



Beatles fan Roger Edwards has set up a new group called Sgt. Pepper's Friendship Club.

# WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY *friends*

A FRIENDSHIP CLUB LAUNCHED IN WALL HEATH – AND WHICH IS HELPING COMBAT LONELINESS – IS ABOUT TO BE ROLLED OUT. **HEATHER LOAT** TAKES UP THE STORY

**W**hen your world is full of family, friends and fun it's hard to imagine that life will ever be any different. Yet, for a lot of people, isolation and loneliness can just creep up on them and is something they face on a regular basis – and the impact on their health and wellbeing can be significant.

Working in the charitable sector in Dudley, Roger Edwards has met many people over the years suffering from life-changing conditions but the thing they find most difficult to cope with is being on their own.

He says: "I am seeing people who may have mobility problems or speech issues but what can affect them more than anything is that feeling of isolation.

"Some tell me they don't see anyone and the phone doesn't ring. They'll say, 'I shut my door and I don't see a living soul from one week to the next'. It's very sad. People just want a bit of company."

Realising this was a widespread issue, Roger felt passionately that he needed to do something to try to make a difference.

So, he hit upon the simple idea of launching a friendship club for people from all walks of life to come along and enjoy the company of others. And what better name for Beatles fan Roger to call the group

than Sgt. Pepper's Friendship Club? The name was inspired by the title of the Fab Four's iconic album, Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band.

"I'm a mad Beatles fan and, like the song With a Little Help from My Friends, the club is all about people supporting each other and offering companionship," explains Roger.

So, he got things going at Wall Heath Community Centre and over the past 12 months the group has thrived and from a dozen turning up initially, is now attracting 40 regulars with a growing membership of around 60 people.

In fact, it's proved to be such a runaway success that a bigger room may soon be needed.

Thanks to Lottery funding, Roger, who is supported by his wife Jan, is now getting the project on the move. They have bought a camper-van emblazoned with the cheerful Sgt. Pepper's Friendship Club branding so they can roll it out across the West Midlands, taking it to the people, rather than people coming to them.

"The Lottery's Community Fund is all about bringing people together with a particular emphasis on tackling social isolation," says Jan.

"Sgt. Pepper's Friendship Club is so grateful to have received funding





Roger with his wife Jan, third from left, and club members John Symons, John Steadman and Sylvia and John Parker; below, the iconic cover of the Beatles album that inspired the club's name and colourful logo.

which is allowing us to make a real difference to people's lives. It's brilliant to have the backing of the Lottery, so we can crack on and get the show on the road."

The plan is to target areas that don't have good transport links, as well as places that have reduced community activities where people might feel increasingly isolated.

Eventually, Roger hopes other groups can be established around the region and that Sgt. Pepper's will work with partners as a signposting and lobbying organisation. He adds: "There's an army of people out there having a raw deal through no fault of their own. Isolation can affect anyone, it doesn't discriminate. There is a perception this is an older person's issue. But the truth is absolutely miles away from that."

Roger hits the nail on the head here. Young and old alike can feel on their own because of their personal circumstances. Perhaps they live alone and have no family, they might be a single parent or carer and therefore struggle to socialise, or they might have disabilities that prevent them from getting out.

For others loneliness could be caused through a bereavement, retiring, changing job or moving house. The causes of loneliness are many and complex.

The way in which society interacts has dramatically changed with the development of technology and this is undoubtedly a major factor.

Roger points out: "Years ago people would have gone to the pub to meet their friends for a chat but now we can communicate without

ever actually seeing someone face-to-face. When people went shopping they would have a natter with the shop staff but now we have self-service tills so we are not interacting in the way we used to. So, you can be out and about in the community but still be lonely. And, of course, you can have your shopping delivered and do so much online and live your life virtually without speaking to anyone."

Sgt. Pepper's recognises that everyone needs a friend and the emphasis is on having fun.

Musician Roger regularly plays his guitar at the group. The singer-songwriter has gigged all over Europe and the fact he owns at least 10 guitars demonstrates his love of the instrument.

Before working in the community Roger had an impressive career in television, producing hit shows like Family Fortunes and Bullseye. He recalls working with Jim Bowen: "He was funnier off screen than on. He didn't know how funny he was. I knew Les (Dennis) just as he was hitting the big time. We're still really good friends and he's just the same as he is on TV."

Roger's natural showmanship makes him ideal for welcoming newcomers to Sgt. Pepper's. Along with other volunteers he puts people at their ease and before long everyone is chatting and enjoying a cuppa and a slice of cake. From starting out as acquaintances, friendships have developed outside the group. One member summed it up perfectly when he said to Roger: "This has changed my life."

■ The club meets every Tuesday at Wall Heath Community Centre, from 10.30am to 12.30pm. Find out more by calling 07512 338594.

