



Bournemouth Tapestry

**A collection of fables
about flourishing,
told near the sea**

Collected and compiled
by Elspeth Penny



KNIGHTSTONE ISLAND

GRAND PIER

GROVE PARK

WESTON COLLEGE

ITALIAN GARDENS

SOVEREIGN CENTRE

TRAIN STATION

ELLENBOROUGH PARK

TROPICANA

CLARENCE PARK

DONKEY SCULPTURES (SALLY MATTHEWS)

CONISTON PLAY AREA

THE SUB STATION

FOR ALL HEALTHY LIVING CENTRE

South Ward

Weston-super-Mare

Contents

p. 4

00: INTRODUCTION

p. 8

01: THE STORY TELLERS - CONTEXT, HOPE & BEGINNINGS

p. 17

02: DISCONNECTIONS, CONNECTIONS & SHINING A LIGHT

p. 34

03: FLOURISHING

p. 46

04: STORIES OF LOCKDOWN & COVID-19

p. 64

05: WHAT IN THIS PROCESS I'D LIKE TO KEEP HOLD OF



Introduction

“

Big NHS initiatives tried to parachute in six weeks after those little boats have got back to the UK shores and say, ‘Here we are!’ and everybody on the beach was going, ‘It’s deserted. There’s nobody here because you’re too little too late.’”

~Mark

This is a series of stories, designed to explore an initiative bringing arts activity and other social prescribing to Weston-super-Mare's South Ward. According to government statistics, this is one of the most under resourced areas of the South West. Weston-super-Mare is a sea-side town, though the train tracks surrounding some of this area render it enclosed and separate from the rest of Weston, and some residents rarely venture far. However, some of the creative projects and stories are reaching and having an influence at national level.

The story as a whole is about flourishing, about disconnection and connection, about journeys and the work to shine a light on a community. It's a story that spans the COVID-19 emergency and lockdown of Spring 2020, before and after. The initiative is called Community Connections and involves old and new alliances between various residents, organisations, individuals and community groups, and is based around the community organisation For All Healthy Living Centre.

My job has been to collect and write up people's verbatim stories, even unfinished stories in an attempt to capture a complex 3-D spider's web which impacts internally and externally. You'll read here a fraction of the stories that could be told, but I'm hoping it will illuminate some of the work that has been done in the area.

There are eight interviewees, though many of the stories involve other people's experiences or journeys. Some names have been changed for anonymity. This is an evaluation, but not in the sense that we need to analyse and interpret the stories. Overall, the key team expressed a will to listen and not interpret.

All of the stories have been told orally, gathered through a series of individual zooms in August and September 2020. As witness,

interviewer and scribe, my job is to give the stories form, within the confines of budget and time, and hopefully prompt your own observations and reflections in the process.

This is all about different points of view. Perhaps we could see this as a collection of fables, by the sea, and if you like you could see yourself as a fish slowly swimming through them. Or perhaps you'd prefer to be piloting a boat, a battleship or sea kayak through them. Maybe you are like a bird, flying over the sea of stories.

Perhaps, as reader, you might note which point of view or bias you are coming from, and if you'd care to, imagine yourself into someone else's point of view.

The stories, as I collected them, were often vibrant and passionate. Talking to each storyteller has been an honour for me, has taught me things and touched me – indeed there have been tears. Like fables, they might lose something as they are written down, hopefully not too much.

Fables can be instructive, as can evaluation reports. However, the aim here is not to be instructive, but rather provide – in the end – unaffected stories or anecdotes, sometimes entertaining in nature and illuminating at other times. I hope at the end of reading, you might picture a tapestry of a seascape with lots of loose threads, unfinished. As time goes on, more stories, more threads can be gathered, but perhaps let's avoid a fixed ending, at least for now. I've not been able to include all the stories, so there may be holes in the tapestry too. Perhaps by continuing to listen to stories from different perspectives, we may mend some of those holes. ●

Thank you,
Elspeth Penny

The Bournville Chocolate Garden – a restful and vibrant community space in the heart of South Ward





IMAGE MIKE KLEINSTEUBER

01

**The Story Tellers –
Context, Hopes
& Beginnings**

Vickie Bardsley

South Ward resident and active member of Theatre Lounge community group (formerly Bournville Community Theatre Company) for 14 years, along with her four children. Vickie has also taken on a Community Producer role across recent projects.

“I live on South Ward. I actually met Theatre Orchard’s engagement manager Angie in 2006 when she first came to the South Ward area to do Festival of Eight and she went all over North Somerset to do different pieces. And at that point, I had just had my third child and she had just had her first. We bonded over babies. Then we did Bournville Does Electra. It was a Greek tragedy themed piece. Over the next decade and a bit, we’ve progressed, done different pieces.”

Laila Barker

Community Connector for South Ward, a role that is managed through the For All Healthy Living Centre and that facilitates a creative social prescribing and community support offer in the area.

“I’ve been a social prescriber for about a year now working on this project, originally a maternity cover and job share for two people. I loved it immediately and wanted to make it my own, but, as Julie was on maternity leave I knew that it wasn’t solely mine. It’s been ups and downs in terms of having to adapt to the different situations – Julie didn’t return to her role, then of course, with COVID, the whole thing went on its head and there were more changes there. In the beginning, getting to know the job, I just went out into the community and met people who were already doing activities and



IMAGE NICK SUTTON

“
I used to fake
confidence.”

~Vickie (above)

running groups and who’d made those local connections. I live here, that helps as well because I already knew some people. I was encouraged by people like Mark to just be known and be seen, because people would build trust and build a relationship. That was quite key in terms of making connections and getting people to sign up to social prescribing. As a parent of young children, running a playgroup, I was part of the community already, and known in that sphere. But in terms of working with adults, that was new. I turned to people like Helen and Mary for their knowledge, because they’d worked here for many years. Just making contacts, that was the key part of the job to begin with. Meeting people and finding out what they did and how we could link up.”

Alex Coulter

Director of Arts and Health South West, a learning, advocacy, networking and development charity that is for everyone who is interested in how the arts and creativity can benefit our health and wellbeing.

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Art is just another way to journal.”

~Helen

“I would say that the work of the housing alliance with Mary and Helen is the most significant work in creating the fertile conditions, more than anything I personally have done. Our project, Community Connections, connects their asset-based community development project, Our Neighbourhood Network, to the medical context. The idea is that Community Connections links the community to the doctors and health structures, there are layers of connection and rationale in here.

The Our Neighbourhood Network project has some arts activities and generates that community energy for better lives. What we were trying to do then is link that back into the system and health services.

One might assume that I had a role that was a bit of a battleship but actually, I feel like I've been something more ephemeral weaving between things. Flying around. But there's a very long lead in to this project for me. My connections with the For All Healthy Living Company go way back. The people who I knew then have been and gone. Mark is the only consistent character in that journey. Not that I've been there very often or met Mark many times but there was a degree of trust from the very beginning. It became a natural location for trying to explore social prescribing, as that took off more regionally and nationally.

Having said that, it was still early days for social prescribing and we were quite pioneering because there wasn't a commitment to social prescribing from the NHS, it was still a very grassroots patchy concept that was happening here and there and I knew about it and wanted to explore it in relation to the arts and culture.

My relationship with Fiona wove into that, it came in when we were trying to develop networks in North Somerset. Then it emerged, of course that she'd done quite a lot of work with the For All Healthy Living Company.

Mark Graham

Chief Exec. of For All Healthy Living Company (FAHLC), a social enterprise that manages the Healthy Living Centre on South Ward, that provides a range of services, facilities and activities for the local community. This includes: Primary Medical Service, Community Cafe, lunch club, community hall, library, children's centre, church, meeting and training rooms and office space.

“I can't remember how it started but Alex and I must have got together at some point and started talking about the relationship between social prescribing and the arts. It's a bit of an entwined history at FAHLC – here, where we are, in the Healthy Living Centre, over the past three or four years running the centre and local community project. We also ran three GP practices as social enterprises and we were very embedded in running primary care for local people as well. The potential for running a social prescribing—I don't like the word 'service'—but as a 'service' for local people felt apt, a good thing to do.

We know from our experience of primary care, and our local community, that actually a lot of people have low level mental health issues, they can be quite isolated, and what they need is not a medical intervention or clinical intervention, but actually what they need is just some support and some social connection. That's the route we started off down.

Together with Alex we put a bid into the Tudor Trust to bring in somebody with an arts focus to their work, hoping that by doing arts in a broader sense – a range of activities, be that painting, drawing, crafts, drama – that would be a way of helping people to engage with each other. Connect. However, during that time, the GP practice was up for sale, or re-commissioned with the money they were offering far less than

IMAGE THEATRE LOUNGE



we were already receiving. We were not prepared to try to run a safe service on those terms and so had to step away.

It was a difficult time but we continued down the social prescribing route. Then a centralised NHS social prescribing service was launched nationally, requiring all local GP practices to respond to social prescribing in a particular way.

There's two other elements to this threaded story. Firstly, a group of us in North Somerset had already started to question how do we respond to this burgeoning social prescribing that's happening, because there are organisations like social services and other people already doing it in different ways?

We came up with a simple answer, a spoke model that had a hub at the centre. People who wanted social prescriptions would come into a hub and go out to the spokes, where there might be specialists in for example, housing, or in art, or counselling. Unfortunately, that got lost in the introduction of the NHS process. There's another story there

about what that transformed into, which I think is very exciting, but that's another story.

The other element was that whilst social prescribing became the new, exciting response to health and well-being, the NHS invested in the social prescribers but not into the end-user resources needed. Somebody wants to do an arts club but actually they need a bit of support. Where's the support? Where's the resources to help that happen? We've worked with Theatre Orchard over the last ten to fifteen years and they're always around, and they know us very well. They're good at working with some people who are struggling. I love the way they work with what people have to offer. They're our strengths-based organisation.

Fiona Matthews

Director of Theatre Orchard, an arts development charity in North Somerset that has longstanding links with South Ward,



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Vickie is a member of our Theatre Lounge group. I've been struck by her creative commitment in lockdown. She's certainly a leading spark within our group on the South Ward. Vickie's been involved for years, along with her family.”

~Fiona

having enabled drama provision in the heart of the community over the past 14 years.

“We've been working on the South Ward for thirteen years and the main strand has been inclusive, free drama and engagement work with groups who wouldn't normally have access to this kind of activity. We've seen, first-hand, over a long period the impact that this work has had on individuals and communities.

We worked with a lot of Greek myths initially, because they deal with those big themes that everyone can relate to and they're quite neutral. Sharing those individual stories has always been both a powerful and humbling way for us to see how creativity can transform lives and empower people. We knew this community work was something we really wanted to build, but budget constraints and an often hand-to-mouth existence as an arts organisation seeking different pockets of funding, meant that our bigger, instinctive vision couldn't be realised.

Then we became involved with the Arts Council catalyst fund, which enabled us to work with Arts + Health South West in order to find funding that would result in projects enabling greater impact and more sustainability. The catalyst fund brought us a much closer working relationship with Arts and Health South West which has been brilliant. Alex is empathetic, intuitive and sensitive to the needs of a particular community.

From that partnership came funding from the Tudor Trust for the new Creative Connections role, allowing us to operate more strategically within an evaluation framework that endorsed and quantified all the brilliantly impactful work that had been going on for a long time. It helped to put us in a proactive position where we could develop an ongoing offer rather than a reactive way of operating, dependent on funds being available at any one given time.

Without continuity and guaranteed funding for projects such as theatre productions, then there is the risk that you lose momentum within a community and individuals can dip afterwards, with no-where to take their newly discovered creativity and skills.

At this point, the group we were working with was called Bournville Community Theatre Company, and the catalyst funding didn't provide resources to make that an ongoing offer. However, change was on the horizon and Theatre Orchard became a National Portfolio Organisation in 2018, with guaranteed Arts Council funding allowing us to plan ahead and schedule a constant programme of activity designed to connect and transform lives.

