

Stories chosen as most significant during group work at Celebrating Age Event, 13th September 2019

Story 2. Devon Guild of Craftsmen: A Good Age

Hairstyles I have known

Kay is 72 years old. Since retiring she found her days filled with more mundane activities such as cleaning and walking the dog and has mostly been at home. The arts group she was a part of have found a venue in a local pub to use so they can carry on meeting up after the project finishes.

'The art has been very positive, and I would love to continue. Before I retired, I was a Graphic Designer – pre-computers - I used letterpress and silkscreen. Computers were just coming in.'

Before the project I was isolated and lonely and now my social confidence has increased through meeting people regularly. I feel more positive and connected to my life and surroundings. I have learned to use Photoshop and although I'm a technophobe I'm considering doing a course.

My project is about changing hairstyles through the decades as I wanted to keep it light-hearted and fun.'

The project chose this story because:

- They felt this was a strong story of confidence regained. After feeling her life had become 'mundane', Kay had found new confidence and friends.
- Kay had rediscovered old skills through a new medium and the project was really happy to see that she had learnt new digital skills and was interested in continuing to learn.

Group Feedback

Why did you choose this story: what did you find interesting and useful about it?

- Lovely example of effective project
- Outward looking, engaged in developing project and legacy

What themes or learning emerged from the overall discussion?

- Sustainability and legacy through relationships

- Potential, growth, looking forwards, resilience, rediscovery of skills and confidence.
- Preventative, in at early stage.
- Empowering individuals and communities to self-organise.

Story 3. Farnham Maltings – My Shout

Restoring my identity through dance

F is a woman in her early sixties who took part in dance workshops which culminated in three performances, facilitated by Matthew Bourne's company New Adventures, including an outdoor performance at Dance in the Meadow and a celebratory curtain-raiser before Cinderella in Woking.

This project has brought excitement, renewed energy and self-esteem to me at a time in my life when I have greatly needed these. My family have been at all three performances and have been moved to tears. I think that our audiences will have enjoyed watching a group of dancers who are older than they would normally see.

I enjoyed meeting a new group of people. Being taught by Luke and Daisy was inspiration - they were wonderful. I loved being treated as part of the New Adventures company. I thoroughly enjoyed all three performances - which all felt different. I loved the experience, and so did my family. My daughters telephoned me after every rehearsal for feedback because they said they loved the enthusiasm and excitement that they heard in my voice.

My role in the world had changed, and I don't think I had realised how much. My role is a mother. It's hard to say, but I think I had lost my identity. My own identity. This project, this dance, restored that sense of identity. And it gave me something new to share with my daughters who so loved hearing about it, so in some ways it's added to my role as a mother. It's given me a new role and it's added more to who I was before. Being part of this project has brought me so much joy."

The project chose this story because:

- This was a story of significant improvement in confidence and self-esteem.
- They felt the project had been able to have a positive impact relatively quickly.
- She "loved being treated as part of New Adventures", showing the importance of the classes treating people as co-creators.
- She notes the changes not only for herself, but for the audiences of the dance performances too, potentially positively changing others' attitudes to ageing.
- This story also shows how her role as a mother has changed, adding to what she can contribute to her daughter's lives and impacting on her family, who have clearly seen a change in their mother.

Group Feedback

Why did you choose this story: what did you find interesting and useful about it?

- We loved the first person narrative and her self-awareness
- It brought up a very long discussion
- Personal connection to the 2 artists who led the project (Luke, Daisy), “loved being treated as part of New Adventures”.
- This story helped us identify that the story should be separate from the interpretations of the story.

What themes or learning emerged from the overall discussion?

- Sustainability
- Being clear about your offer:
 - Social engagement/artistically challenged
 - Funding boundaries
- Importance of the role of the artist and their skills and ability to facilitate co-creation.
- The story and interpretation of the story needs to be 2 different things.

