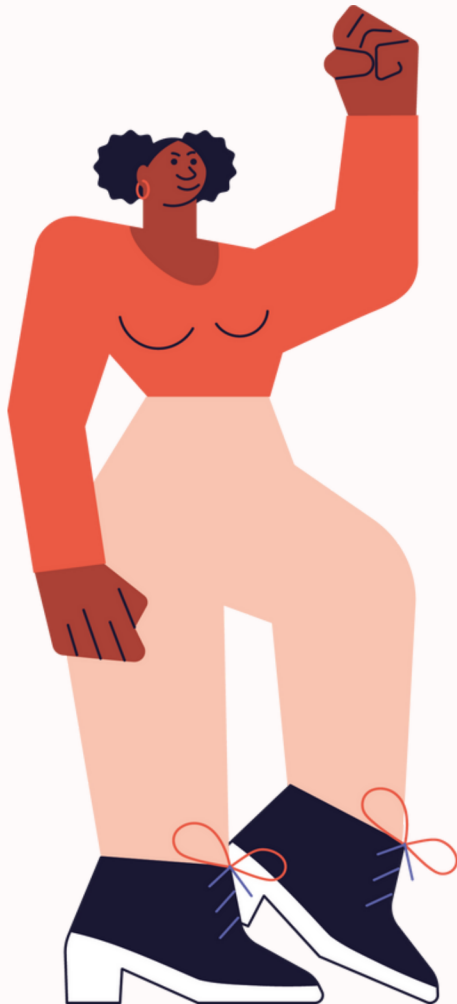


# Participant Stories from Small, Powerful Groups

Stories of confidence, entrepreneurship, social connection and mental wellbeing.

An Anthill Collective Report, 2023



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**You're going to start seeing your reflection as an entrepreneur.**

**And you do have good ideas, and you can make them work.**

— Abby, WEvolution member

# Abby's Story

## Support in entrepreneurship

In early 2020, Abby was running a small bakery out of the kitchen in her home flat. Her business was doing well, and she was looking for support to help it grow. Abby knew she needed financial support to expand, but had hesitations about finding support for a small business, especially as a woman.

*"When you're a woman it is really hard to make your voice heard, or make people take you seriously if you have a business idea."*

Abby was contacted by WEvolution, but had hesitations at first—she believed that the type of support they were offering must only be available to large, established businesses, or must come at a high cost.

Despite these hesitations, Abby decided to take part in a WEvolution call, and quickly learned that neither was true.

*"I didn't even realise that these support groups are available, and that it's a resource that is available in Scotland...I thought you would have to be a big business and pay a monthly membership to, I don't know, some sort of business club."*

Abby joined a call to learn more about WEvolution and invited four friends to join her in establishing a Small, Powerful Group (SPG). Because each of the four members was in the process of running or setting up their own small business, meetings focused on sharing business ideas and social support for their entrepreneurship. Abby spoke about how energising it was to be part of a community of women entrepreneurs:

*"It's just really really energising to meet other women who are talking about business, other entrepreneurs. You leave with a lot of energy and a lot of this can-do attitude."*

The group began meeting regularly, alternating between weekly and bi-weekly, and collectively decided to start a shared savings fund as part of their SPG. At each meeting, each SPG member added £2 to a collective fund.

With a low interest loan from WEvolution and social support from her SPG community, Abby was successfully moved her bakery out of her house and into a dedicated bakery space. This was a big moment of growth for her self-led small business.

Abby's business was thriving in the bakery space, until she encountered an unexpected issue—an oven in the bakery broke. Abby needed to fix the oven to keep her business running, but the cost was high, and was not something she was prepared to pay alone.

The SPG set up an emergency meeting. All four members immediately jumped on a call, and quickly agreed on Abby taking a loan from the group's collective savings to replace the oven.

*"We agreed on how I'm going to pay back the money, and then I immediately withdrew the funds. I was able to order a new oven and just keep on baking."*

*"I went from being really stressed out that morning, to then having a conversation with my group to being like, okay, I have the money, I can fix the problem now."*

Abby reflects on the speed of the group's decision making. Having to work with a traditional bank to take out a loan would likely have taken longer, and involved more fees and interest.

