTS

4
GENERATIONS
REPRESENTED

£4,000
CHARITY INCOME

12
HORSES & PONIES

4 GOATS &
2 MICE

150
BALES OF
STRAW

AN INTRODUCTION

The My Life Pony Panto began not as a performance idea, but a question: how do we create something, somewhere, where everyone truly belongs?

Taking place in the run-up to Christmas 2025, the project grew into a joyful, entertaining, deeply human – and yes, sometimes brilliantly chaotic – pantomime. It brought together children, young people, adults, staff, volunteers, families, community members (and of course horses) – into one shared story.

Loosely inspired by Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, this was a panto that by design was never about getting lines perfect or producing an ultra-polished, professional show.

It was about people showing up as themselves, being seen, being supported, and discovering that they had something valuable to contribute.

Over 100 people took part across four performances, with audiences of around 200 people each time, creating a rare space where inclusion was not explained or announced. It was simply lived.

“It was wonderful – a credit to everyone involved. We were captivated from start to finish and haven’t stopped talking about it since. It was fantastic.”

- Eileen Cuerden



THE IDEA

Christmas obviously provides a natural moment for shared reflection and community gathering. And we chose a pantomime because of its participatory tradition in the UK; where the audience is as much a part of the experience as the cast.

In some respects, in the era of expensive pantomimes featuring television stars, this idea of a seasonal show being for and about a local community has been lost. We were keen to bring that back, not least because it aligns with My Life's values around social pedagogy, community assets, and inclusive participation.

When we began planning the panto, then, it became clear that there were four key pillars that we wanted everything to feed into:

- Create a genuinely inclusive performance project where everyone could take part in ways that made sense for them
- Strengthen connections between different My Life programmes and services (Duke of Edinburgh, Thompson House Equestrian Centre, Pony Club, alternative education, apprenticeships, My Life Opportunities)
- Build confidence, skills, and a sense of pride among participants
- Open My Life to the wider community, and bring the community to My Life



INCLUSIVITY IN PRACTICE

Participation Without Barriers

From the outset, the pantomime was designed to avoid traditional barriers to participation. So there were no auditions, and no expectation of prior performance experience. Participants could be on stage, take on roles behind the scenes or front of house – or indeed move fluidly between both.

Whatever people wanted to do, we shaped their role around their strengths, interests and indeed comfort levels. That meant young people with additional needs, those with anxiety, first-time riders, experienced equestrians, staff, volunteers, parents, and community members all took part together.

Inclusion was not labelled or highlighted. It was simply how the panto worked.



“The best production I have ever seen! It was inclusive without being 'inclusive'! Every individual accepted for who they are and everyone had a role to play. Amazing and will be making this a Christmas tradition in our household thank you and Merry Christmas.”

- Emily Kruger Collier

DOING WHAT MATTERS

A core principle was that everyone should contribute in a way that was meaningful for them, with gentle stretching beyond comfort zones where appropriate.

Participants who preferred not to perform took leadership roles in props, scene changes, or audience support. This approach avoided tokenism and ensured that participation felt authentic and empowering.

Jess, with her love of Disney music, stepped into the role of Snow White, supported discreetly by a second Snow White rather than a visible support worker.

Kacie taking on the symbolic role of the Huntsman on horseback; a part she was keen to play but had some worries about; we made sure she was on the most desensitised horse and supported by another participant delivering the spoken lines where necessary; Kacie felt the power of collaboration.

Jack, a member of the Leigh Community Choir, wowed the audience with his rendition of Take Me Home, Country Roads. The capella choir, which performs a varied and enjoyable repertoire including pop, folk, and songs from musicals, provided the perfect foundation for his performance.



BECOMING SNOW WHITE:

JESS'S STARRING ROLE

Jess is an incredible young woman who spends part of her week with us at the Stable Door Café, where her baking and hospitality skills are widely appreciated and celebrated!

She has a long-standing love of Disney princesses, especially Snow White, and has been to see Disney on Ice when it's come to the area. This passion, combined with her growing confidence in social settings and enjoyment of singing and dancing, meant there was a natural opportunity here for Jess to participate in Snow White and The Seven Steeds.

We really believed that she could bring all this together into a starring role, even though this would be new territory for her. And at first, quite naturally, stepping into a main role was daunting.

"I was a bit nervous, especially being around horses, but with everyone's help I got used to the animals and then worked on what I would have to do," says Jess. "I had to be brave, but I had help."