The NPO status enabled us to employ professional arts practitioner, Angie, to run that theatre company as a regular weekly group. That's when it became Theatre Lounge, a thriving, committed group that has already devised and performed acclaimed work in the community, including 9 Million Nobodies, a co-created theatre piece that explored themes of anxiety, loneliness and isolation and looked – uncannily given the current Covid world we are in – to a disconnected, dystopian future where human warmth and the strength of community finally triumphs.

Mary Morgan

Community Project Manager of Alliance Homes, a housing association that manages and supports the majority of housing stock on South Ward.

“I was involved in the Community Connections project from the very outset, from the imaginings of it. My role as community project manager at Alliance Homes means that I work in partnership with the For All

Healthy Living Company (FAHLC) and we've delivered lots of things in partnership over the years. I was included as a partner at the interview stage, was there as Julie was recruited (as social prescriber) and stayed involved as part of the steering group, meeting regularly with the gang over at the FAHLC and linking up the work that we're doing.

I saw the potential of working together with a strength-based approach and big connections with us working with the five ways of well-being. I stayed involved with the project in that way because I manage Helen and she was more closely involved in some of the joint delivery. Having a shared perspective has brought about some real changes in South Ward I think, in the way that we deliver things and how we involve and include local people in that.”

Alistair Todd

Weston resident and member of Theatre Lounge community group since 2018. Alistair's interests lie particularly in writing for mental health and dramaturgy.

“I have lived in Weston since I was seven years old. I won awards for my writing and performing at university. For many years, it just felt like my talent was going nowhere until I came back to Weston. I run a writing group on a ward at Weston hospital.

I've not done something through social prescribing officially, but I use the Theatre Lounge people, I think that's the closest I've come to social prescribing. It's kept me well. It's been amazing.”



IMAGE HELEN WHELOCK

Helen Wheelock

Founder of Create Together, a CIC that offers creative arts and craft activities for health and well-being, with extensive provision on South Ward. Helen also works on the community engagement side of Alliance Homes.

“I’ve got two job roles. My first role is as a creative arts facilitator, I have my own small arts practise which is called Create Together. I facilitate arts and craft courses in North Somerset, many in the South Ward area. The courses that I am currently running are funded by Public Health. My other job role is as a Community Networker on the ‘Our Neighbourhood Network’(ONN) project with Alliance Homes, a role funded by the National Lottery. Mary Morgan is my

line manager on the ONN project. There are a lot of overlaps between the two job roles, they compliment each other and this has its advantages for building stronger connections with people in the community.”

Elsbeth Penny

“I am a mixed media Writer and Director, working in podcast, theatre, film and print. Regular commissions come from Arts Council England, The Wellcome Trust and University of Bristol.

Working in the area of arts and health, my company 2BU Productions creates socially-engaged projects of excellent artistic quality, often using participatory arts, encouraging people to tell their own

narratives. In addition to making content, we teach and facilitate other people's work. I led the arts side of a research collaboration with University of Bristol's 'The Life of Breath Project'. This was 'Letter to my Breath'.

I've been excited to be invited to write and direct drama scripts, 'Out Like Fudge', based on research diaries or transcribed patient interviews, a continuing collaboration with Barny Hole, trainee specialist in kidney disease, dialysis and transplant medicine. My podcast and theatre play 'Silva Lining's Care Plan' is based on original care diaries from a University of Nottingham study by Professor Justine Schneider. It's the story of three brains, two bodies, one secret plan: an absurd journey into the invisible world of carers, dementia and organoids, based on original care diaries. The play was longlisted for the Women's Prize for Playwriting, 2020." ●

02

**Disconnections,
Connections &
Shining a Light**

Laila

People talk, don't they? People talk to each other, they talk to me. People stay here. They talk about wishing that the park was maybe tidier, for example. They know if you stay in a place you get to know your neighbours. They will talk about – 'Oh number fifty-five who isn't very well' – and I know people who will take food packages around to their friends and things like that.

There's a lot of families that are all on the estate. A young family will have the grandparents just on the next road. I mean, that's very, very common, or they're all living together.

Alistair

It's amazing how many writers there are in Weston, actually. How many actors, how many artistic people are around us. They don't get up to the surface much in Weston, it's nice to see these people be able to create good work and be able to deal with this stuff, even under adverse conditions.

The last council, anyway, had a vision of 100% arts cuts. I mean, that's been tragic. Doesn't help at all. It was hard enough before, anyway. Now, it seems a bit impossible. I sometimes feel like I was supposed to be born in Bristol more than Weston. When I was living in Weston, when there was nothing happening, I had to go to Bristol just for my cultural satisfaction. They've always got cooler stuff going on and Weston doesn't have any of that. Maybe it's just a problem in seaside towns at the moment, in Britain, but Weston didn't have anything going on and it was hard to live in.

I'm not the only one thinking this, which is nice. I think people just felt they'd been let down. I think they haven't been given



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The last council, anyway, had a vision of 100% arts cuts. I mean, that's been tragic.”

~Alistair (above)



Left: South Ward.
“What we’ve got here
is a community.”

IMAGE MIKE KLEINSTEUBER

what they need. Their artistic needs, their cultural needs. They haven’t been given that. People need that. Culture is important, it’s vital to how people understand themselves.

Ann and her painting

I can tell you the story about Ann up to the last time I saw her which was pre-Christmas. Her story unfortunately has changed since then as she has become very unwell.

Ann was previously known to people in the area but I hadn’t come across her until she was introduced to me through Laila. She is a very creative person so the Create Together course suited her well. We had an

informal chat about the course then she said, “Yes, I’d like to join the course now I’ve met you, it sounds fun.”

Laila accompanied her to the start of the first session which can help some people as it can be difficult joining a new group. Each week Ann had to walk quite a way to get to the location where we were meeting, it was quite a commitment for her, especially with all the disabilities that she had. She managed to attend most weeks and she enjoyed it. Come rain or shine she would rock up, which showed her commitment.

Ann opened up quite a lot during the course and although she had a lot of things going on, a lot of difficult issues, and a lot of illness, she always joined in conversations and became very much part of that group.

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...John for me is an inspiration because he genuinely wants to help other people.”

~Mark

I had a message from her halfway through the course telling me how she'd learnt a different painting technique and how she'd gone home and used this technique, painting for about four hours. She said that time had passed by because she'd totally chilled out and relaxed while painting.

Ann said the course had helped her during the time she was attending and she looked forward to it each week. Although I know she didn't build on the new connections she had made after the course, I do know that attending the course had helped with her anxiety and that she had gained some new creative skills along the way.

Ann was referred to Create Together through Creative Connections before Christmas

Told by Helen

John and his walks

There's a man called John who we've worked alongside for 10 years. He's got things like diabetes and all sorts of trouble. Originally, he used to come in here and sit in the cafe with his wife all morning.

About three years ago, his wife unfortunately died, and for John, of course,

that was difficult, saddening and traumatic. However, John then started to look for something to be and got involved in the walking group and over time he's become the walk leader. Around North Somerset, there are lots of walking groups run by public health.

John does not fit the model of most of those very middle-class rambblers. He is skinny, ugly, blunt, smokes like a chimney, not that fit, and very working class. But for this area, he's the right guy and his heart is huge. During this recent time, John has struggled again because he's had to go into more isolation. But he stayed in touch with us and we stayed in touch with him. And he's just about kept the walking group going, though he has to keep changing how many people he can have in it and how far they can go. I think John for me is an inspiration because he genuinely wants to help other people. This is not just about himself. He believes it's good for people to go out and walk and meet, because that's his experience, but he wants other people to share it and he will do anything to try and make that work. And he just doesn't give up.

Well, in fact, unfortunately on one of the walks, he apparently collapsed.

It's like, 'What the hell are you doing, man?'

'I didn't take enough water on board.'

'Well, bloody hell, sort it out.'

The walks can be anything from a mile to two and a half miles. I mean they go to the sea front and back. That's the longest they go, which is a fair distance. And they're not the fittest group of people. That's why they do it, but the fact that they're walking, they've got some, again, sense of talking to each other and connection. That's what matters. Yeah, yeah, and he's fabulous at it. I mean, he just always wants to communicate with us. He's great!

Told by Mark

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She hadn't realised that about four hours have passed by where she'd totally chilled out and relaxed.”

~Helen

Alice

I've got one participant called Alice, who is very socially anxious. The first time I met her we agreed that I would walk with her to the place. I went to her house, and she was crying, visibly very anxious and didn't want to leave. I said to her,

'There's no pressure if you just want to chat, and then go after a while, that's fine' but she persisted.

We got over the threshold of the door and we walked. And we walked to the Healthy Living Centre and she came in and each of those steps they seem very small but I knew for her, having seen how anxious she was, that this was a massive victory. She went to this particular group for a short time, and then we left. And then the following week, she was less anxious when I picked her up. Preparation time diminished and her engagement increased.

We had a friendship group called Hatters Friendship Group. One of the volunteers that works with the social prescribing programme, Wendy, is great. She gives up a lot of her time. And we'd been talking and we saw a bit of a gap for people who weren't ready to join a group, but still wanted to have a chat. We just wanted to create a space where it was very low key, and free. We used one of the rooms at the Healthy Living Centre. People could just come along, drop in, have a cup of tea and leave or stay for chat and that was doing well, actually, just before COVID.

They got to a point where they were inviting people along to speak, like a police community officer. They had a nurse come in to talk about bladder health. These talks came about from them all sitting around having a chat, raising questions and then saying to me, 'Do you think we could speak to somebody about this?' and then I would go and sort. Alice came to a couple of those. And then she also took part in a couple of the

colouring groups, run at The Substation on the estate. That was good because you could just sit down and get on with your colouring and if you didn't want to talk, you didn't have to, and I think that was quite important for her, that there wasn't attention on her all the time.

The Substation is a space you can hire, Alliance Homes own it - and they have creative groups in there.

The Hatters Friendship Group was growing, but more than that, it was the core of mending something disconnected in the community. They were meeting every week. I don't know if they stayed in touch during the pandemic, though there were definitely some strong friendships growing there between people who wouldn't have necessarily gone up to each other and started to talk. They had this space that felt very safe. Rather than sitting in the cafe at the Healthy Living Centre on their own, they were invited into a space where they could just sit next to somebody and have a little chat... which made all the difference.

Told by Laila

Fiona

Was there a dovetailing between the (social prescriber) Creative Connections role and Theatre Lounge? I'm not sure that's happened for a number of reasons. The Creative Connections role was originally partly focused on gathering referrals for creative pathways. I know it's developed in a slightly different direction since then. I think theatre can be quite a daunting area for people to tread into when feeling very vulnerable. Putting yourself into a theatre space is challenging.

Most of the group have come thanks to word-of-mouth. It's about someone saying, 'Come along and give us a try'.

For a while, activities took place in a residents' lounge, in the middle of the South Ward accommodation. And through that we recruited some of the residents who simply saw this lively gathering happening every week. A local man who has MS came along because he saw it happening in his domestic space. It's better perhaps if the offer somehow stimulates your curiosity without it coming from us: the 'Try this group next week, it'll be good for you' doesn't necessarily work.

I'm not sure as yet that the creative connection role has worked for us in terms of expanding the group, but what it has done, I think for the area, is provide important support on the ground and very gentle, hand-holding support to step outside the door. On South Ward we are working with a community where some of the people are fragile and have particular needs, and it's about being able to start encouraging steps into the world. I think that's how the role is working at this point in time.

Mark

Many of the people that we work with and quite a few people in this area have experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). There's a disproportionate number of adults around here with ACEs and their capacity and capability of taking on new stuff is very limited. You can function, but as soon as something new comes in, your functionality goes out because there's just one more thing that can tip you over. There's a very strong link there between ACEs and long-term physical health problems, such as COPD, or heart

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I'm not just going to say, 'Oh, forget about your financial worries. Do this workshop'”

~Laila

conditions. I think that's another impact on a lot of people in our community. It's that their capacity and their resources are limited.

Arts at its best gives people space. There's some lovely examples from the work that Theatre Orchard have done. I've seen some of the videos where people have been out in the fields, talking about their experiences. They need that space to be able to do it and it's been a great place for them to help unravel some of the things that they've experienced in their lives. They're very careful and thoughtful at Theatre Orchard to work with that stuff in a safe way.

