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## Instruments of change

**WORKING RELATIONSHIP** Christina Coker OBE, chief executive of the National Foundation for Youth Music, and her PA, Claire Mills, talk to **SUE FOX**

DAVID BEHRE



In 1999 Christina Coker (above left) was given a blank sheet to start Youth Music – an ambitious partnership between the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, and Arts Council England.

With an annual budget of £10 million, the organisation has already reached over one million children and young people. “Our goal is that every child, and the community in which they live, should have their lives enriched through music.” Christina, the mother of twin daughters aged 15, is in her element.

A firm believer in the power of music to transform lives, she is determined to get every child in Britain singing.

With her eyes firmly set on 2012, her innovative Young Musicians Olympics programme is a project close to her heart, “giving young people who wouldn’t normally have opportunities to make music, a chance to play a major part in a national event.”

Recently Christina flew to Houston, Texas, to receive the 2006 Woman of Influence Award, which honours women like Christina who, through community-based projects, have helped to improve lives, especially those of women and children.

Having started out as a secondary school music teacher in Kent, Christina ended up – via senior posts with the Inner London Education Authority – as director of Hackney Music Development Trust.

Now, in her role as chief executive of Youth Music, she is constantly forging strategic alliances at the highest levels in arts, culture and education and with Government, as well as with the media, major trusts and foundations and other private, public and voluntary sector interests.

Youth Music fills three main roles – funder, development agency and advocate – and Christina needs a PA who can concentrate on the details while she takes care of the bigger picture. For Claire Mills

(above right), who has been working for Christina since June last year, this is a job which ticks all the boxes.

“I’m a good organiser, so I really enjoy the challenge of being ten steps ahead of Christina.

“In the course of a day I could be planning a conference, coordinating briefing papers, li-

**‘I’m involved in important conversations and am asked to share opinions’**

aising with MPs, dealing with trustees and board members, or talking to groups who are involved in community-led projects. I also work closely with Donna Nevers, who is the office secretary. Apart from the admin, I’m given plenty of opportunities to use my own ideas.

“When I joined the organisa-

tion, there was so much paperwork. I suggested a whole change of system which has made everything more streamlined and efficient. One of the best things about working here is being part of a young, vibrant team who are all so committed to what they do.

“We’re based at London Bridge which is a lovely area to work. It’s close to Borough Market, so it doesn’t feel too corporate even though we’re just on the cusp of the City.”

Christina sees Youth Music as proactive. “We’re a catalyst for new ideas. My horror scenario was always that contacts weren’t followed up. Before Claire came, I spent three days out of the office and things piled up. “Now I know I can delegate and be relaxed about it. Between Claire and Donna, they’ve got all bases covered.”

Claire joined Youth Music from Coram Family, a large children’s charity where she was PA to the chief executive. “I’m happy in the charity sector,” she says. “It really feels

like you’re making a difference. Coram Family was a much smaller organisation. Youth Music is small at the centre but has wide networks. The combination of children and music was what attracted me to the job. I studied journalism and used to regret that when I graduated I never took it up. “I no longer feel like that. Working with Christina has given me the chance to be creative and to use the skills we were taught on the course. I’m involved in important conversations and am asked to share my opinions. It’s a great learning experience.”

Always the teacher, Christina admits that hearing Claire enthuse about learning on the job gives her the greatest buzz. “It’s what I love to hear. It’s important to me that there are opportunities for staff at Youth Music. Several have progressed from admin assistant to other areas. People tell me that they’ve gained terrific experience in a short space of time. In terms of staff development, I count that as a mark of success.”