



All six of Tina's children have been to St Joseph's, with Kathleen, 11, and young Tina, eight, still enjoying the benefits of a school which has, says their mum, made a huge difference to their lives. The Purcells come from a long line of Irish travelling families and whilst Tina and her children still live as travellers, they have been settled in Greenwich for many years.

Tina knows how much her children have to offer society, and St Joseph's Catholic Primary School is helping to break down the prejudice barrier

Busting the Traveller myth

St Joseph's was Tina's choice of school for her children partly because her brothers went there in the 80's and 90's, partly for its good local reputation and partly because of its status as a Catholic faith school. However, it is only since her own children have attended there that she has come to realise how much more it has to offer.

"There are a huge amount of misconceptions about Irish travellers, one of which is that our girls don't go to secondary school because they get married and have families early," Tina says. "In fact, a big reason why many travelling girls leave the system after primary education is the fact that they are often bullied very badly because of their heritage. At St Joseph's, racial bullying is not tolerated in any way, shape or form, and when my children first went there any potential



bullying was quashed immediately and we have never had any problems since that time."

Sensitive and enlightened approach to bullying

According to Tina, the school's approach to bullying is sensitive and enlightened. "Quite often, a child who is being picked on won't complain for fear of making the situation worse," she explains. "At St Joseph's, they made sure that extra staff are available to look out for problems and address them directly, rather than leaving a vulnerable child in the position of either complaining or having to put up with it. The staff can witness for themselves what is happening so that a child is never put in an impossible situation and the system has worked perfectly. As adults, we can mostly shrug off insults and prejudice but for a child it is much more complicated and distressing."

Understanding and acceptance

In addition to this protective approach to its minority families, St Joseph's actively celebrates other cultures, promoting their strengths and rich heritage. "As travellers, we are not just accepted but are encouraged to play a part in school and community life," Tina says. "As part of the school's multicultural awareness programme, I have given talks and demonstrations about our way of life and even sung on stage! Helping other people to understand us better and to accept us as individuals rather than listening to what the media say about us has made such a difference to how people perceive us. Not all travellers are how they are portrayed by others."

Proud of who we are

That assertion is proved by the success that Tina's children have achieved. Various, they have achieved good and high qualifications and jobs, have carried out charitable work in the community and have learned to be proud of their background and heritage. "At some point, all my children have felt marginalised or even been physically threatened and have sometimes lied about their circumstances to protect themselves. What is so amazing about St Joseph's is that the children have been given the confidence to stand up for themselves and to understand that they have just as much to offer as any other child, to realise that they have nothing to be ashamed of, and that they are worthy of respect as anyone. I have never seen a school which is so actively committed to belief in all its families."

Support in any circumstances

Tina has huge admiration for St Joseph's, its teachers and its Headteacher, not only for their pastoral care of her children but their involvement with its families. "We have been supported in so many ways, not only within the school remit but in terms of practical things, too. The Headteacher has attended events with me to support my disabled son, helped to get a Statement of Special Educational Needs in place for him, turned up on a Sunday to cheer on the Irish Dance group at the V&A Museum and has even interceded with utility companies when our gas supply froze in the Winter."

A valued part of the community

Although Tina herself was home-educated and never attended school, she fully realises the value of a school education for her own children. "St Joseph's has given them self-respect as well as a good education," she says. "I campaign and volunteer for people who are disadvantaged and I like the fact that St Joseph's has the same attitude. Partly because of St Joseph's, our family is respected and we feel like we are a valued part of the community, and that we are helping to break down the barriers of prejudice."



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