The connections here have always been very strong. I think what we've done through this partnership is build on them by working alongside Theatre Orchard, and working with Mary's project – that's been important. It's about us always working collaboratively and genuinely with trust, adult to adult at that level. We're always talking about what the options are and how we can do this together, and also challenging and pushing each other to shift the way we've done things in the past.

Laila

There's the whole notion of fear. For a lot of people here it's not something they're familiar with. I understand what will happen in a theatre workshop without even taking part in one, but I've got a degree in English Lit. I've done some drama. A lot of people aren't in the same boat and might be a bit mistrustful, and maybe just not interested.

Or, in the case of this guy I mentioned, he had health issues. There were just other, more pressing things going on. I recognised that a drama workshop is valuable and can bring a lot of healing and a lot of confidence, but if other people have got more pressing things that they need to deal with, then I'm not just going to say, 'Oh, forget about your financial worries. Do this workshop'.

I have to be sensitive to where that person's at... Fiona would echo that. That's been a big challenge in terms of this area and the needs. It's just a higher need and there's a lot of mental health issues, and... it just takes time.

Sarah

Sarah passed away in February. We'd actually parted ways happily enough in January... but we'd had weeks of just talking to her on the phone. She'd been through a major domestic violence incident that had gone to court and had nearly ended her life at that point. But in the midst of all of that trauma, we did manage to get along to the colouring group a couple of times. She loved it and actually the first time we went, I met her and we went in together. And we just sat down next to each other and coloured in and she joined in. She was quite sociable,

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When she did engage with drawing or colouring or something else creative – it was reminding her of who she was and also who she could be beyond the trauma.”

~Laila

actually, once she got out of the door... into a safe place. And she said after that colouring session, which was probably two hours,

'Oh, I went home and I just had the most wonderful sleep'.

I said, 'I think that was so healing' – sorry... sorry (tears). It's just sad that she died. I get involved with people's lives. Well I'm not supposed to be a support worker or a counsellor or anything but inevitably, people want to talk, want to share their lives.

The colouring group felt like the beginning of mending something disconnected and it gave her such a confidence boost.

I know that she was very encouraged by even just the few groups that she took part in and the relationship that we had. She was dealing with a lot in her life and unfortunately, addiction as well, and that I think was ultimately the thing that ended her life. How do you evaluate that? Somebody who was there with so much promise. She'd been through a terrible thing but had got through it.

And then, I think she should've had that chance to start again... but people are

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The Hatters Friendship Group was growing, but more than that, it was – it was the core of mending something disconnected in the community.”

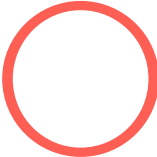
~Laila

still carrying that stuff, aren't they and life isn't that clear cut, is it? We can't just go, 'Right, that was that, I'm going to do this now'.

She would always show me her charcoal drawings and I think that's something she wanted to pursue. It was very, very therapeutic for her and I think she could have reached out to others who'd been in a similar situation. I don't know... that would be a long way off, I think, because she had a lot of healing to do herself. It was helping her when she did engage with drawing or colouring or something else creative – it was reminding her of who she was and also who she could be beyond the trauma.

Told by Laila

Vickie

 riginally for the first 10 years, I suppose, it was about the same core group of people and we did have a few people join in with us from other places. We had somebody who had done TV work before join us. And then we had Vince join as he had also done TV work. Then a few students from other areas joined us, just to see different ways of how we worked. And with Vince and Theatre Orchard, we've done three core films, little microfilms, but yeah, they were good.

Then more recently, we did Nine Million Nobodies. That one was a big difference because before we would give Angie ideas and she handed us the basic script and we'd work as a group together. Whereas this time, we picked, not only the idea, but the foundations and then made our own script

together as a group. And then we ended up working with Made in Bristol. Most of us in the drama group, apart from Mary, are all 30s+ whereas most people in Made in Bristol were teenagers and they're also more, I suppose, traditionally trained as well, because of working with the Bristol Old Vic. It was great just seeing how that all evolved, because we had this ballpark idea of what we wanted and Made in Bristol helped bring it to life.

Oh, there was a lot more movement, choreography for example, that most of us hadn't done before, or hadn't even thought about doing. For most of us, it was something that we do as a hobby and as a way of expressing ourselves and trying to find ourselves.

It was good working with them because most of us have either got mental health issues or mental and physical health issues. They also commented on the fact that it was good for them to learn how to adapt their way of working – that actually they were more inclusive. I've got fibromyalgia, but I was never excluded. We just changed it so that I was able to join in.

Even doing the warm-ups were more kind of having fun, bonding, team building and I had one day where I was struggling to stand. I couldn't walk, I had my trolley with a seat on it. We were playing a ninja game and I was sat on the trolley miles away from everyone else and I was supposed to take my next move, but I'm too far and I can't jump or walk to get to them. They decided to move me in my trolley so I could actually carry on. It was just 'Come on, we're gonna make sure you can keep playing, this is fun'.

It was a good experience for myself as well, because watching the younger ones, I just accept that actually, even though I'm

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They decided to move me in my trolley so I could actually carry on playing, and there was no negativity about it and there wasn't any sarcasm, it was just done all in a kind of—'Come on, we're gonna make sure you can keep playing, this is fun'—way.”

~Vickie

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It was almost like they assumed that to be socially isolated, you either had to be old and in a caring place or support basis.”

~Vickie





Right: Theatre Lounge workshop using Trestle Masks to explore emotion



IMAGE MARIE DOMINIQUE DEMERS-KING

only in my 30s, it doesn't mean that I'm going to be 100% healthy but that doesn't mean it's the end of my life or the end of my world, and I have to stop doing things. And it was nice seeing how they adapted to that and made it easier. The piece was based on social isolation and the mental health that comes with it. Their ideas of what that meant to them to start off with was very, very different from what they felt afterwards. It was almost like they assumed that to be socially isolated, you either had to be old and in a caring place or support basis. Whereas at the end of it, they realised that actually you can still be fairly young and even younger than myself – Mary's just 18 and she's socially isolated because of physical health and mental health as she's got thyroid problems, which affects every part of your body. For her to go and meet people is a major thing. It was a good and supportive way of doing things, the fact that you could turn up to a session, feeling in a horrible dark place where you didn't want to do anything, but you went.

For me, I would go because Mary wanted to go. She's my 18-year-old. She's outgrown the younger drama sessions so she joined Theatre Lounge. And because she wanted to go to sessions when I just didn't feel right, mentally, to go, we'd go. I'd be in a dark place when I turned up and by the time I left, I was either slightly positive, or I was extremely positive. Just from that whole session of how everyone worked together and picked each other up.

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And yes, to me, doing these sessions is a massive lifeline, basically. It's created new friendships for me, support networks.”

~Vickie

It helped bolster everything. And, yes, to me doing these sessions is a massive lifeline, basically. It's created new friendships for me, support networks. Because even though now we're not seeing each other in person, I can still message them and say, I'm having a bad day and they're supportive, or I could send them messages that for most people wouldn't mean the same. 'Yay, I got out of bed' or 'Woohoo, I managed to have a shower and dress myself this morning', whereas everyone in the group is like 'that's fab', 'that's brilliant', 'you did amazingly'. Because they get where you are. And it is a big family as opposed to just a group of people working together.

We've had new people join us and people that have not been part of the group for years. They've moved away and they've come back. I think from the core members we've got two left that were from back then that have stayed all the way through. And even though we've now got extra members that weren't there from the beginning, they've walked in and said it's like being back into the same family. It's still welcoming, warm. For most of us, it's about getting more people involved with us, or even any parts of the arts, just to spread more warmth and support to each other and learn how to support each other as well.

I've suffered mental health since I was eleven. And when I first met Angie between the first and second theatre piece we produced, my mental health dropped severely. I suddenly became agoraphobic again, and somehow Angie managed at that point to get me into groups and start talking again.

When we had the break between Hurly Burly in 2015, to a couple of years ago with Theatre Lounge, I'd gone through bad stuff again, my mental health had dropped, I was back to being suicidal and I didn't want to leave the house. But it took, I think, two sessions for me to get into the group again and instead of panicking about going and seeing people, there's actually excitement about seeing them.

And outside of the drama group, instead of doing quarter of a shop for the kids and running back to the car and saying 'Mary finish the shop off' and paying for it, I can actually now do my own full shop. I suppose it's leaking out into the rest of my life as well, making that a lot more safe and healthy for me. Yeah, it's definitely making things a lot easier.

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When I went with her to that garden I became more emotionally connected to the place.”

~Alex

Fiona

Mending something disconnected? Well, friendships, is an obvious one. That's the great thing about being able to have the funding to do Theatre Lounge regularly. There are some big characters and they are dealing with a lot. This is human life and it can become quite volatile and has at times in the past, when we haven't been able to offer that steady, weekly group.

Having a regular offer versus a sporadic offer has made a real difference in terms of supporting friendships to develop between residents. What the group provides is a very supportive atmosphere, and a space for understanding. And Angie is hugely skilled at, I won't use the word counseling, but it's that ability to diffuse tension. The regularity of having a creative mediator has been so important. These days there are rarely bubbling tensions between members of the group, but instead a mutual support that scaffolds personal and social growth.

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It's that positivity there that actually you're not a burden, you're not annoying.”

~Vickie

Jan and the garden

One time when we went there, we met Jan, who had been involved with the FAHLC as a 'service-user'. She was going to be part of our project but that didn't happen, which is a regret for me. There might have been any number of reasons why Jan didn't continue to be part of the team.

But in those early days she was, and she took me and a researcher, Julia to see the community garden where she did a lot of work. Jan had such pride in the place and such commitment to the people there that it challenged the visual narrative I'd created in my head about it. It made me question my way of understanding, what I was seeing and experiencing, because she brought our attention to the quality of her life and her commitment, and that environment for her, and the people she worked with.

Told by Alex

Ali & John

There's definitely community there because I know one of our members, Ali. She loves computers and they break, bless her. She again, doesn't like going out very much. She doesn't do her own shopping. But when she's into the drama groups, she's out doing her own thing again. She goes and sits in the pub with friends, actually out with people around her and not panicking about it. And she'll connect with other people that she hasn't spoken to for years because she didn't feel able to, I suppose. She felt more of a burden. Whereas, while we're doing the drama and a short period afterwards,

it's that positivity there that actually you're not a burden, you're not annoying.

It's still there for her and she'll still go out and meet people and make new friends. I know a couple of others that said that it's actually made that side of life easier.

We've got John who is very immobile, which is a new thing. Well, he's always had physical issues with his spine, but it's gotten quite severe the last couple of years so he doesn't leave his house unless it's for drama. He definitely connects more because of the drama group, and he's more chatty. We've seen the change from day one when he turned up to now, he's back to being that loud, giggly, jokey person who messes around.

There's definitely changes in everybody while we're doing the drama pieces and watching them reconnect to each other and bringing new people into the groups. It definitely feels good. It's not just you benefiting from it, you're actually helping other people, which then in return makes it better for you as well, because you get that happy go positive lucky feeling.

Told by Vickie

Alistair

My mental health deteriorated and it wasn't a good time at all, that period. A couple of years knocking around supportive accommodations for a bit and having a rough time, I got so angry with this country... I couldn't see a way to make my own ends meet. I'm a young person, gifted and talented and whatnot, but none of that even matters.

Eventually, I had to move to Clevedon. That was a real turning point for me because

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Finding that job has been key to keeping me well. I needed to be well for patients.”

~Alistair



IMAGE NICK SUTTON

I was in supported housing. They had live-in staff on hand all the time, they were amazing, that made all of the difference.

Again, in my flat in Weston now has been incredible. But what's been amazing has been the opening up of the artistic community in Weston, because that wasn't there before, and I was excited to be part of it. When I moved to Weston before, there wasn't anything going on. When I first moved back, there seemed to be all sorts of artistic community stuff going on.