Story 4: Gateshead Libraries: Art Diamonds

Not being a couch potato

J is in his 80s and has been involved in the project’s artist-led activities. He had heard about Art Diamonds in his local library and fancied trying something new. He used to work in sales and always had an interest making things, especially in wood, but had never found the opportunity with a busy job and three children.

Since being involved in Art Diamonds, J has tried papercutting, visited an exhibition, made a mosaic tile and thrown pots on a wheel. He thinks it’s great to work with artists and learn some of their skills. It helps keep his brain active and his hands busy. J loves the opportunity to find new interests and try something new. He doesn’t want to be a couch potato and wants to live his life to the full.

The project chose this story because:

- It isn’t necessarily one of loneliness or isolation; it is more that J has found an opportunity to express his creativity and to try his hand at different things.

- He is getting out to places - visiting exhibition, going to sessions. 'J' is an advocate for the project and very welcoming, he recognises that this is an opportunity for others in a similar situation to himself and is prepared to be an advocate for the project.
- Often, he is the only man in the group, and he wants to share the message and the invitation to others, particularly men, who would benefit from a shared interest. He will hopefully help to carry the project forward and be part of the legacy.

Chosen (along with story 2 by one of the groups but no feedback provided)

Story 6: MAC – Culture Club

Not a typical old people's club

S cares for her husband P, who is unwell.

'Because P can't hear or remember things anymore it makes it hard for us to do things together. I get quite stressed because I'm always looking out for him so coming to Culture Club is great because it's a chance for us to do something together and we don't often do that anymore. His motivation has pretty much gone.'

Even when he can't remember why we're here and I don't want him to show me up – like on the day when we'd come to do the watercolour class and he didn't want to do it, he did in the end and we both had a laugh at how bad we were at it! P's condition means things are often quite stressful so doing something out of both of our comfort zones, like painting, actually makes us closer together.

"I wouldn't have normally joined an older people's club as I don't think of ourselves as this but this one is more vibrant, and something I really look forward to. We both used to go to clubs together but gradually P had to drop out due to his issues so this helps to give him new interests. I love it."

The project selected this story because:

- It involves a couple, showing a change in how they were brought closer together through being at Culture Club when so many other things draw them apart.
- It is an important point that Culture Club does not feel like a typical 'older people's' club: this is surprising for us – but very useful and positive news. We have been reflecting on what it is that we are doing as an Arts Centre to achieve this – it feels like we are redefining what it means to have an older people's club, and that older people might redefine what they think about themselves as part of this.

Group Feedback
Why did you choose this story: what did you find interesting and useful about it?

- The importance of projects that include family members and carers, the impact this has on everyone – being catered for and accepting and catering for individual needs.
- Shared creative experience – in a different environment; meeting new people; “typical old people’s club” – categorise.
- People enjoying being in the moment – going with the flow – responding to the needs of the group – life changing – having tea.
- The sense of individual voice – very personal story – how she spoke.

What themes or learning emerged from the overall discussion?

- Sense of family/community.
- Overcoming barriers/anxieties. The environment in which this is possible.
- Confidence building – artistic, social – trying new things.
- Retrieving personal relationships – through arts/community.
- Sharing an artistic experience.

Story 7: MIMA

Life is better in Pinnies

I started coming to the group because my counsellor told me that it would do me good to join a group, to get to know people and talk to people, to get me out the house. I came to the group and I really enjoy it.

Joining the Pinnies has made such a difference in my life - I am a nervous person and I spent all my time on my own or caring for my mam. I do not find it easy in groups, but I'm made to feel so welcome, I bring my mam along who is 96, everyone is so kind to her and we love trying new things and just having a natter. I have never been any good art- that doesn't matter.

It feels like a family, it's loud and busy and everyone makes sure that you have a cup of tea- sometimes we don't really do anything except drink tea and chat, then other times we can't stop crafting- I have missed the bus a fair few times. Coming to the group takes my mind off the worries I have in my head, I feel safe and have made some wonderful friends.

