

Press release
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V Factor winners prepare for Ponty's Big Weekend

Since the launch of this year's V Factor, thousands of young hopefuls from across The Valleys have been busy preparing, rehearsing and performing acts ranging from comedy sketches to dance troops, and singing to musical theatre, in a bid to impress judges at a series of regional showcases.

Six acts were selected at the showcases and will now get the opportunity to perform on the same stage as hit artists including JLS, Faryl Smith and Hayley Westenra at this year's Ponty's Big Weekend on Sunday, 25 July.

Launched in February as part of 'The Valleys- Heart and Soul' campaign in partnership with Bigfoot Arts Education, The V Factor was developed to nurture local talent in performing arts including bands, choirs, solo musicians, acting, dance and theatrical performances.

More than 80 schools and youth centres across The Valleys were involved in the project, and in excess of two thousand young people took part in the after school and holiday workshops in preparation of the showcase events.

The acts who were selected to perform at Ponty's Big Weekend include Emily Ady, Harriet Whitehead, Lauren Shields, Ryan Elliott, Lucy Hemms and Taylor Jones.

Case studies:

Lauren Shields, aged 18, Church Village*

Bryn Celynnog sixth form student, Lauren, is one step closer to achieving her dream of becoming a star, since gaining experience through The V Factor.

Lauren, said: "I was involved in last year's V Factor and was lucky enough to perform at Ponty's Big Weekend. Winning the theatrical performance category this year is so exciting, and I can't wait to get the opportunity to sing on the stage once again.

"The V Factor has not only given me brilliant exposure from performing to thousands of people, it's also brought some opportunities my way. I was put in touch with West End Star, Rosemary Ashe, as result of last year's performance, and I now visit London every month to receive singing lessons from her.

"I have also just started taking dance classes at the famous Pineapple Studios in London, something I certainly wouldn't have done or considered without the experience and confidence resulting from the V factor.

"The competition is such a fantastic opportunity for everyone involved, from the rehearsal stages to the showcases, it's fun and a great way of making new friends and developing confidence and performance skills. I'd really recommend it to other young people in The Valleys."

Ryan Elliott, aged 17, Church Village*

Ryan, a pupil at Bryn Celynnog, has been playing the guitar for seven years now, inspired by the likes of Steve Vai and Shawn Lane.

Ryan, said: "I'm spending about three to four hours a day at the moment rehearsing for my performance at Ponty's Big Weekend, as I want to make sure that it's perfect. I'll be performing a groovy piece called 'Get you back', by late underground guitarist, Shaun Lane, as I want to share his amazing work with a large audience.

"The V Factor has been such a brilliant opportunity for young people in The Valleys, not only because it's great experience, but I've also got to meet so many people too. The fact that we'll get to perform at Ponty's Big Weekend is really the icing on the cake.

"I'll be applying to study music at Guildford University later this year, so I'm sure that my involvement in the V Factor will help with my application."

Lucy Hemms, aged 16, Pontllanfraith*

Pontllanfraith Comprehensive pupil, Lucy, will perform Italian song 'O Mio Babbino Caro', at Ponty's Big Weekend.

Lucy has developed a passion for classical music over the past year since being offered a Scholarship for Junior Access at the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama.

Lucy, said: "I dream of becoming a famous classical singer one day, so the experience I've had from being involved in The V Factor will definitely help, and performing to such a large audience at Ponty's Big Weekend is a dream come true.

"There is so much talent in The Valleys, so the V Factor is really important, as it puts the spotlight on the young people and gives them a chance to shine."

Harriet Whitehead, aged 16, Ebbw Vale*

Harriet, who attends Abertillery Comprehensive School, performed 'The Wizard and I', a song from hit musical, Wicked, at the V Factor's regional showcases. She will go on to perform another of her theatrical favourites, 'Cabaret', at Ponty's Big Weekend.

Harriet said: "The V Factor has been an absolutely brilliant experience for young people in The Valleys, I know a lot of people who went into it and enjoyed it, and how much I enjoyed it personally. There was such a buzz before and after performing on stage, and the competition has given such confidence to the young people involved."

A member of The Cardiff Stage School, Harriet has won 'Best Singer of the Year' at the prestigious Mark Jermin annual awards, performed at Leicester Square and secured a role in a British film, in the last year. Having just completed her GCSE's, Harriet plans to audition

for further roles in films and theatre in the hope of becoming a well-known Singer-Songwriter one day.

Harriet added: "Although I've performed to big audiences before, I've never performed on my own to an audience of this scale, so I'm pretty nervous, but excited more than anything. This is such great experience for me and I'm really looking forward to it."

Catch the winning performances at Ponty's Big Weekend on Sunday, 25 July. Visit <http://www.thevalleys.co.uk/site/whats-on/ponty-s-big-weekend-free-sunday-concert-p110121> for more information about the event.

Follow @LoveTheValleys on Twitter or become a fan of LoveTheValleys on Facebook for the latest news and updates.

For more information about The Valleys and upcoming events, visit www.thevalleys.co.uk

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Notes to editors:

***All case studies are available for interviews and photography. To set up interviews/photography or for further information please contact Helen Newton at Equinox Communications on 02920 764 100 or email valleys@equinox-pr.co.uk**

The Heads of the Valleys regeneration programme is part-funded by the European Regional Development Fund, together with match funding from the Welsh Assembly Government and other partner organisations. The 3-year campaign aims to bring economic benefit to Blaenau Gwent, Torfaen, Merthyr Tydfil, Caerphilly, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Bridgend, northern parts of Swansea and Neath Port Talbot and the eastern Valleys of Carmarthenshire.

Aimed at changing perceptions of the Valleys both to local people and outsiders, the campaign will encourage more visitors and attract potential investors.

www.thevalleys.co.uk