And that help came from My Life staff, who helped her learn the choreography and staging - and her Mum, who practiced lines at home with her.

All of which meant that all Jess needed was My Life's Jodie to help her on stage. Be her understudy, basically - it was this structured support which still allowed Jess to "own" the role.



Leading and performing the ketchup song and dance - one of her favourite routines - meant Jess also took on some leadership skills, teaching the dance to those who didn't know it. It was this choreography and use of a headset which helped everyone involved feel like they were part of a "proper" production.

And by the final show, Jess had moved from being nervous in rehearsals to confident and comfortable on stage - taking part in scenes involving the ponies and becoming the star of the show.

"I was so proud of myself and everyone else," she says. "My anxiety went down, I felt good on stage, and I know my Mum and Dad really enjoyed seeing me as a main character - they took me out for a special tea afterwards!"

And later, Jess was presented with a cartoon drawing of her in the middle of the cast, recognising her impact in the production.

"I really love that picture," she says now. "It means I'll never forget being Snow White for a week."



Perhaps it won't be the only starring role, either. Jess says she now feels ready to take on more performances in the future - "Cinderella next time, maybe?" - and she really enjoyed the commitment and discipline it took to learn her lines, act, dance and perform.

"Seeing everyone love the panto - from my parents in the audience to my fellow cast members, was great," she says. "There was a sense of pride in what we were doing but also we trusted each other and believed in each other.

"It was really nice to show everyone in the community what we can do."

"And from My Life's perspective", says Lyndsey Heaton, "it was so amazing to see Jess's communication, leadership and self-confidence improve.

That will all feed back into how she feels about everyday life - and shows how creative support, where we encourage people to gently push their boundaries, can really work.

It's been a fantastic learning experience for Jess, but one which she grasped with both hands; it's enriched her life and opened the door to even more ambitious goals in the future."

"Seeing everyone love the panto - from my parents in the audience to my fellow cast members, was great.

There was a sense of pride in what we were doing but also we trusted each other and believed in each other."

- Jess

COMMUNITY ASSETS AND CO-CREATION

Using What The Community Has

Snow White and the Seven Steeds was built almost entirely from community assets, which is an approach we are trying to build into everything we do.

Costumes were created from donated and recycled clothing (checked shirts, hats, props).

The sets were designed by an art group, built by the woodwork group, and painted by Duke of Edinburgh participants.

Music was chosen based on what participants already knew and loved.

Hidden skills emerged organically, including professional-level audio production and visual design from staff and volunteers.

This asset-based approach reinforced the message that everyone has something to offer.



INTERGENERATIONAL AND COMMUNITY CONNECTION

Participants ranged from young children to older adults, including a retired community member who took on the role of Father Christmas. His involvement extended beyond the event, helping rebuild his own sense of community connection and belonging.

Families, carers, and community members were invited not just to watch, but to join in. This created a shared experience rather than any notion of there being a performer-audience divide.



INCLUSION OF HORSES

Horses were not props, but participants in their own right. Significant time was spent on desensitisation, gradually introducing music, props, movement, and eventually large audiences.

This was excellent training-in-practice for anyone involved with our animal or equine programmes.

But it also mirrored and emphasised good behaviours in the human experience of inclusion:

- Going at a pace that feels safe
- Building trust through repetition and reassurance
- Recognising that confidence looks different for everyone

The parallel between supporting people and supporting horses became a powerful learning experience for participants.



THE PERFORMANCES

Despite limited opportunities for full rehearsals, four performances were delivered with a cast of over 100 people. The first performance was the first time everyone had been together in the same space. But by the last performance it was quite clear what had been achieved.

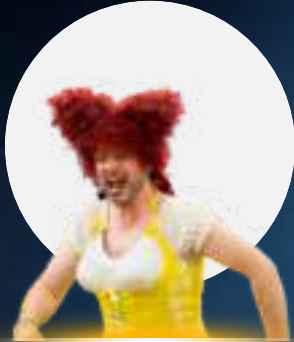
There was a noticeable increase in confidence and physical presence on stage. And some of that came with participants and peers naturally supporting and prompting each other.

You could see everyone's anxiety reducing as familiarity and trust grew – and that trust in the process and each other meant there was a strong sense of collective responsibility for the success of the panto.

Yet all of these incredible achievements and progressions appeared seamless to the audience; it was an organic system born of mutual support and shared ownership.



