

Friends for Life



Founder of Social Circle Manchester, Steve Sutherland, discusses why making friends in later life matters more than ever in the run up to International Day of Friendship (30th July).

The International Day of Friendship was proclaimed in 2011 by the UN General Assembly with the idea that friendship between peoples, countries, cultures, and individuals can inspire peace efforts and build bridges between communities.

To mark the day the UN encourages governments, international organizations, and civil society groups to organise events, activities, and initiatives that promote solidarity, mutual understanding, and reconciliation.

After five years of travelling the world – three laps of the globe, working visas, and the Inca Trail, Colombia – Steve found himself in Manchester wondering: ‘how do you actually meet people here?’ “When you’re travelling, you can’t help but meet people and make connections,” he says. “But often you’re doing things as part of a tour. Even if you’re travelling independently, there are always people around you. When that stops, what then?”



So, Steve decided to take the initiative and set something up: “For no other reason than people coming together to meet other like-minded individuals. To make sure they weren’t just sitting around watching TV, missing out on life.”

This September, Social Circle marks 20 years: “When we started, there was no Meetup, no Facebook, and hardly any smartphones.” The world may have changed, but the philosophy hasn’t: “It’s simply been about getting out, meeting people, and having stuff to do – giving yourself more options.” The group has evolved along with its membership – where it once attracted people in their 20s and 30s, it now skews older, as is natural with such a long-running community.

New members now often come with a clearer sense of what they’re looking for – people who’ve recently moved to Manchester, come out of a long relationship, or simply found that old friends have drifted into more settled, less adventurous lives, as Steve gently laments: “I love my mates to bits, but for goodness’ sake, some of them really need to get their mojo back!” For many, Social Circle offers just the kind of boost they were lacking.

The group runs on a monthly membership fee, meaning it filters out those who might see the group as a backdoor to dating, or who aren’t genuinely committed to showing up. What it attracts instead is: “educated professionals who genuinely believe in the value of what they get.”

The calendar of events is varied, including cinema nights, countryside walks, Sunday roasts, comedy nights, weekends away in Snowdonia, and Edinburgh Fringe trips. But the thread that runs through it all is consistently doing activities with like-minded people: “Getting to know people, you pick up a story, you cultivate it, and



you expand on it. It’s a broadening and enhancement of your social network, not a replacement.”

Steve is well familiar with the statistics around loneliness and social isolation and was acutely aware of the harmful effects long before the research caught up. As he points out, loneliness is now considered worse for your health than smoking 15 cigarettes a day and suicide remains the leading cause of death among men under 45 in the UK: “What we know now – far more than we did 20 years ago – is the mental health value of being outside, of connectivity, and of having fulfilment, stimulation, and actual lifestyle choices rather than just being secluded.”

Steve says the most rewarding part of the job is witnessing the transformations people often undergo: “Some people come in who’ve been in a toxic relationship for years. You can tell they’re nervous and apprehensive. But suddenly, they’ll come out of their shell, grow a new confidence, and do all kinds of things they never imagined they would.”

Social Circle Manchester welcomes new members and is open to all – no criteria, no exclusions, and no need to have a specific background or circumstance: “If you’re of the mindset to improve your lifestyle and want to get out and meet new people, then Social Circle is for you.”

With a packed summer programme already under way and the 20th anniversary celebrations planned for 25th September, there’s no better time to get involved.

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