Before the lockdown I was involved in a lot of writing groups, and I run a writing group in the hospital on a ward. It's been amazing that has – a real honour to listen to people's stories and writings and for me to get to write every week. That's been incredible, that has. I've got good OT's – occupational therapists – to work with me, and it's just been a delightful experience. I've had many experiences on the hospital wards.

I'm bipolar. There's a guy who is the volunteer coordinator called Steve, and he was always trying to get people engaged in the community on the hospital wards. They had a thing where, once a week, he'll come in and say,

'Right, have you got any issues or problems, you just talk to me about it and we're talking about things and how this hospital can be better'.

I was on his radar for a bit, and then when I left, when I was in Clevedon, he got in touch with me saying there's a guy in Bristol who's starting up. He wanted to create a writing group on the wards in the NHS trust and he asked me if I was interested being part of that in Weston and I'd be paid for it as well. It's part volunteering and part working.

It's been great. That's the foundation I was wanting. The last time I was in hospital was about four or five years ago and since then, I haven't needed to go, which is amazing because I used to go into hospital once a year. Finding that job has been key to keeping me well. I needed to be well for patients.

What's kept me well? Just doing something that I believe is my thing . I need to write. It's working in the group as well. Writing can be quite solitary but it's been quite fun to write in a group, to give people who haven't had before a taste for what writing's like. The impact I make on people's lives... I know what it's like on hospital wards. They're quite boring places. People are just bored a lot of the time, waiting for the next appointment to get out.

Some of them, like me, were sectioned because they're too unwell to be in society. It can get a bit fractious and it's an hour where you just get off the ward to think about something completely different. Some people love it.

We give out these exercise books as well. People keep on writing when they're back on the wards if they wish to. There was one guy who I saw one week and he was a bit manic and I gave him one of these exercise books. Next week, he completely filled it out. He was lovely. He was working on a book as well, actually. During the lockdown, I bumped into someone who had been on the ward and had done great writing with me, and she mentioned just how much she enjoyed doing it, which was nice to hear actually, but I miss it so much.

Where I live, there's nothing creative going on. I go down to The Lamb pub in Worle and the Weston poets meet up there. They read out their own poetry and I go once a month. There's been that, but nearby where I live, there hasn't been anything going on.

I've felt very disconnected for a lot of my twenties especially going back after university to Weston. I felt redundant as a person. I didn't know what I was for. I think having done stuff like the drama piece I did last year and keeping on doing the writing workshops and the poetry open mics, that's helped a lot, actually, because I've made friends and lasting connections out of it. And we were like-minded people. I was missing it, connections with like-minded people, and that's invaluable.

ACEs and films

Mark does have a deep knowledge of that community and he said to me, not that long ago, that a huge percentage of people were manifesting difficult situations or health issues, particularly things like obesity. He was referring to ACEs – Adverse

Childhood Experiences, which are pervasive and impact on many people's lives.

I think probably in his community it's a very deep problem which is not solvable one assumes by any quick fix, whether that's a pill or an art class. It's deep stuff and therefore, anything you do, you're trying to add to a journey of improvement.

Some of the films that Fiona's made with these individuals. It has reinforced my belief in the power of this work, to have deep transformational change.

I don't know whether it's fear but I think it still feels like they're not that many people being helped to explore the opportunity that might result in some of the stories that we hear in those films, which are fantastic.

Mark said this to me recently, which stuck with me. He prefers to use the word under-resourced rather than deprived. You talk about the hard to reach and there is push back on that because people aren't hard to reach, services are hard to access. You're not giving medicine – you're trying to support people to find their own path and way.

Complex stuff and social prescribing is very predicated on that notion that people with a bit of help can find a different way to live their lives better or be better or be healthier, rather than relying on a medical intervention.

Told by Alex

The GPs

The health service is trying to reduce the number of people who go to the GP. It costs money and time and the general theory is that 30% of people go to the GP, for reasons that

aren't medical. In South Ward probably more than 30% of visits are not a medical issue.

Mark would say that when he was in charge of the GPs and when they first started in this cooperative model, the GPs who came there wanted to work in a 'deprived' area. They were people who had a social justice motivation. They wanted to work with those residents.

There was a GP I met just before lockdown. She was quite a young GP, a fascinating character, maybe trained in Bristol certainly had come from Bristol, and she was saying,

'My colleagues in Bristol, other young GPs would be, like, "...never go to Weston, it's the worst place to be.'" They've no idea it's a brilliant place to work and I love it here and it's exciting and interesting what's going on.'

Well that's a massive challenge isn't it – the perception of a place like that as deprived is that it'd be a horrible place to live, or place to work.

Told by Alex

Mark

I think the difficulty has been, and will continue to be, getting the buy-in of the GP practices. I think it will change. It will get better and will improve, but in the last two or three years I think they've been under such pressure just to get through their clinical needs. If they invested the rest of their time into social prescribing, the idea is it will reduce the number of appointments that people request. It will also reduce some of those frequent goers, which can take up an enormous amount of time.

However, resources have been very low for GP practices. Recruitment of GPs is a national issue. There are not enough GPs in

the system, there are certainly not enough GPs in Weston. They're always chasing their tails, they are overwhelmed. Demand outstrips supply by such a long way that to get something that they can see makes a difference is very difficult to implement.

What you actually need is a clinical champion within the service who says to everybody else, all their clinician colleagues, this is important and we must use this. There's a couple of people who say 'Yeah, this sounds great', and then they just go back to having to prescribe antidepressants, or whatever, because that's what's coming through the door in their world. Locums have not all got time, or interest in anything which they would see as fluffy around the edges because they just come in, do the clinical prescribing and then move on, again. It's a shame.

Author's note: I did hope to speak to a GP. Mark wrote to me however to say, 'I think it would be virtually impossible to talk to a clinical member of staff, partly because there is no one consistent member of the team at the moment and secondly they are up to their necks in flu jab season right now!' ●

03

Flourishing

Mark

Where people come, share activities, like when they're doing theatre group, or the knitting group or whatever, they find the chance to talk to each other in a safe way. Flourishing occurs in connection, where it gets seen as individuals, as humans.

There's enough space for them to listen to one another without being caught up in their own worlds and that's quite a difficult thing to achieve. I think that's the best of those experiences. It creates space for people to talk and be listened to. Quite often the experience is if people start talking about their difficulties, it's like a floodgate—it all opens—and they don't have a lot of space to be able to listen to somebody else. But I think given time and consistency by going week after week after week that got shared more equally.

At its best, it means they all go just to talk and listen. Flourishing happens in listening and connection. The Knit and Natter is one of them. Although, actually what they call themselves is Stitch and Bitch. It's because they tell me that's what they do.

I've dropped in a couple of times. They're all women, probably over 50, and they are outrageous. It's hilarious. They are incredibly edgy. Some of their stuff, particularly around sexuality, it's interesting. They talk about men and how terrible men are in a way that is quite fun to be around for a short period of time. I always have to put my hands up and say,

'I'm gonna walk away now. I'm not solely responsible for every man you've ever encountered.' But I think it gives them an... There's that conversation over the garden fence that I imagine used to take place,

'Oh, have you heard about Neville? Neville's not that good.' That stuff is great, and they have a chance to do that.

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Flourishing happens in listening and connection. The Knit and Natter is one of them. Although, actually what they call themselves is Stitch and Bitch. It's because they tell me that's what they do.”

~Mark

Vickie

Theatre Lounge definitely helped make things flourish. I've gotten a lot more confidence from it because for a long time, I used to fake confidence. Like going shopping. I wouldn't want to say thank you to anyone or say anything to anyone, but I knew I had to. I'd fake it. And people ask for help now and instead of ignoring them and pretending I've not heard them and shuffling away, I'll actually respond and talk to people, help them out, make sure if there was anything they needed help with.

Also, for a long time, there's a crochet group I want to join and I actually joined it during the process of starting the Theatre Lounge. I actually ended up doing more things for myself as well, and socialising with people that would have scared me before. I've crocheted for years, wanted to learn new skills for it, but I never went because I was always like, well, I'm going to be the one that doesn't know enough. I'm gonna be the one that annoys everybody or the odd one out.

Whereas now I've gone and I think I've been going for about a year and a bit now. And it's one of the best things I've done because it's another group of friends I've got, but I wouldn't have been confident to go if it hadn't been for getting that confidence from the drama group and being reminded that actually, I can be a fun person. (Laughter) And that not being the brainiest person there or the most achieved person there isn't the most important thing, it's actually being yourself. And having fun is the most important thing. Yeah, there's definitely growth happening.

We have great fun. Even days where you're like, any of us can come in, because most of us have got them and got some mental health issue, you'll see us come in, and we'll be in a bad mood, or we'll be low and quiet. And by the time we've even properly started the warm up sessions, we're all having a laugh and a joke and moving around as much as we're physically able to. There's always laughter and there's always support.

Many different things go through my head. I think the best ones for me as a mum is the first time Mary took... we had different expressions on these masks and you've got to adopt that expression. And Mary picked one that most people would look at and say, 'Well that's a smile, they're happy', but for Mary, actually, it looked like a false smile, the fake one that you use. She did this piece with Jenny where, at the start of it, Mary adopted how she was feeling that day that she had to pretend to be happy. And the fun that you should actually have with Jenny where Jenny picked a face that was a crazy character face. She's being silly and fun trying to make Mary cheer up, that actually by the end of it Mary was sat on the floor because she'd collapsed in a heap of laughter. Seeing Mary go from

'I don't want to work with somebody who's not my mom', to working with Jenny that day and then she's just sitting there in fits of laughter to the point where she was





IMAGE MARIE DOMINIQUE DERMERS-KING



IMAGE HELEN WHEELock / ARTWORK CREATE TOGETHER

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If I do get criticism,
it doesn't affect
me negatively.”

~Vickie

bright red, Jenny was bent over laughing at Mary, because she just couldn't help but laugh because it was that proper genuine laughter. Yeah, there is always somebody in the room that ends up laughing that hard. It is brilliant.

It does feel personal to me as an individual, yeah. Even aside from adapting things that I can still join in on my bad days. Everyone gets their opinion in. Whether it's on different warmups or different ideas for our performing piece that we want to produce next, whether it's a plot, the idea, how to do it. Pre-lockdown being announced, we were hoping to do the Worle Festival and part of that was originally looking at and picking historical characters, whether they're fact or

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If something is a big no-no for you, then it is scrapped because we'd rather have everybody happy than one person feeling not comfortable doing something. Yeah, it's very, very inclusive as well as being individual at the same time.”

~Vickie

fiction. Somebody who could fit in the history of Worle. Originally it was going to be being that person for the day, coming out with a nice little catchphrase and having this character to go around and talk to people. Then with lockdown, we had to find a new way of doing it.

Angie literally said, 'The floor's open to you. How'd you want to do that?'

Originally, I think we were looking at it doing it via like video media, having some like little mooshed up performance. We just took bits from everybody's piece and put it together to make a performance. And then we started writing diaries to expand our character and see who our character actually was and writing them over a couple of years or a couple of weeks, whatever works for that character and that could be our bit for the Worle Fest, which is what we did in the end.

We actually did the diary pieces. And most of us just doing the video and handing it over to Nick and when you looked at the pieces, they were all very, very different. A couple of them weren't pieces as you'd expect traditionally. We've always been able to have that (be individuals) and it's more now that we've become Theatre Lounge that we're able to sit there and go 'Actually we'd rather have this back', or 'We'd rather try something new'.

We were looking at doing dance or different types of dance, singing. Yeah, it was just different things that would appeal to each of us and working together and deciding how to use it. If something is a big no-no for anyone, then it is scrapped because

we'd rather have everybody happy than one person feeling not comfortable doing something. Yeah, it is very, very inclusive as well as being individual at the same time.

Being more involved, taking more responsibility myself has been brilliant because when you're performing it and you actually get the audience reacting to you, it is a boost anyway when it's somebody else's work, but when it's something that you've actually had, whether it's a small input or big input into, there's much more confidence gained from it, much more... I don't know the right words. But yeah, it's that positivity you get from it, especially with the mental health side of things for me, it snowballs so much into such a happy feeling and such a positive feeling.