*"When you're a small scale entrepreneur, you can go to a bank, but you don't have time to fill in documents. Your group, knowing your business inside out, can make really quick decisions about whether they can lend you the money."*

Abby was able to use the shared group funds to take the emergency loan she needed, fix the oven, and keep the business going. Now, Abby runs a successful baker, and continues to find support from WEvolution and her SPG.

*"It's been two years now that I've been running this company. And whenever I have a work-related challenge, usually the first people I want to text is my Small Powerful Group...I feel like if you message them, they're always there for you. There had been at least a couple of times during these two years when I felt like I really couldn't have done it on my own."*



# Gabby's Story

## Improvements in confidence

When Gabby first joined WEvolution, she couldn't imagine herself running her own business or taking on leadership opportunities, such as speaking in front of a group. But, being part of a Small, Powerful Group (SPG) gave her the confidence to do both.

*"Being part of an SPG has given me confidence in business finance. The other members push me to ask for help when I need it and that has meant I feel a lot more confident in seeking answers and help...Being part of the SPG gave me the confidence and start up fund to begin the darker humour offshoot of my business"*

Gabby now has her own small business, Mental Health Marketplace, and runs stock in a craft shop. She has also shared her experiences by speaking in front of large crowds, "and that absolutely would not have happened had I not been part of an SPG." She has immediate plans to expand her business.

*"Being part of an SPG, and having access to resources because of that group, has helped me develop that aspiration and dream into a plan of action. It helped me develop the knowledge of the steps I need to follow to create and grow that dream."*



# Jasmine and Beth's Story

## Community and a sense of belonging

Jasmine and Beth were two strangers, both going through a transformative moment in their lives.

Jasmine had recently left a marriage, and had moved with her family from Glasgow to Edinburgh. As an outgoing and social person, she was looking to build community in her new home, saying "I was yearning for human contact as I am quite sociable." Parts of her marriage had left her with diminished confidence, and had negatively impacted her finances.

*"My confidence got knocked when my husband was controlling everything, and I had to learn how to do everything from scratch again when I left the marriage."*

Beth was also adjusting to life changes. After enduring extended Covid-19 lockdowns, she was feeling socially isolated, and was craving community and social connection.

*"It was just after lockdown when everything started unlocking, and I was so depressed at that time. I thought I can't take it, I'm at a most lonely place."*

Both joined WEvolution looking for social support during these changes.

Jasmine was proactive in finding community: she saw an ad for WEvolution and decided to attend a WEvolution meetup. At that meetup she met Beth, and the two found an immediate connection.

*"I told my story at the board meeting...Beth came just next to me. I really connected with her. And when I was telling my story, she was nodding alongside me. And when she told her story, there was a lot that resonated with me. I think we clicked."*

The two decided to start a Small, Powerful Group (SPG), and invited two friends to join. In their SPGs, they shared their personal stories and their experiences as women. They also shared in their different religious backgrounds, as a Sikh and a Christian.



They encouraged each other in their entrepreneurial work: Jasmine works full-time, but also independently runs a small business as a therapist. Beth is a yoga teacher, and teaches yoga and meditation.

Finding more confidence to expand her work, Jasmine hosted an Inner Leaders workshop, and invited Beth to lead the workshop's mindfulness session. Both Jasmine and Beth felt encouraged by the support of their SPG to lead the workshops.

*"I felt I could do this. And with the support of the group I would not be alone. I have a squad of cheerleaders."*



Other WEvolution members joined the workshop, and its success gave Jasmine and Beth continued confidence to pursue their goals.

*"What I loved about this workshop was that we were all our own unique personalities, and very active about what we have as our dream and goals. This was very moving, as we all resonated with each other, and we're compassionate about what we would love to do and achieve."*

*"I had an opportunity to share my mindfulness session at the gathering, bringing everyone peace and tranquillity, settling them down, grounding them, relaxed in the event. I was nervous as I did not know the audience, but I felt great after."*

Jasmine and Beth found support from WEvolution and their SPG, and a sense of community in their friendship with each other.

*“Jasmine and I have supported one another, holistically and mindfully. We are growing and encouraging each other and have lots of thoughts and plans about what we wish to do and support each other in SPG.”*

Continuing on the mindfulness experienced in the group workshop, they decided to plan a trip together, to a holiday home in Nairn Lochloy. They watched the sunrise together, drank tea, continued to share and connect, and led each other through therapeutic and mindfulness activities.