The project chose this story because:

- The description of the group being like “family” was moving; it demonstrated how this sense of belonging has huge ramifications on wellbeing and happiness.
- This story highlights the independence and ownership the Pinnies have over their community setting and group. This was non-existent at the start of the project.

- Of the positive personal journey of the storyteller and how the Pinnies has played a part in that journey.

Group Feedback – chosen by 2 groups but feedback only available from 1 as the other chose 2 stories.

Why did you choose this story: what did you find interesting and useful about it?

- Joy and passion.
 - Benefitted generations of her and her mother.
 - Intergenerational.
- The environment – safe. How we cultivate spaces. Relaxed.
- Social prescribing.
- Sense of community.

What themes or learning emerged from the overall discussion?

- Confidence; joy.
- Environment – safe and supportive; social aspect.
- The surprise after project; agency.
- Development – personal.

Story 11: Rural Arts

Care home outreach

D lives in a care home in Thirsk. She was referred to us by our partner Thirsk Community Care because she used to do art before she moved into the care home and she is very lacking in self-confidence. She describes herself as shy and nervous and says she doesn't go to many events because of this. D says she is 'crafty' but unfortunately had to give away all of her arts materials when she moved into the care home. She now has bad arthritis so her fine motor skills are impaired, but there are still many crafts in which she could participate.

Our artist Clare visited her for the first of four sessions at the care home and believed that she could definitely help her come out of her shell. Clare's aim was to build D's confidence enough to join in with the Arts Café sessions being held at Rural Arts. Despite her severe arthritis D didn't show any signs of frustration or pain because she was so enthusiastic about what she was doing.

By the fourth session, D was confident enough to attend the Arts Café at Rural Arts and also had been to a creative session that Poppy (another artist) had delivered at the care home as part of another project. Her favourite activity has been the silk painting and some of her work was exhibited as part of the end of project show.

The project chose this story because:

- D. was one of the people who benefitted most from the arts activities provided on a one-to-one basis. She would almost certainly not have come along to the Arts Café at Rural Arts if she had not accessed those one-to-one arts sessions first.
- It was good to see D looking forward to something again and knowing that she could continue the activities at a local venue.
- The bespoke project has helped her to gain confidence and self-esteem.
- D's story is typical of many people in her situation – having to move away from her home to somewhere she doesn't know with new people.
- She didn't notice the arthritic pain as much when doing the arts activity.

Group Feedback

Why did you choose this story: what did you find interesting and useful about it?

- Investment of significant resource initially (4 1:1 sessions) – time, artist specialism, bespoke in process.
- Tangible and measurable outcomes – pain reduction; agency.
- Identity – staff and other people in care home knowing her as an artist.
- Relatable – happening all the time, could happen to any of us.

What themes or learning emerged from the overall discussion?

- Validation – still able to contribute, recognition.
- Increased wellbeing – physical and social; tackling loneliness, social isolation; measurable and intangible.
- Investment in the process and individual (rather than outcome) – social prescribing.
- Specialisation of the arts intervention – time, bespoke, flexibility.

Story 12: Stratford Arts Social

My calming sessions

'G' is in her 70s and has been regularly attending the Stratford Arts Social weekly Creative Café since September 2018. She also attends our monthly arts events.

I found this place by accident. I never went to any groups until 2 years ago. I'll only go to places I'm comfortable- that's the most important thing. This is the only place I've been coming for so long. And I think it's done a lot of things for me – it's calmed me down.

I have OCD. Normally I don't go out, and when I do I have to scrub and clean. But now I'm so much better... Magically, I [have] seen myself improving. I can sit down, I'm not so restricted... I can sit in public buses! I used to get stressed so easily and had epileptic fits. Since I started in September, I've only had three, so to me this is very important! I'm hyperactive, so to sit down able to do things and complete what I can complete is... ['G' throws her arms up in amazement]! Occasionally I am [still] agitated and uneasy but I think I'm a lot better now. I can sit down and enjoy classes. I [have to] put my alarm on – otherwise I forget the time, which is very unusual for me.

