Charity makes use of disused building to raise awareness of childhood arthritis

Thursday 5 October, 2023

Arthritis is a condition that is most commonly associated with the elderly, yet around 20 children each week are diagnosed with arthritis in the UK.

Juvenile Arthritis Research is a charity based in Tonbridge, Kent, that supports children, young people and families affected by Juvenile Idiopathic Arthritis (JIA). JIA is an autoimmune condition where the body's natural defences attack the joints causing inflammation, pain and reduced mobility. It can affect children of any age. Once diagnosed, someone with JIA has the condition for life.

The charity was founded 5 years ago by Tonbridge resident Richard Beesley whose wife and daughter both have the condition.

"Before working at Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council, I used to work as a researcher an statistician, so I wanted to go back to my roots in science to help find a cure for JIA," Richard told us.

The charity soon realised that as well as wanting a cure for the condition, families also lacked information and support.

"We worked together with parents, young people, the medical profession, and even with teachers and schools to develop information resources to support families when a child is diagnosed with JIA."

Awareness of childhood arthritis is low and this can lead to delays in diagnosis and treatment. The condition can cause permanent joint damage if left untreated, as well as complications with eyesight from JIA-related uveitis (inflammation inside the eye).

"Prompt diagnosis really is vital. The delays are not due to long waiting lists. The delays are happening because of a lack of awareness that children and young people can even get arthritis so we need to increase awareness amongst families, amongst schools, amongst healthcare professionals such as GPs and A&E staff who might be amongst the first medical professionals that a family sees. They need to know that it is ok for them to refer to specialist paediatric rheumatology services if they suspect that it could be JIA."

To enable communities and health professionals to learn about the signs and symptoms of JIA, Juvenile Arthritis Research have developed an awareness campaign called "ThinkJIA", the idea being to just "**J**ust th**I**nk and **A**sk" if it could be JIA if a child is experiencing any issues with their joints lasting over 6 weeks.

"GPs will normally rule out other serious conditions but JIA is often overlooked. Often blood tests and X-rays will appear completely normal in JIA so it really is important to refer to paediatric rheumatology where specialists can make a diagnosis. A referral to an eye specialist is also vital because around 1 in 5 children with JIA can develop uveitis which can cause loss of sight if not detected and treated promptly."

Juvenile Arthritis Research have just moved into new premises in Tonbridge on the site of the old SCI gym on the industrial estate.

"We've been welcomed by all the neighbours in the area who are pleased to see the building back in use again. They are particularly excited to know that it is a charity who is making a difference and having a real impact that has moved in. We're very happy to be there too as it means that we can support even more families in the local area as well as the work we do across the UK."

New window signage has been installed with thought-provoking yet positive imagery. It features local children, young people and families from the local area who came along to the building for a recent photoshoot. Local photographer Janet Penny from Hushabye Photography donated her time and skills to enable the window signage awareness-raising project to happen.

The images are bright and colourful and feature some of the core messages that families affected by JIA wanted others to know.

Richard told us: "We try to get a balance in all we do between the serious side of raising awareness and

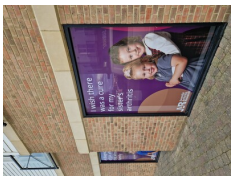
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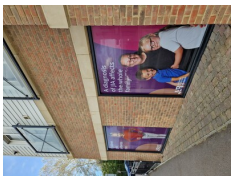


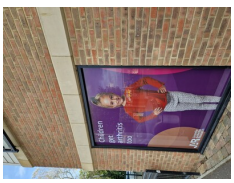












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showing that living with JIA can bring it's challenges whilst also giving hope to those diagnosed so that they know that with the right treatment and support, they can still lead full lives."

As a very small volunteer-run charity, Juvenile Arthritis Research would love to hear from any businesses or funders who are able to offer their skills, services or funding towards their work.

"We're thrilled to have such a visual presence in Tonbridge with the new building as we hope that it will enable us to continue to strengthen our links with the local community."

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