Yeah, if Angie had asked me to do something like this four years ago, it'd be, 'Nope. I won't do it. Nope. I'll give you written stuff. That's fine.' Yes, sit there on a video with somebody I don't know, four years ago would have been a massive no-go.

Whereas it's more that confidence, I suppose, more self-belief in myself. It's easier now. It's not daunting for me, I suppose, having somebody talk to me and be able to see me while I'm talking to them. Because it used to be a big thing for me. I liked hiding when I spoke to people, it would be things like text messages or written work that I would communicate via, whereas showing my voice or my face was like a big no-go. Now it's just the fact that I know that the stuff I've done, and even performing it in front of people,

Paul, a member
of the Theatre
Lounge group



IMAGE NICK SUTTON

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It was nice to be able to find folks and give advice and information on things. Because most people that end up in that situation, it's through no fault of their own.”

~Vickie

even on my worst days, has been so well received, that it's made me feel better about myself and put myself out there. If I do get criticism, it doesn't affect me negatively.

I suppose especially the Nine Million Nobodies, a lot of the responses we had, especially from the counsellors that turned up to it, was the eye-opening thing for them. And then information they'd never thought of, or how actually a lot of them thought that it was only these small categories of people that were affected by the issues we'd brought up in that whereas actually, it was such a wide range. Yeah, it's also helped people.

We were originally at Graham Court and it's a retirement place for disabled people and we actually ended up with a couple of them joining with us. It was nice to have old people that wouldn't normally feel included into doing a drama group. There was one gentleman that would join us most weeks. And that was whether he could come over by his own steam or if he wasn't there, by say, ten past, we'd go knock on the door and if he couldn't get into his electric chair, we'd push him over in his manual chair so he could come and join us. Yeah, it's so encouraging people come and see us. Also, the other things that we've done, because at one point, the original lot of us that were doing it about ten years ago, branched off into our own drama group under Theatre Orchard with their support.

Tel Jones as 'Macbeth', exploring anti-social behaviour versus positive action through the power of drama.



IMAGE LIZ MILNER

We ended up actually getting commissioned ourselves to do something, The Loan Sharks. Which was, at that point on the Bournville, a big thing because there was quite a few of them on the Bournville there and a lot of them actually realised they had ways out or they had companies out there that they could go to and say, 'Look, this is what's happening to me. How do I get out of it?'

It's also the fact that we can actually provide that information there. The piece that we did actually wasn't dark. It started off very dark, but by the end of it, it was very comedic and very light, but it didn't take away from the message. It just made it actually a lot easier. By the time you got to the end of that you actually went,

'What, this is happening to me. Where do I go?'

It was nice to be able to find folks and give advice and information on things. Because most people that end up in that situation, it's through no fault of their own.

One of the plays that we did actually got turned into a film because the company we're working with actually wanted us to take it further afield. All of us were at that point parents to young children, it wasn't feasible for us. With Theatre Orchard's support again, we ended up turning it into a film and it was the film that they took around the country and their feedback on that was

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Doing that piece, it was like 'Okay yeah, I have still got something I can offer to the outside world.'”

~Vickie

a fact that it was well done, that it wasn't localised, that they can actually go and take it to Birmingham or Scotland or Devon, and it didn't matter that it was actually based on the Bournville when it first started.

It's a massive, massive confidence boost. It actually makes you feel as though you've done something because at that point, I was feeling like a failure because I'd lost my job, I was going through a marriage breakup, but knowing that I'd actually done this thing and helped write it and gone through all the checks with the company to check they're happy with it. There's a case to take everywhere because it was something they could use without people feeling bad about themselves from it. Yeah, it made it a lot easier to actually feel good about myself and actually move on and keep going. I think at that point, the only thing that was going for me prior to doing it was the kids.

Then doing that piece, it was like 'Okay yeah, I have still got something I can offer to the outside world.'

Post note: a loud cheerful whistling from Vickie's son Alex accompanied the telling of her story, as he went about his business in the room.

Fiona

We've linked with support organisations like The Credit Union who are on South Ward when we did a project on illegal money lending.

And we've also done a couple of projects with the college. University Centre Weston have their arts campus, not too far away from the Bournville Estate, so we have strived, where we can, to try and connect the two. Sometimes it's easier than others because the college have quite set curriculums of course.

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One particular man came along to those sessions and I think it opened up a whole new world for him.”

~Mary

One of our first projects, actually, the group went and performed at Weston College and the lead actress in our group then ended up going on to study because that threshold of space had become less intimidating.

Mary

We were asked, as a neighbourhood team, if we would get involved in a particular area in the Bournville because

there were problems. The police had identified that there was antisocial behaviour, that there were difficulties, and they wanted to set up a Neighbourhood Watch and they wanted our help.

We said, 'No, that's not how we're working. However, we might be able to think of another way of working...'

At the same time, we were approached by the Theatre Orchard who were establishing a group locally - Theatre Lounge. And we offered them the space that was closest to the area that was being talked

Create Together
- what lights up
your imagination?



03: FLOURISHING

IMAGE HELEN WHELOCK / ARTWORK CREATE TOGETHER

about. And Theatre Orchard were happy to establish themselves there and because of the way they work, they are very open and support what we used to call 'hard to reach'. And we don't call it hard to reach anymore because that's – again, it's making responsibility for those people being hard to reach.

Turn that on its head and you need to go to where people are and offer something that's useful and linking into strengths. Because of where the Theatre Lounge was based, they made links with the local community there, some of which were useful in a way that the Neighbourhood Watch would not have been. It did the same thing because it brought local people who lived in the surrounding houses, which are Alliance homes properties, out to notice, to be part of, even in a small way.

The theatre group actually put on a couple of coffee mornings, open mornings that local people could come along and try it and test it and link up that way. And for me, those connections are vital, the local connection, we're meeting people where they are and meeting people face to face.

One particular man came along to those sessions and I think it opened up a whole new world for him. Those properties are on the ground floor and bungalows and people often do have physical problems, and he did and he couldn't get out that much – but to have something actually on his doorstep there was amazing for him. I think it helped, he made connections and felt good about talking to his neighbours. It gave them a role – that give thing – and he actually took a role in inviting others into that coffee morning.

It didn't last for long, the coffee morning idea. I think it was last summer holidays. It was a slightly different delivery – worked well, though, and created those links and knowledge and understanding of the way that we're working, the way that

we've all been working, the connections project was working in that way as well.

Alistair

I suppose you could say that me coming back to Weston was flourishing for a bit. Definitely. Because I was doing more open mic stuff with Word Masters and there were more open mics going on in town as well. There was one just by The Stable, which was quite a big attendance. I had thirty or forty people involved in that. Other little ones were happening, there was a flourishing for me because I got more poetry written and I had venues to perform at.

Art Space is in some ways, a nice, intellectual place for people to read books for pleasure and people can watch interesting films or are interested in ideas and stuff like that.

It is nice to share my own talents with other people, to be a bit more appreciated, and be able to listen to people's stories. Yeah, it was very personal, especially seeing it in Weston. Last year with the Theatre Lounge and this young company called Made In Bristol, we made a show called Nine Million Nobodies and I was a dramaturg for it. I came up with the story for it and I performed in it as well. And we devised it from the base of my story, and we performed last December in the Tropicana. I can remember when Tropicana was a swimming pool. I swam in there, to come back to it with my own stuff was pretty personal.

We had very good responses. I think it was a very limited audience. I think we sold out, but we didn't have that many seats in. We weren't doing it in the big area. We were within the bar area, you see. The Councillor John Crockford-Hawley was there and he

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Those experiences leave a sense of pride. It's about a sense of worth.”

~Fiona

a promenade piece one Christmas through South Ward that went through the community and ended up at the Healthy Living Centre. It was cross generational, and celebratory of the place and the people – Ballad of the Bournville. And what we've been doing more recently, since the NPO, is focusing on providing that weekly sustained support.

Though we did work with Made In Bristol, of course, which resulted in a show about loneliness and isolation. It was at the Tropicana, and again you could sense a real pride amongst the community about being on an equal platform with emerging professional actors from Bristol Old Vic.

Those experiences leave a sense of pride. It's about a sense of worth. ●

was interviewed afterwards. He was quite moved by it all. Our piece was about social isolation, you see, and about the future, about what's going to happen in the future if we keep going on to be in social isolation and stuff like that. And he was moved by it and he said he wanted to do something about changing it or helping people to be less isolated when he goes to the council, which I think was a pretty amazing result.

Fiona

It's more about process, our work, rather than the final product. But sometimes when you do have a final performance – and that is the lovely thing about theatre – you just get a real sense of everyone coming together. A few years ago, we created

04

**Stories of
lockdown &
COVID-19**

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Those experiences leave a sense of pride. It's about a sense of worth.”

~Laila

Cedrik

Cedrik's from Montserrat and he lives just off the estate. I asked him his experience of working with me. He said, the main thing was it's given him motivation to keep going. He hasn't gone into any... art thing but his skill, that we've uncovered, is fixing things. I managed to get him a place at the repair cafe that was up and running just before COVID set in and he went along to that and is good at fixing up bikes. I was a bit – I was disappointed for him when that shut down because of lockdown.

But what's happened during lockdown is that off his own back Cedrik's been fixing up his neighbour's bikes, and he's had many situations where he's been walking his dog and there's been a broken bike or something in the front yard and he's asked about it he said,

‘Oh, what's happening with this? Would you like me to try and fix it, free of charge?’ And he's had quite a few of those encounters which have led to him... doing up people's bikes. I'm just impressed with that he's completely done that off his own back, and... it's encouraged him and it's given him a structure to his day. I think because he feels

that pressure because he's a black man that he actually doesn't want to go out and he is... he is more afraid, of coronavirus because of what has been revealed in the press and all of that.

Yet through all of that, he's still able to do something that he loves and he's good at.

I'm saying to him, ‘You could make this into a business. This could be your thing’.

He's like ‘Oh, it's early days, it's early days’, but yeah, it's good.’

Told by Laila

Mark

The government and local authorities have been very excited about how they perceived local communities to respond to COVID. Hugely excited, ‘Oh, isn't this fantastic, we can build on this’ and then also a bit embarrassed about how the NHS national volunteering scheme just fell flat on its face. They're already misinterpreting it.

The COVID mutual aid groups acted primarily like the Dunkirk boats. There was an emergency, COVID and all these boats set off across the sea, in all sorts of states of disrepair to pick people off the beach and brought them back. NHS battleship came about three weeks later and it was ‘Where is everybody, they've all gone!’

It's because the little boats have already done that job.

Now all those boats are not fit to go back out again to sea. They'll go back to harbour, be repaired, be changed, but the government, and all those local authorities they say ‘Those boats we can build on those’. It's not accurate.

A lot of people go back to work, people have been furloughed, and the big difference

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The COVID mutual aid groups acted primarily like the Dunkirk boats. There was an emergency, COVID, and all these boats set off across the sea, all sorts of state of disrepair to pick people up off the beach and brought them back. NHS battleship came about three weeks later and it was ‘Where is everybody, they’ve all gone!’

~Mark

of this doesn’t come partly after that project as in other parts of North Somerset, there are a lot of people like various professionals who were furloughed. In this area we had to repurpose our staff to do the support in the network. The capacity in that area like this to support, just wasn’t there as quickly, because people have a lot of health issues, both finance issues and a lot of young children; they couldn’t go out and help in the same way. That would be the story that I might want to put into this around the learning of COVID and how an area like this is different.

I think the local primary care services have struggled. They’ve not been connected, or they’ve been disconnected or a bit broken. I think we work hard; the mutual aid groups have sprung up around COVID and the rest of North Somerset.

Clevedon, Portishead, wherever mutual aid groups sprung up. They were getting food out to people, getting prescriptions to people. It didn’t happen here. Again, that’s part of the issue we talked about earlier on. People didn’t have the extra capacity to connect with each other to do that, or the framework, in all those other areas, again without teachers, social workers, bankers who were all on furlough, they suddenly were wanting to do that little boat stuff and come out and support people, which is great. That skill base doesn’t exist in this area, that life experience skill base doesn’t exist.