STARRING IN SNOW WHITE



ROB NUNNEY
Dame Dolly Dumpling



NICOLE WALMSLEY
The Wicked Stepmother



JODIE CROMPTON
Snow White's Understudy



JACK GRIFFIN
The Singing Cowboy



JESSICA MARCH
Snow White



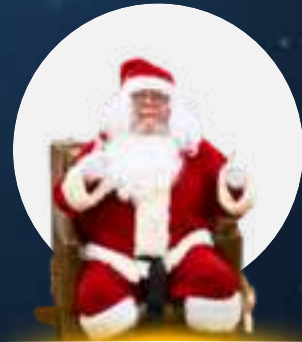
ANDY GALLACHER
The Huntsman



CHRIS WATSON
The First Aider



AUSTIN STEWART
Muddles



PADDY GREEN
Father Christmas

IMPACT AND OUTCOMES

Personal Outcomes: Confidence, Voice and Belonging

Across the four performances, everyone showed visible and growing confidence. People who were initially hesitant stood closer to the audience by the final show. Those who needed reassurance in early rehearsals began prompting and supporting others.

Several described the simple act of taking a bow as one of the most powerful moments – in that moment they were being recognised, applauded, and seen.

Here are just some of the outcomes we recorded in people:

- Increased confidence in unfamiliar and public situations
- Greater communication skills, including non-verbal communication
- A sense of pride and ownership in a shared achievement
- New identities beyond labels such as “service user”, “nervous rider”, or “support worker”

For some, the pantomime became part of the story they now tell about themselves.

“Sophia has had the most amazing 2 days, memories she will never forget. Thank you to everyone involved xxx.”

- Lisa Stanton



SOCIAL OUTCOMES: CONNECTION AND COMMUNITY

Without question, the pantomime created connections that did not previously exist. Young people supported peers outside their usual friendship groups. Staff and participants worked alongside each other as equals. Parents moved from observers to co-participants. Community members who had felt isolated found themselves woven back into local life.

Here are some of the community benefits we've noticed.

- Participants continue to greet, support, and socialise with each other well after the event
- Apprentices have chosen to join the Duke of Edinburgh programme
- Community members have formed new relationships that extend beyond My Life activities

The shared experience created a common reference point – a memory that people now hold together.



LEARNING AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Snow White and the Seven Steeds was always designed as a way in which participation had a skills-based outcome. It supported a wide range of skill development, often without participants realising they were 'learning'.

We wanted to foster a sense of teamwork, patience, and problem-solving in a live, unpredictable environment; that's quite a skill to develop but it comes with practice in a wide range of situations, not just creative or dramatic environments.

But, obviously, creative skills in drama, music, dance, art, production and design could be worked on.

Emma Matthews from Theatre Works led the drama workshops, while equine coaches Des Hulley developed the audio and Claire Prentice created the visuals. Together, they built on their existing skills while further strengthening the leadership abilities needed for their ongoing professional development. But actually, those leadership skills also trickled down to the participants; to anyone co-ordinating props, scenes, and even managing peer support.

This sense of learning how to navigate performance, find emotional regulation, develop resilience, and manage anxiety all became key skills – and aligned naturally with Duke of Edinburgh frameworks while remaining accessible and enjoyable.



ORGANISATIONAL OUTCOMES

For My Life, Snow White and the Seven Steeds was a classic reminder not just of what we're good at, but what outcomes are possible if we live our values.

It also helped us define our long term strategy where we embed inclusion rather than add it on, and showed us the value of asset-based, community-led practice.

The panto has given participants confidence in creative, participatory work, but also gives My Life the belief and indeed proof that this approach works and should be supported and encouraged by all.

For commissioners, funders and other users of our services, the Pony Panto is an example of the long-term impact of shared experiences and coherent programmes of participatory support over one-off interventions.



CONCLUSION

Snow White and the Seven Steeds was not a project that happened to people, whether they were audience members, cast members, support staff or behind the scenes. It happened with them.

And, it was joyful. It showed that when people are trusted, supported, and enabled to participate in ways that make sense for them, something extraordinary can emerge.

In a space filled with straw bales, music, ponies and laughter, inclusion stopped being an aspiration and became a lived experience.

Long after the costumes were packed away, the real legacy remained: confidence carried forward, relationships strengthened, and a community that knows what it feels like to belong together.



With special thanks to our donors - Rachael Acton, Wates Group, Montane Lakeland, and J&M Horse Drawn Carriages - for providing Santa's transport.



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