

Neighbourhood Awards: Best Neighbour Award

How Rachid made a difference in W9

Give a summary of your entry

Octavia Housing and Care nominate their tenant, Rachid Rezoul Boufas from Fernleigh Close in Queen's Park, London W9, for the Best Neighbour Award.

In eight years at the Close, Rachid has consistently been at the heart of community life and is well respected in the neighbourhood for his willingness to get involved, volunteer his time and support the elderly and isolated. As a member of Octavia Housing's Tenant Steering Group, he also works to improve the services they provide and take up local problems.

When a large group of young males aged between 10 and 20 began hanging around the Close, Rachid and his neighbours were understandably concerned. However, Rachid, who has four children of his own, opted to find a positive solution

Challenging their behaviour, but gaining their trust over a period of months, Rachid learned there were few activities for young people locally and that fears about gang territory stopped them looking further afield. He began meeting with Octavia staff to see what could be done for them.

When funding became available, Rachid introduced the boys to Community Initiatives Officer Cecilia Faduola, to discuss what they would like to do. Nine youngsters went on to take part in a highly successful eight-month music project, which ended this spring.

Rachid has made a difference for a significant number of people, especially the young and the old, in an area towards the top of the UK's deprivation index, and where crime rates are high.

What makes this person's contribution particularly noteworthy?

For Rachid it's straightforward. "If you really want a good neighbourhood, you have to give time to each other," he says. "To build a community, you don't need much money. You just need someone to mediate."

Rachid is always willing to give his time. He has helped resolve neighbour disputes, supported elderly neighbours, set up and run a social club for isolated elderly people and worked with Octavia Housing to improve life for fellow residents. He believes passionately in bringing people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities together.

So, when around 20 young men began hanging around Fernleigh Close, he was concerned for the young people as well as his neighbours. He explains: "As citizens of this country, we have a duty to these children."

Rachid's approach was to talk to the youngsters. "I was very direct. I said, 'What are you doing here?' But I was friendly too and asked them, 'What makes you buzz?', because I could see they had nothing to do."

Rachid began meeting with staff from Octavia Housing to find a solution, but continued to chat to the youngsters every time he saw them in the street. This approach proved key to the project that followed.

“He took the time out to talk to the boys. Not just once, but consistently over the months. That was fundamental. Without that contact, it would have been difficult to engage them. Rachid was a bridge and a positive role model,” recalls Cecilia Faduola, Octavia’s Community Initiatives Officer.

What change has this person led or initiated?

Rachid’s willingness to step in, whatever the problem, and his willingness to volunteer, whatever the project, has helped to transform life in and around Fernleigh Close. Where once there were misunderstandings and cultural barriers, there are now neighbours who know and look out for each other.

Rachid’s neighbours felt intimidated when the calm of the Close was threatened by the young people drinking and smoking on their street. But Rachid saw bored youngsters, rather than simply an anti-social behaviour problem. “If this had carried on, I don’t know what would have happened to them. This is where problems start,” he says.

Rachid’s meetings with Octavia Housing led to funding being found for the SPIT (Sending Positive Images Through) Music project. As a result, nine youngsters went on to make two music videos and take part in a documentary, working with professional companies and up-and-coming grime artists over an eight-month period.

They have since shown their work in public and presented it to a group of Dutch MPs. They are now taking part in further projects and working towards an accredited qualification in music video production.

The young people have been transformed by their experience, gaining confidence and increasing their horizons. Most are now studying or working and they no longer hang around on the streets. “They’ve become different people, better behaved and politer,” Rachid says.

Rachid continues his work as a tenant representative, helping Octavia Housing to improve its services and tackle local problems.

Who did this person work with to make things happen?

Rachid has worked with his neighbours and other local people for many years. He is well known in W9 for his community spirit, his willingness to run and cater for events (Rachid is a restaurateur by trade) and his concern to include everyone.

Rachid attracted a grant of £2,000 from the Scarman Trust, in partnership with The Octavia Foundation, to help him run a ‘Stay in Touch’ social club for the elderly and isolated.

Rachid worked tirelessly with the young people. Because he is genuine and approachable, he was able to find out about their lives and convince them that there are alternatives to hanging around on street corners. They trusted that he really meant what he said.

“Most people were giving us negative vibes. They saw us as a gang of thugs. But he was different. He kept coming back,” says Kenneth Keeya (17). “You could do nothing but respect him,” agrees Treven Augustin (17).

By treating the youngsters with respect, Rachid helped the other residents of Fernleigh Close feel more positive about children and young people, and to feel more secure out and about in their neighbourhood.