We waited a bit and we watched a bit, and there are a couple of street things where people were doing things but there

was no coordinated South Ward thing. There was somebody who worked for the church and she was going out and doing lots. We decided here and what we would do is that, although our reception team were out on furlough, I talked to them about each of them volunteering one day a week to administer the response in this area and connect people up to do the shopping, with getting their prescriptions and the low levels, and that worked well. We were doing thirty to forty people a week. However, the members of the community didn’t have enough capacity to respond in the same way that many other communities did. That’s why we chose to step in and support and help people do it, and so just that ability to oversee something like that just didn’t arise. Naturally we supported that.

The biggest thing of the whole COVID is we have to be local, and where it fails... national government needs to resource it, but when national government tries to actually run it, it’s failed miserably.

Track and trace testing, social prescribing, all these centralised responses take no account of local variation in terms of need and strengths. In the COVID sense, the NHS volunteering scheme. Do you remember that? There was this whole massive excitement around the NHS: ‘We’re recruiting all these volunteers, they’re helping the NHS’. Singularly failed. Nobody that I’m aware of in this area was helped by one of the NHS volunteers.

People who volunteered were left unmanaged for weeks, they signed up to say ‘We want to do this, we want to do this’,

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You need a very localised response – one size fits all is a bad approach to anything.”

~Mark

and nothing happened. Because they did it at a massive national level with national protocols. It's not going to work. Well, I think the NHS National Volunteer scheme is a real example where one size doesn't fit all. And it's very typical, I'm going to say this, Westminster centric, they appointed the RVS Royal Volunteering Service just because RVS became the national lead. I suspect that somebody in Westminster knew somebody around the RVS and they went 'Oh yeah we'll do that'. Nobody locally has any connection with RVS, there's no local connection.

They tried to parachute in six weeks after those little boats have got back to the UK shores and say, 'Here we are!' and everybody was on the beach was going 'It's deserted. There's nobody here because you're too little too late.'

Mary

I find that the stories, the things that are coming out of COVID, the COVID experience, to be quite heart-warming. And I think it's an opportunity for us to... identify a way of working that's... not a new normal, but perhaps just a different more caring, more human approach.

Because I think that's what people have experienced – people have experienced that during COVID. Not everyone.

Through Theatre Orchard, there's a writing group. It's called Chapter One. It was based in the Worle hub prior to lockdown, but then they went online during lockdown, but it's never been specific – it's never been only for Worle residents. South Ward residents have linked up with it and this particular person I'm referring to is one of our South Ward residents. She wasn't the only one. People that were linking up in that way, that was quite... freeing because it meant

you could do that from your own home. Geographically, we weren't separated.

I did link up with the writing group on a Zoom link and one of the women that I've known for years on the estate is also part of that group and she shared with the group that... COVID had made her feel normal because she always felt isolated and locked down anyway and now that everyone was locked down she was able to share that experience with other people. She was dreading the end of lockdown because it would then throw her back into her... different lockdown that was a bit self-imposed and linked to depression.

She had enjoyed the camaraderie, very much, and feeling the same as everybody else. And that was her COVID experience at that time, she was writing about that. And I think that experience can't have been just hers,

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COVID had made her feel normal because she always felt isolated and locked down anyway and now that everyone was locked down she was able to share that experience with other people.”

~Mark

Creative Writing workshops held at the For All Healthy Living Centre enable participants to shape their own story



IMAGE MIKE KLEINSTEUBER

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Lots of people have felt they're not interfering anymore, they are looking after people.”

-Mark

that feeling of being linked up in this shared disaster... was lovely, in some way. Obviously, it was a fearful way, nobody would have wanted it, but there were good things that came out of it. But part of that, the feeling of like the normal lockdown that a person would experience because of the things that were going on in her head and the actual lockdown freed her head. I found that very moving.

I feel connected to her because we both shared a bit of our COVID experience

on that. And I feel I could talk to her again about it which, again, is transcending whatever are the differences you might have in your life. I talked about how angry I was to have been labelled 'vulnerable'. And she understood that as well, I think, we had a shared experience there.

Alistair

I've been quite isolated during a lot of my life. I even wrote a long poem about isolation. And this particular period we've been in for the last six months has been the most isolating I've ever felt. Well, it's feeling like the hospital was coming back to me, like I'm on the ward again, it's this uncertain waiting period.

But it has shown me that I have a lot of grit and determination because I've kept well over the last six months. I've got more resilience now. Being on hospital wards for so long in my twenties has actually been to my benefit in a way that a lot of people just know for the first time now. The first three months I felt awful. The first three weeks were actually terrible, I was in such shock. It felt like everyone was mentally unwell. But now, I think, we've just seemed to move through all that. We've gone somewhere a bit deeper. We have to face up to things that we've never had to face up to before.



I must admit, before COVID, referrals were scarce..”

~Helen

It's been an interesting experience, and it's not something that's gonna happen again in my life, hopefully, for the rest of it I don't think. It's one opportunity to learn from, I suppose.

Mark

During lockdown, somebody was telling me the other day, that when people were coming out to clap, then they start to connect to each other again in a different way and I think that was an interesting time. I mean, I had mixed feelings about the clapping. However, given that we're all locked down and gone in, it was a chance to come out and say 'Hey we're still here'.

I was talking to Mona (?) the other day. She was saying that they came out to clap or they saw somebody on the street they hadn't seen for ages, they went and had a chat and they were going,

'Yeah, we're okay but we're struggling with food at the moment because we can't get out'. Then she was able to connect to her to take her food to her, it was that very localised streetwise, street connection at its best.

There has been greater community connection. It's particularly, just checking each other are okay. I think there's been a real eye to hoping that nobody got left behind. Just checking that neighbours, people who might be vulnerable.

For me, one of the shadow sides of good things like the NHS and the welfare state has been the patriarchal 'We'll look after you' approach. For some people that's meant

'Okay you look after me, I don't have to worry about it. Don't have to take any responsibility for myself'. Also, 'I don't have to get involved and look after my neighbours because social services and NHS should be

doing that because that's their job, because you've told me that's what you're going to do.'

People realised that wasn't happening and actually you did have to get back up and look out for your neighbours in a different way. I think that's been a good thing, lots of people have felt they're not interfering anymore, they are looking after people. That's the COVID bit I think.

In terms of social prescribing, I think some of that's gone, and also what's gone is some of the light stuff like theatre or just stuff people started to connect to each other, where they'll support each other by going for coffee and things like that.

Helen

During lockdown Create Together received funding to make up and deliver 200 art packs across North Somerset. I was busy. It was absolute chaos but fun making up all the packs with different creative activities. Delivering the art packs to people opened up lots of interesting conversations with people on their doorsteps and quite often I would be invited to sit in people's gardens and chat with them for ages, listening to their lockdown stories. This was a real privilege and such a natural way to get to know people. For some people it was not all the art pack, it was about the real face-to-face contact and the conversations that they enabled. During the lockdown, Laila had quite a few of these art bags which she distributed, she also gave me names of people where I also could deliver to where she felt that person would benefit from receiving a pack.

Since the lockdown, I've been running two Create Together groups in the Healthy Living Centre. I've got three people referred from Laila. One of them is a young adult,

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If I can I take a step back once connections are starting to form and then they nurture each other, ‘Where do you live? How long have you lived on the estate? Do you use the Healthy Living Centre?’ And you can see they start working together – connecting.”

~Helen

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By about week seven of an eight-week course, they're beginning to get a little bit anxious because the course is coming to an end... I don't like my waiting list at the moment it upsets me.”

~Helen

Tess, She's very creative and talented. Laila was aware that I had delivered art bags to Tess during lockdown and I had built up a connection with her, so Laila passed on the information about the Create Together course. Tess has been coming along each week and is really benefitting from the group.

I don't know whether it's because maybe there weren't the people out there to refer to Create Together, or maybe it was a lack of trust and a lack of understanding around what Create Together was offering. I understand that if you're referring somebody to something you need to know what you're referring them to. You've got to trust the person that's going to then be taking them on. This is why I always invite, social prescribers, linkworkers etc to make time and come and join a course. I encourage them to come and get involved as a participant, not an onlooker. Laila has seen how I work and has had feedback from past participants. This is a key element – its so important to get to know the groups and their leaders.

Before COVID, I will have to be honest and say 'flourishing' wasn't happening via Creative Connections, other than the one person I told you about previously I didn't have anyone referred to me from this service. My clients have mainly come from word of mouth or from my own advertising. However, now I've got a stronger relationship with the Creative Connections project and have got to know Laila, yes, I am beginning to see it flourish, post summer lockdown, because Laila is referring more people now. It's been great to see people come together again and watch them grow, enjoy themselves and connect in those small groups with people from their local community.

If I can I take a step back once connections start to form between group members, you see they begin to start nurturing each other, 'Where do you live? How long have you lived on the estate? Do you use the Healthy Living Centre?'

'Oh, we go to that group, do you fancy coming along?' 'I can help you with that' they begin to share knowledge and information not just about the class activity but about what's going on locally, and that's one way I've seen people flourish, because they can then start to feel they belong. That's happening more and more.

A typical Create Together course runs for eight weeks but because I can only see a small amount of people in each group due to Covid restrictions, I've reduced the length of the course to six weeks, so that I can add another course in for an extra 5 people to come along. .

Each week we try out a different craft activity, this gives people the chance to experiment with a wide range of materials.

What tends to happen is people find something they enjoy. I say to them at the beginning of the course 'You may find that you will like some activities more than others but give them all a try.'

And you find that people come back to you and say, 'I loved working with that clay, it relaxed me.'

'It's helping my anxiety during the week I've been able to go back to it when I've got stressed and work a bit more on what I'm doing at home'. It's very therapeutic the work that I do.

On Create Together the participants have said, that by about week seven of an

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Some weeks, you see people’s tongues coming out as they concentrate on what they’re doing.”

~Helen

eight-week course, they’re beginning to get a little bit anxious because the course is coming to an end. They want it to be a regular group that they would continue to go to, a weekly club, like a craft club.

I have had one past participant who has now started a weekly craft group which is open for local people to attend. She had a little input from me at the beginning but is now running that group herself.

Thinking about the whole of the social prescribing project – it definitely looks different now to how it did when it was first set up, Laila is more visible to people and I think that helps because if people can see you out and about they can build up a trust with you. And she is doing that, people are beginning to know who she is in the local area. And like I said to you earlier about the social prescribers coming into a group and experiencing it for themselves, it makes them feel real and approachable to people. I think it’s important that social prescribers are visible to people, not sat at a desk away from the public. Laila’s become more visible and I do believe that is what has broken down some of those earlier barriers.

Although, the Covid restrictions on my group size has meant a waiting list has built up, which I don’t like as I find it difficult saying to people I’ve got no spaces left, I do however, like having the smaller groups because you can dedicate more time to people. And as long as the group is facilitated properly, you can still get good conversations going. For people who are anxious or shy, a group of five is better for them, I’ve found there’s more nurturing going on in smaller groups.

I do stress to people who are anxious about joining that they don’t need to be artists to come and join, they just need to have a willingness to join in. It’s a very laidback atmosphere and we often have a good giggle. Some weeks, you see people’s tongues coming out as they concentrate on what they’re doing!

People like to help, they like to help clear up. Quite often, after the first week, they’ll start making coffee for each other. Quite often, we get people come in with a homemade cake to share, a cake they’ve made particularly for that group. It becomes not just about the art, it’s about the connections, and the belonging. And that’s what I truly believe is important

Vickie

When COVID came... to start off with, we started just chatting on normal Facebook chat, and I think Angie found out about Zoom and we decided to stick with that and use them for groups, and in some ways it was harder, because you were seeing each other all the time via Zoom. And we were still having our Thursday mornings, but we weren’t having hugs, we weren’t in the same room, that side of it was harder. But because we were using Zoom meant we’re actually able to add another session, because there wasn’t having to worry about travel backwards and forwards, especially for Angie being in Bristol having to come down to Weston.

