

Freetime

Your local London guide to what's on, eating out ... and more

Grooop therapy

Dance troupes from London and beyond will this weekend raise money for GroOops, a Finchley-based company that helps young people with life difficulties.

MIRIAM CRAIG finds out how it began.

GROOOPS founder Pennie Aston strongly believes in people's potential to continue developing into old age. She left school aged 15 with no qualifications and says she was 'completely written off' by her teachers. For 14 years she made a living from singing, the only career she felt was open to her.

But her life changed unexpectedly when her son Luke died in a house fire just before his eighth birthday: "Luke's death completely devastated us. As a family we learnt that the unexpected can happen and it can feel like there's no point going on."

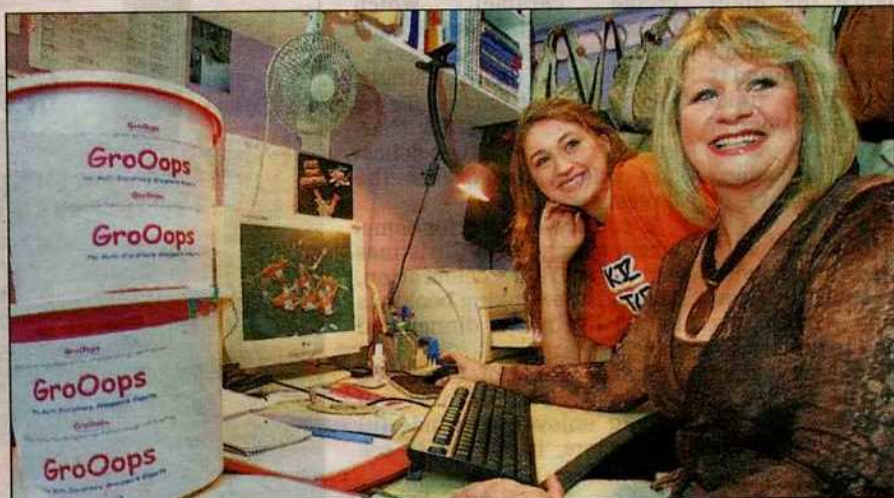
Mrs Aston took on some responsibility for running her husband's TV production company and soon realised she was capable of more. She continued to work in TV, writing and presenting

programmes, but the memory of Luke's death made life at home difficult. The couple's two daughters, born after Luke died, were 'born into a world where bad things really can happen and nobody wants to talk about it', she says.

Her newfound professional confidence enabled her to apply for a masters course at the University of London and, aged 40, she started training in lifelong learning, going on to do a second masters in psychotherapy.

But she also felt her own experience of bringing up her children under the cloud of bereavement could allow her to help others: "I wanted to provide the support that we as a family didn't have."

She founded GroOops two years ago to reach young people going through difficult times —



Family affair: Pennie Aston and her daughter Zoe-Ann get prepared for the fundraising event Kidz Take Kontrol at artsdepot this weekend NL4513

whether they were the result of separation, domestic violence, substance abuse, learning difficulties, or other causes. The three Os in its name represent the child, the young person, and the family. Mrs Ashton says: "The idea is to give kids a sense of belonging, where they can grow and feel safe. Normally that's something the family provides, but we live in a very fragmented society and it's hard to find your identity when your situation is constantly changing."

GroOops uses a combination of evening and weekend courses using the arts to teach young people how to express themselves healthily. Each set of workshops costs £4,500

and all the money comes from donations and fundraising.

This weekend's event Kidz Take Kontrol aims to raise money and celebrate of the positive effects that can come from negative experiences. Everything from making up dance routines to organising rehearsals to printing programmes is done by people aged under 22.

Performances will range from street and hip hop to lyrical, balletic dance. Compères will include 12-year-old Baby Flex and four-year-old Malachi Welch, and singing will also form part of the evening in the form of a performance by Pixie, aka Victoria Lott, an up-and-coming pop singer signed with record label Island Def Jam.

For the Aston family the event is more than

honouring the memory of their son and brother.

Mrs Aston's daughter Zoe-Ann, 20, is one example of a young person overcoming difficulties, namely dyslexia and difficulties with schoolwork. She founded her own dance company, Interlude, aged 16 and has worked with GroOops to put together this event.

For Mrs Aston, Kidz Take Kontrol encapsulates everything GroOops stands for: "It's the most incredibly exciting expression of youth involvement in dance and music. I'm humbled by the kids' ability to put it all together and their positive attitude to getting on and making it right."

Kidz Take Kontrol is at artsdepot, Tally Ho Corner, North Finchley, on Saturday, at 7.30pm. Tickets cost £12.50 from the box office on 020 8369 5454.