This type of community and social connection was what drove both members to join Evolution. Beth reflects on how the empowerment she found through WEvolution was particularly impactful as she moves into a new life phase. She shares feeling more “like herself”, and more “confident.”

*“WEvolution came along just at the point where I thought I had been confined to the scrap heap, simply for being middle aged. But here was this movement made up of all sorts of people who wanted to encourage, create, experiment and share ideas, and who didn't think that age, background or gender should be a barrier to that.”*

*“I'm not in a lonely place anymore. I don't feel alone...it's amazing.”*

Jasmine found the social connection she was looking for, and also found empowerment and support in reestablishing her finances: she began saving, and took a 90-day course on finances and money mindsets.

*“It's given me a sense of empowerment to be able to save and to know that my little will grow into something big.”*

The support of new friendship, and of the SPG members and WEvo staff, helped them both in their respective journeys.



# Trishy's Story

## Social support and entrepreneurship

In 2010, Trishy had moved with her husband and three children to Scotland, and had a new baby on the way. Trishy had no existing social network in Scotland, and was lacking the community support she needed to settle into a new place with a growing family.

*"I was totally isolated. Totally isolated...We didn't have a network, I didn't know anybody. It was just me and him and the kids."*

Trishy immediately began to feel isolated by her lack of social connection, and began looking for ways to build community, quickly. She began talking to a parent at her children's school, who introduced her to WEvolution. She reflected on being "out of my comfort zone", but decided to go anyway.

Almost immediately she felt a connection, and decided to join a Small, Powerful Group. At first it was "purely for the social aspect", but when she began to learn about how WEvolution supports entrepreneurship, she felt encouraged to start her own small business.

After attending a series of WEvolution events, Trishy noticed a trend: "small entrepreneurs that were creating the most amazing products at home", but who "didn't have the confidence to go and sell them." Noticing a need, Trishy successfully started an indoor market, to help these entrepreneurs sell their goods.

Through social connection, Trishy was able to change her mindset about her own abilities.

*"I suppose that's probably the biggest turning point for me: the fact that being part of the movement...created the right environment for me to feel that that was possible."*

# Nora's Story

## Improvements in mental wellbeing

Before Nora joined WEvolution, she was struggling to make consistent social connections. Having grown up in a strict religious group, she had an ingrained idea of what community looks like that didn't feel positive, and that she wanted to change.

*"I basically grew up in a very high control religious group. When I left, it was very difficult because in that group you are taught that people outside of the group are all bad. So I was really scared of people."*

This belief led to a lack of social connection, which affected Nora's confidence.

*"I don't have much self-esteem."*

A friend invited Nora to join her at a WEvolution peer meeting. At first Nora was sceptical: her religious group "taught that people outside of the group are all bad. I was really scared of people."

But she decided to attend, and immediately began to experience fundamental shifts in her perceptions of people and community. These shifts also positively impacted her mental health.

*"Meeting all these people helped me understand...that people are good. I'm very socially anxious, so it really helped with my anxiety."*

Nora decided to join a Small, Powerful Group (SPG). Being part of the SPG helped with her confidence, which in turn continued to support her mental health.

Nora began to take on new challenges: she took ownership of her SPG's Feedback Loop programme, in which she sent SPG members daily prompts to track their mental wellbeing, sense of agency, and interactions. Nora independently designed the Feedback Loop findings into a comic for the group. She reflects on how this leadership and creativity sparked a change in her, and how much this has impacted her mental wellbeing.

*"This is something that I never thought I would be capable of doing. So that illustrates the change in me. Especially when I went through this really bad period of depression, and I had psychotic symptoms, it was horrible—I thought this was the end. So being able to do things like that is really amazing."*

Being able to share her self-doubts and challenges with her SPG, and to find support and shared experiences, has impacted Nora greatly.

*"I've always felt like a failure in a lot of ways, so it's been amazing meeting people who have felt the same way basically, and we really help each other out, and empower each other. That's what movement's all about."*

Nora has found a positive community, and with it, self-confidence.

*"Now I have support that I didn't have before, I have a tribe who gives me confidence and empowers me."*



# Thank you.



## **An Anthill Collective Report**

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This report was produced by Anthill Collective, a group of independent social researchers, policy experts and service designers helping organisations create citizen-centred policies and services.

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