We had a Tuesday morning coffee morning, where we’d literally talk to each other on Tuesday morning about normal lifestyle things, things that had happened during the week that had been amazing or awful and just like venting with each other as you would with normal group friends. And then on a Thursday morning we decided what we were going to do, how we were going to do things. It was very, very different, but it still worked, we were still together still planning things. And we ended up doing the diary entries for the Worle Fest.

I can’t remember which member it was, but there were washers drying behind them.

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There was one woman... well into her eighties, and she wasn't being the recipient of support in this society, she was the giver of support, she was ringing around.”

~Mary

I've got Alex (my son) climbing all over me. And each of us are going through issues and like the speakers aren't working, or the mic's not working, the camera's not working, and just all those silly little daft things. And I'm not sure who it was said, 'Why don't we do a Zoom play?' Literally where we sit and all these issues that we keep having no matter how small and silly they are how big and hilarious, we just add them in there. And then, when we're talking to somebody, because we're all over the screen, everyone's head turns to that person, we're actually talking as though they're next to us.

We're also looking at doing a play that can be done via online and looks as though it's literally through the Zoom windows and how we will interact with each other and obviously things that we've had to deal with.

Fiona

We just kept going. It's been quite interesting because some arts organisations just stopped in COVID whereas the people we work with, their needs were greater than ever. We've kept going and found ways to do that. And we've increased our support actually over COVID.

Angie's been heading onto Zoom twice a week, and what it brings to the fore is the issue around digital access and I don't know how we resolve that. Not all members of the group have the appropriate digital tools to access the offer, that's a nut we've got to crack still and it takes money. They've been amazing. Some group members that we work with, they don't necessarily leave the house very much usually. One of our theatre

makers was saying that he's had more contact through COVID than he would have normally because we've upped our communication to twice weekly rather than weekly, and otherwise he doesn't leave the house generally apart from essentials. That's been a bit of an eye opener. I hadn't fully appreciated how isolated some of our group members are.

One group member wrote a lovely verse of a poem which talks about how others are now experiencing the sense of isolation that she normally feels, and what happens afterwards. Which is a humbling thing to understand.

Lockdown for us has been about talking to people, finding out what their needs are and then supporting them. In a sense for us it was a continuum of how we normally operate. We just had to shift the means through which we do it. But everything carried on or amplified rather than stopped, and we adapted things. The only thing we weren't able to do of course was being able to connect our group as audience members to live, professional performance. This usually forms part of our wraparound offer, opening up different horizons. But that will come back.

Alistair

I've done nothing (since COVID). I run a writing group in Art Space on the High Street. It's called The Salon for Sanity. I've been running it with a friend since last August. There was a guy who came to a group and because he was inspired by me, he started a reading group on a different day. You pick a book and read a bit, I think, that's what he does in there. But



IMAGE: CHRIS MONTGOMERY

Burt said that he and I should get together and do our own new writing group out in the community. Because the thing was, there's plenty of stuff to do on the ward, but if you're in recovery and you're out in the community, there's not much stuff going on especially now they've closed down the One in Four.

That's a place where people with mental health difficulties can go and they do activities and stuff like that. A community for mental health people. They closed that down and there's nowhere for people to go.

The South Services (?) is supposed to be like a place where you can go if you need to. There's somewhere for you to go in town. It's been successful, that has. I'm not doing that either. I'm not doing any writing groups. I've not been able to do anything online. It just hasn't worked for various reasons. It's more technical problems that we're having, it wasn't workable in the end, unfortunately. But hopefully the Art Space is meant to open in September and we can start it back up again.

Mary

Being such a close-knit community, there were established lines of communication and connections already, and people were very willing, perhaps more willing than in other communities, to help neighbours to shop. They knew their neighbours better perhaps because they lived here a long time and have grown up together. That works for a proportion of the community... and then there is another part of the community, which there always is in South Ward, which is more transient, who are not known and who are not part of all that, are excluded from all that.

In COVID, I think we all felt we're part – it was that wartime thing of just by dint of being here, we are linked with going through this together, we're experiencing the same worries, concerns. We're trying to look after each other, as a community. I think I do believe one of the things that we're doing is making links. We've got this thing going down

at the allotment now which is a storytelling coffee morning, and I'm trying to get an idea of how some of those links were made and I know that they were made through the local COVID responders. But I think also that lots of networks were created that we're not aware of. We did ring round our tenants who were shielding because of their age, and talked to a number of people. I discovered from them what connections and networks were available to them. I was relieved and happy to find out that people weren't as isolated as we supposed and that... in this community, possibly because the housing is quite dense... it was impossible for people to not be noticed, perhaps.

Those older people – they were connected through their church group, through things that they belonged to in their youth that were still happening. Some were working still, and it made me think, a lot of judgments are made about people over seventy, about them being in this vulnerable state and actually they were a lot less vulnerable than we initially thought. Some did need support and help, and that was why we were ringing round. However, it was mainly a friendly, 'How are you doing, thing.' These connections... lots of them hidden... are there and they're supporting people, and possibly by revealing those potential connections... we can help people... more than delivering a service to them, just by making them aware of the local support.

There was one woman who was in the sisterhood, the Soroptimist Group. It is a good example of someone having far reaching connections and being part of a supportive group. I think they have a reputation for being old fashioned but I've just looked at their website and it is right up to the minute.

Anyway, she had belonged to that, all of her life, and was linked in and she was... well into her eighties, and she wasn't being the recipient of support in this society, she was the giver of support, she was ringing around, I think she was the secretary of the

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There was one woman... well into her eighties, and she wasn't being the recipient of support in this society, she was the giver of support, she was ringing around.”

~Mary

local group. She was making sure other people were all right and understanding some of the difficulties of those women who were at home. I think that's a well-recognised group. Some of the central churches in Weston were coming out because those people belonged to them. They were part of their community and helping with the shopping and stuff like that. Those churches were – they weren't estate and the local church didn't have that level of connection, I don't think, but the ones in town did. They're taken in and out, given lifts, and all that thing because transport is one of the big problems. One of the needs are for the community – the transport is terrible even if they had in the past been travelling on buses and things like that, people were terrified at that time of being on public transport.

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We all have difficult times, and that shared knowledge, that's what Helen does well. She links up with people and listens to their stories, and sometimes shares some of her own. There's something about that communication that just breaks down the us and them”

~Mary

Laila

It was lovely to be able to serve people and get their shopping and get their prescriptions for them and... I loved the fact that I could do it and I didn't have to shield or anything like that, I could go out and get somebody's shopping and that meant that they could stay at home and all of that when that was very important in the early stages.

And people were anxious and worried about not being able to get their food and all the rest of it. When you've built up relationships with members of the community over many years, something like a pandemic, you want to be able to connect with people that already know you. And that if you do run out of food

one week, you don't feel ashamed for having to ask for a food parcel, things like that.

My response would be always just be like 'Oh, it's no problem we can drop that round' and then they're just like 'Oh, thank you. That would be great'. And you hear the relief and realise the importance of it.

My experience of doing social prescribing during the pandemic has been fruitful in terms of collaborating with people like Helen and West of England Works, and just seeing what's out there when everything's stripped back. It's just felt easy actually. I'm not saying it felt difficult before, but there was something about, we can't do what we would normally do. But we can do some things, for example, Helen during her art pack deliveries, meeting up with her - I was thinking who I could deliver some to, and then conversations came from that.

Myself and Cathy run the playgroup normally in the Healthy Living Centre. Our playgroup mums stay connected through that and that was connecting them to Helen as well, which I liked. That going forward in terms of just making collaboration easy, and just something that happens almost naturally in terms of decisions that we make.

In terms of the social prescribing, nothing continued (at first), but we did a big park clear up in Bournville. Cathy is also a work coach for West of England Works, so we often collaborate and share clients. There's a lot of overlap. In July, we did a big park clear up in Bournville. We wanted to think of something that... first of all, that we could see our clients again and just say hello to them, do it outdoors: there's less worry about COVID, and have an activity that people can focus on without feeling like a spotlight's on them. Our park always needs tidying because there's a lot of rubbish in it, unfortunately, so we just thought that would be quite a good first stepping stone. When no other groups are running, what can we just put on very easily,



*On a plain unembroidered sky
Trail-less birds stoop and fly,
Whilst silent foxes ply
Ways through gardens,
As insects taste sweet spring
From breathing blooms
Giving hope of what
Quiet change may bring.*

BY CONRAD COLLINGE



Finding the Colour
NATALIE COOKE

I work as a nurse and play as an artist! Painted at the beginning of lockdown, this evocation of Brent Knoll reminds us of nature's positivity.

CONRAD COLLINGE is a member of Theatre Orchard's Chapter One writing group and wrote this verse as part of a collaborative poem about lockdown 'All Closer Together Now'.

A collaborative project between Culture Weston and Artspace celebrating artists' creativity and bringing new life to poster sites in North Somerset.
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The people's voice.
Posters for the town with
the words and images of
those who live here.

Circus company
Dizzy O Dare
pack a punch with
local communities



IMAGE MARIE DOMINIQUE DEMERS-KING

that people might want to come along to?

We had about eight people. Some of my clients, some of Cathy's clients. And it was great actually. I mean, it was never about clearing the park – that was like the activity, but we just wanted to see people and find out how they were getting on. Those who didn't want to chat just got their litter picked and went off and picked up rubbish for an hour and then went home, and those who wanted to, we'd sit down and have a chat and it was – it worked well. We were encouraged by that and lots of them said, 'Are we going to do this again?'; that's something that, in this period of limbo where the nature of social prescribing has completely changed, and yet there's a need for something, I think things like that are going to be good.

I could potentially see that developing in a different way. There's no reason why if a group wanted to keep doing that, they could make it a weekly event, that meets to clear the park. I know that we're near the beach but actually a lot of people don't leave the estate, but they care about the estate. It

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...it has been brilliant not only having you run our workshop but also seeing your work itself. An honour and a privilege...”

-Vickie

wouldn't necessarily go beyond Bournville. But that's okay, there's plenty – there's still growth, even if it doesn't move geographically.

Fiona

We run a festival called Whirligig! which is an outdoor arts festival in the middle of town. And we always work with at least one performance company who is part of that festival in greater depth, so that they can come and work with our Theatre Lounge members in advance of the festival. There's a relationship that is struck up between the community and those professional artists that can create a unique connection.

Last year we worked with the brilliant Dizzy O'Dare who is based in Kent. He did a workshop on South Ward. One of our group then came to volunteer at the festival itself, others came to see it and Dizzy also did a special standalone performance in town to which Theatre Lounge were invited. It's finding all those other opportunities. You connect the group to wider professional work. It's beneficial, everyone's benefitting – professional artists equally.

Dizzy O'Dare says:

“Alana and I have done lots of workshops in the past for theatre groups or drop-in sessions, and for the most part everyone participating has had an interest in performance, but these sessions had a very different demographic and I started to see how important they were for bringing socially excluded individuals out of their shell, sharing, allowing themselves to be silly around others, for making eye contact without fear or anxiety, and perhaps for a short period of

time forget the difficult lives they may have.

Between sessions I was told about some of the issues affecting the participants... I did not see any sign of this during the sessions, and I think it shows a great success to have one of the participants volunteer and become a steward my show Baba Yaga's House at Whirligig!

The more I thought about the sessions the more I began to feel passionate about them and their potential benefits to areas of society which are forgotten about or disregarded.

In essence I just wanted to say how important I thought the sessions were, how much I hope these and similar sessions around the country can be encouraged and supported and say a big thank you to Without Walls for supporting Dizzy O'Dare, and a big thank you to Theatre Orchard for bringing Dizzy O'Dare in to help out.

Finally, we received this yesterday from one of the participants – Vickie Dadswell-Bardsley:

‘It was brilliant to see another of your acts today at the Whirligig!, Alex was impressed that Baba knew his name, he wouldn't stop talking about it. It has been brilliant not only having you run our workshop but also seeing your work itself. An honour and a privilege, thank you so much.’

Mary

If you've already got a power differential, say, because, I mean, I have a job, and... and possibly I'm talking to somebody who doesn't have a job. So, you've got your power differential there already. If I'm talking to a woman from my position and... well, this is my experience. The assumption is that you are in a protected state, that you're working, you're educated, you've got

support, a happy marriage, your children are not hungry and are looked after in a cosseted way, there's a real difference there.