Rachid successfully lobbied Octavia Housing on behalf of the young people and made a convincing case for something to be done for them. As a direct result, Octavia's charitable Foundation went on to get support from the Local Network Fund to enable a project run in partnership with video producers 2One Creative and Elliot Rae of Make it Happen Music.



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Rachid Boufas: Community champion

Last year, Rachid's work in the community attracted a £2,000 grant from the Scarman Trust in partnership with Octavia Foundation.

Selected by the Foundation as a community champion, Rachid was given the grant to support his 'Stay in Touch' project, which ran popular weekly social gatherings for older people, with refreshments and music. Rachid set up the club to combat the isolation experienced by many older people in living in W9. He was keen to get people together and to break down the barriers that often exist between people from different ethnic backgrounds.

Rachid's enthusiasm soon attracted other local people to the club, including Lika Al-Sabagh, one of his neighbours. "I went every Friday night to the club with my three children. It was good for me to meet people, as my English is not so good and there was singing and games for the children. Rachid is very nice and always very happy."

Another neighbour, Claudette Montaque, has this to say about Rachid's willingness to contribute to the community. "I find Rachid very helpful and thoughtful. He's always good at saying 'yes'. For example, when we had a community function at the Methodist Church, Rachid organised the food, drink and games."

Octavia Housing's Resident Initiatives Manager Susanne Radmann says: "The first time I met Rachid, I was struck by his genuine interest and care for the community he lives in. In particular, I noticed his firm commitment to breaking down barriers between people of all races, ages and abilities."

"Over time, it became apparent that Rachid's enthusiasm is so infectious that he is able to mobilise people. He consistently demonstrates his true impact through the realisation of a variety of projects."



Rachid Boufas, whose strong sense of community spirit makes such a difference in W9.

Tenant representative

Rachid has also played a key role as a member of Octavia Housing and Care's Tenant Steering Group. The group brings tenants together with staff to discuss Octavia Housing's plans and services, and to make suggestions for improvement.

Resident Initiatives Manager Susanne Radmann, who co-ordinates the group, has really appreciated Rachid's positive contribution. "Rachid is involved in range of initiatives to help us improve services for residents. His gentle and diplomatic manner facilitate honest communication in any group he is a member of. He doesn't shy away from responsibility."



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How Rachid made a difference in W9

SPIT – Sending Positive Images Through Music

When Rachid Boufas successfully convinced Octavia Housing that something needed to be done to engage the young people who were congregating in his street, it led to a ground-breaking music project that has changed the lives of all the young people involved.

Although it began as a way to tackle anti-social behaviour, the SPIT music project quickly became much more than that – and Rachid has played a key role throughout.

Rachid acted as a bridge between Octavia's charitable Foundation and the boys on the street, bringing them face to face with Community Initiatives Officer Cecilia Faduola to discuss what they would like to do. As a direct result, nine youngsters went on to take part in the highly successful eight-month music project, which ended this spring.

During the project, the young people wrote and recorded two music tracks with Elliott Rae from Make It Happen Music and went on to make two music videos and a documentary about the project with video producers 2One Creative. The results can be viewed online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5EKQfka3eR8>

Since the formal end of the project, the youngsters' work has had two public screenings and their tracks have been showcased on Life FM. They have also presented their work to a group of Dutch MPs on a fact-finding visit to UK housing associations. Some participants have gone on to take part in BBC projects for aspiring musicians and will join a songwriters' festival at the Royal Festival Hall. The young people are now working towards an accredited AQA qualification in music video production.

Chosen by the boys, the theme of one of the music tracks focuses on the pros and cons of homework. A humorous take on the subject, but with a serious conclusion, the video will be distributed to schools and youth groups throughout London as an educational tool.



Thanks to good neighbour Rachid Boufas, the nine young people pictured got the opportunity to explore their creativity and boost their self-confidence.

The transformation in the lives of these young men is impressive. Extending their horizons beyond Fernleigh Close, they have explored their creative talents and become expert in handling large public appearances and experiences. The project has challenged stereotypes about young people at the same time as challenging the young people themselves. Kenneth Keeya (17) expresses a view they all share, when he says: "It's been a good experience. I'm proud of myself."

This pride and confidence is having an impact on the youngsters' wider lives and expectations. For example, Kenneth is now studying for a BTEC in Business Studies, Treven Augustin is on a BTEC sports course and Adnan Berouain has landed a job as a cashier with Barclays Bank.

The project did not take much funding – £7,000 from the Local Network Fund and £3,000 in Foundation time – but it took the enthusiasm and ongoing commitment of all involved, particularly Rachid. Because, at every stage, Rachid has been there, attending public events and keeping up to date with their progress – beaming with pride at their success.