This is just my little personal story. When it became known through someone that my marriage had ended, the women I was working with closely, treated me completely differently. There was a huge difference. There was a huge warmth... from other women who were struggling, looking after children on their own, possibly... that I had not experienced prior to that. That was probably, after having – all through my Sure Start time, I didn't have that – that was when I was working in a different role, but those same (people), because I work quite closely with the community and I've seen a whole generation grow up. There was a warmth and understanding as a shared human experience.

You're going through difficulties, we all go through difficulties, we all have difficult times, and that shared knowledge, that's what Helen does well. She links up with people and listens to their stories, and sometimes shares some of her own. But... there's something about that communication that just breaks down the us and them.

Mark

Looking back now to the beginning of COVID when it was emerging, I remember saying, 'We've got to close the cafe now. Let's not wait', then a week and a half later they said, 'You have to close things' and I think we were ahead of what we were being told to do and that felt better as well because they were just slow or reluctant to act, I felt. And we didn't have enough information but it was better to be safe at that point. Yeah, to begin with, it was I mean, I'm bizarrely, my own



shadow, but excitingly it was an emergency. I mean I like responding to crisis well.

Fiona

It's right where my heart is, doing this work... it's inspiring working with all these people. Theatre Lounge members are so bright and offer so much. I wouldn't have the confidence to do what they do. At the group you connect with people on a genuine level whereas in day to day life I think it's much easier to build a little fence around yourself.

We run a creative writing group as well [Chapter One] which has continued over lockdown. I enjoyed attending that actually, and the quality of the writing from group members is so impressive. And what's



IMAGE SIMON TOMSON

nice is you can see how the output of the work crosses over many different areas. Our Chapter One writing group wrote a collaborative poem about lockdown called 'Closer Together Now' with around twelve different verses from people. Each verse explores completely different things, different personal experiences about lockdown – one of the verses was about the pride that the writer had from becoming a volunteer in lockdown.

We've been able to connect that one verse with the council's work around volunteering so that creativity is profiled as an important way through which people can express themselves. Over lockdown we have also worked alongside artists from Artspace to create posters that have gone up around the town, because there's nothing on the sea front noticeboards with events coming to a halt. One of the designs is created by

a local nurse. We have coupled it with one of the verses from the 'Closer Together Now' poem that a lovely writer called Conrad wrote about nature and lockdown. That's an unanticipated collaboration between the community artist who's a nurse and Conrad who's a resident of Weston and a writer. That's an example of our whole approach, trying to enable links between diverse people and activities in order to build a community where everyone feels that their creativity is seen and valued and where life feels better. Cliché, but it's true and it makes a difference. ●

05

**What in this
process I'd
like to keep
hold of**

“

There are no destinations at the moment, because there are no groups.”

~Mary

Helen

I see the process like a journey, not always knowing which direction we are going in, sometimes taking the long way round, but always moving. Joining Create Together may be just the start of the journey for some, the start of new friendships, new confidence, the start of a new crafting hobby, for some it's about re-connecting with people and re-connecting with their creativity along the journey. Who knows where we will end up!

in different ways. And I'd get other people to introduce it as well. It's that knock on effect. There's nothing like a local connection to get something different happening.

Alistair

What would help would be a project trying to get a theatre to perform, like, original plays written by local people will be a great thing to have.

Mary

The whole process of being involved in social prescribing ... it is to hold on to our shared humanity and the things that connect us rather than concentrating on the things that separate us. And the opportunities have come about through creative methods to think about, to take yourself outside of that... learned experience, perhaps, and to seek out those connections rather than the divisions.

I think it is different when you use creative methods as part of your design... because I think it allows you to step away from the everyday, somehow. It's the discovery.

Whereas in sport, in netball for example... I'm just going to be how I was when I was twelve in netball. I'm always going to be that person. I'm always going to be goal defence and I'm going to refer to my childhood self.

I suppose, the creative - by linking creativity with discovery, well people need to get out of their comfort zone, if there's going to be a change made. And, yes, how do you make that invitation. You have to be clever, don't you? You have to introduce it

Laila

Going forward, there's a lot of... I'm still working out what the next six months will look like when groups aren't just going to restart. I've been trying to work closely with people like Helen and Mary who are in a similar situation.

With Helen - her art groups are taking them outside and I know for some of my clients that - actually, the fact that it will have to be a small group is good. I feel like the fact that we can't have lots of people together is actually a bonus because a lot of the people I work with don't want to be in big groups. Seeing what can come from that, in a small group setting, and doing something like the park clear up where... we talk about having destinations.

There are no destinations at the moment, because there are no groups, but maybe social prescribing becomes the destination in this interim stage? If we're running a weekly park clear up, and then see if that grows into something - if people want to take that on and if it will evolve into something else.



IMAGE NICK SUTTON

Everything has been reset. I feel like we have this social prescribing programme in the South Ward has the potential to... listen to people, and find out what they want, what they're hoping to be part of, and go from there. But I'm vague because it's - I feel like it's early stages and I'm trying to make sense of it in my head.

Fiona

For me the most valuable thing has been striking up a deeper relationship with Arts and Health Southwest.

We've had regular steering groups to enable that ongoing narrative.

That's probably what's helped me, and the same with Mark Graham, who we've known for a long time, actually. It's the regularity of the steering group that supports the Creative Connections post and having that ongoing communication with Mark and Alex and Mary from Alliance Homes has been great - a chance to really understand their [Mark

and Mary's] whole asset-based approach.

The way we have talked about connections and that very grassroots reaching out - that's how we experience our creative offer too. And that's been endorsing to have the discussion group as a regular support. Even though we haven't had a huge connection with the critical connection role, for us the wider connection with the steering group has been helpful.

For this third year of Creative Connecting we're going to be working more closely with Laila. I think we probably need to move away from thinking that role is going to massively overlap with direct referrals to Theatre Lounge. I think what will be helpful is just having more capacity and time for Laila, Angie and Vic, (in our dance programme), to spend time talking and to see what sparks come. It's developing those organically formed impacts.

We've been making films with different members of the group about their stories. And that's been a powerful testimony. Just sharing stories is hugely, hugely beneficial. Keeping that group running throughout lockdown, I

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I run a writing group in Art Space on the High Street. It's called The Salon for Sanity.”

~Alistair

think it's been a bit of a lifeline according to some of the members and their families. And we very recently just secured some funding from Active Communities to do more.

One thing that has become apparent is, I think, members of our current Theatre Lounge group are quite keen to explore some of those issues which can be pretty gritty, that dominate their life experience. And if we're offering this group out as something that might support well-being for people who aren't familiar with drama, that social focus can feel daunting.

To make what we offer more attractive to the social prescribing route, we are setting up a separate group which we're going to call Theatre Forum, which is more about providing that social support, a place where we can explore issues that directly affect lives such as domestic abuse ... or whatever the issue might be. And then make Theatre Lounge a much lighter touch environment, which is about fun, playing and connection. That's probably been one of the issues, if there is an issue. That's something that we've been thinking about in response to the Creative Connections role, and it's enabled us to develop our offer, with a second strand that will kick off in September.

Alex

What's coming might have happened anyway, but I feel like, you know, we've helped. We've helped to nurture it, this work, that Fiona is involved in with Culture Weston which is much broader than just the Theatre Orchard. And the hospital relationship which is fortuitous, because that's to do with the fact that Bristol hospital's got Anna Farthing, the Hospital Arts Director. Then they joined forces with Weston hospital and there's a lot going on between Anna and Fiona, which is way beyond this project. Weston-super-Mare has always been a bit of a place - you have Banksy and Dismaland, but I'm not sure how much South Ward is interested in any of that. I think that our project is creating some pathways.

Mary

There is something about the area that we work in which is very inward looking... because there's safety in that and being accepted for who you are in your own tribe, as it were. That's enough for some people and I don't think flourishing is linked to that. For me, flourishing is when that can be turned around and people are looking outwards and making connections beyond perhaps their local environs. And I do see that the area that we work in is well connected in lots of ways, it's very well connected. People have grown up together, people have had a set of similar experiences, there's lots of looking after each other. However, not all of it allows people to flourish. It sometimes holds people in and keeps them out where they are.

So, for me, the connections need to be

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I met a lovely group of people in a place called the Healthy Living Centre. It was a drama group called Theatre Orchard. It gave me so much confidence back to my life and made me realise what I am capable of.

~Tel

more outward looking and by bringing other elements in a bit earlier perhaps you know, the creativity of the theatre or the chance to do craft and talk about yourself in other ways, and storytelling. Being able to tell your own story is to not just that safe audience. That's flourishing. Being proud and being able to tell the world and link up with the world.

To do that someone needs to be trusted and valued, so it's the equitable approach. We talk about people in our project being contributors. So we're all the same. We're on a contributed project. I bring something and so does somebody who lives locally and has a skill or talent or just wants to be alongside. We're all contributors rather than service providers and recipients... and so, that's the difference, it's the approach, it's being human.

Mark

I think the biggest thing in relation to Creative Connections was reassigning Laila's role. It wasn't about picking up individuals and driving them into community activities because that no longer was possible because live activities came to an end during the early days of COVID. But that role was then about working with everybody else to check that nobody was left behind... Let's not worry about getting figures for having people use social prescribing. Right now we need to be out there supporting people... shifting roles.

Elspeth

We've been talking about Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and with that in mind, how to not expect that we can solve everything in one generation, how can we possibly? You're talking about how that deep transformational change is possible through arts and health. I believe so too if someone's got the will to. There's many people however, who aren't so motivated, a bit suspicious possibly, and aren't really linked in with the idea of transformational work at all. I love the idea that it could work, do you believe it's possible?

Alex

You can imagine that if you took one little thread and you started with who they connect with outside their world, whether it's some kind of professional or... and how could you capture, almost put a little stitch

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If you took one little thread in that and you started with who they connect with... and how could you capture, almost put a little stitch in there?”

~Alex



IMAGE KAROLINA GRABOWSKA

IMAGE MARIE DOMINIQUE DEMERS-KING



in there? And how could you build that so they eventually found a path to something that was more spiritually and creatively intense in some way? How could you help that process without it being a 'doing to'? How could you build that through all their connections?

We have these different layers – the GPs and NHS layer, how Mark interacts with that, and then Mary and Helen's community work. In each layer there's a bit of a gap between them, because they have different purposes and different ways of thinking and different needs and demands and money flows and all the rest of it. And they're the same people. Humans filtering up and down through these different layers but there often seems to be a bit of a disconnect in the way of doing things, and there are lots

of obvious reasons why. I do think that the work that Helen, and Mary do is starting to capture those little threads but what doesn't seem to very easily happen is for that to thread through to say Fiona's work.

That's one of the things we've been talking about recently is that Fiona's getting people coming to the Theatre Lounge by word of mouth. So that's the individuals themselves, finding it's good, and then telling others, but she's not getting them through the various systems we're setting up. That's because the people who are managing the referrals wouldn't necessarily be focused on – 'Well would that person actually benefit from Theatre Lounge?' I mean maybe they are doing that to a certain extent but I can see that Fiona is frustrated she's not



really getting the people coming in. There needs to be money for that professional level of work and that's another barrier.

I'm really digging down into the nitty gritty here, but I'd say overall actually we've found a very harmonious way of exploring all sorts of things and it's been a great delight. But the impact, the outcomes, the visible change is not very clear or finished yet and I don't think this work ever does finish. I think it goes on and on.

Actually, I'm quite pleased with the direction it's going in at the moment I think it's quite interesting. And it's very real. You can't just create a social prescriber role, and then think it's all going to be hunky dory and easy because there's a constantly shifting changing context for this. It's constant flux and

change, and the usual frustrations around the NHS and money and austerity, it's all going on all the time and within that you're trying to create something that's got some roots, stability and value. I think we've done well with that: it doesn't look quite like we thought it might look, but that's inevitable I'd say. ●

South Ward Tapestry

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