We [my family] call them my calming sessions – it's therapeutic, and I don't need to take any tablets for it! I think people can underestimate art. It can have such a good [impact]. Your mind just goes free from all the stress. And then when you look at what you have done... it's not a masterpiece but to me it's the serenity... a peaceful feeling of content.

This place makes a lot of difference. I think it's the art... you know, you see things differently. Part of it is that you can get so bound down thinking about [your problems], but when you're here you forget about things. The staff make a lot of difference. They are lovely, and the volunteers... You really make my husband and I feel comfortable and included. I love the company. I'm so close to 'S', 'R' and 'B'. I feel at ease, and so happy! It's the people who make it! We are older and we don't like to be told what to do, but you give us that freedom to do things we want to do and you never say 'I know what is best for you!'

The project chose this story because:

- Participation has had a really tangible impact on G's health and wellbeing, and her family and friends have noticed the difference
- It has also supported her to develop friendships, try new things, be more active and feel part of a community.
- 'G' grew up believing that she was no good at arts, so it is particularly poignant that participating in creative activities has become so positive and important to her.

Group Feedback

Why did you choose this story: what did you find interesting and useful about it?

- In her own voice – unfiltered. Enhanced her sense of agency.
- The impact on her family – wider than specific programme/participant.
- Art as a magical medium/a vehicle for change - direct impact recognised.
- The choice she had in her activities and socialisation.
- “It’s not a masterpiece” – quality of process not the art.

What themes or learning emerged from the overall discussion?

- Importance of the voice of the participant/power of own voice.
- Optimism.
- Signposting / a ripple effect / evolution / a journey.
- Initial “I’m not good at art”.
- Inclusion/part of a group

Story 13: Suffolk Artlink

The Way to be Happy

J, who is in her 80s, came along to a series of workshops including crafts and natural-voice singing. We call them 'Creative get-togethers' as the social element is very important. They have been held in the village hall which is only a few minutes' walk from her house. J looks after her husband who is in his 90s including taking him to hospital appointments. She is in reasonable health except for suffering from asthma. She enjoyed all the workshops as she likes to be active but won't stray far from her husband in case he needs her. Being able to do the activities in the village hall made them very easy for her to access.

The group who attended the singing workshop asked for it to be continued and so it has run monthly ever since. J drives to pick up her friend and they come along together. They both confessed that they sing in the car on the way to the session!

J said that she has a lot of worries, husband and grand-children, but that 'I've noticed the change between doubting myself and then feeling 'good-enough''. She said she goes home afterwards and tells her husband all about it - 'I go round the house singing away'. She also says it has helped her with her asthma. She said she doesn't notice it when she's singing. 'Somehow since we've been singing here, I'm breathing better'. She summed up that the biggest change for her was being able to stay close to her husband while meeting friends

and doing something she really enjoys and which has increased her confidence. Singing together has given her 'more pleasure than anything I can remember'.

Post Script - the singing group were invited to perform at a community celebration in Bury St Edmunds, about a 35 minute drive from the village - J arranged for someone to care for her husband for the morning while she was there, giving herself permission to be away.

The project chose this story because:

- J's life is still restricted by needing to care for her husband and feel that she is not far from him, but being able to attend so close to home has allowed her to spend some quality time on her own life
- She feels her physical health as well as her happiness is benefitting.
- This is then spinning off into other lives – her friend (they're 'singing buddies') and her husband, since she goes home with a confident story to tell him;
- She's in regular contact with old friends and participating in the world of the village.

Group Feedback – chosen by 2 groups

Why did you choose this story: what did you find interesting and useful about it?

First Group feedback

- Struck a chord / emotional impact
- Renewed sense of self
- Spin-off into others' lives – singing in the car/at home.
- Body, mind and soul.

Second Group feedback

- The identity and personal growth of J.
- The importance of the provision being accessible and local
- Progressive steps of participation.
- The individual granting herself permission to be involved.

What themes or learning emerged from the overall discussion?

First Group feedback

- Value of what older people do/contribute – perceptions of age, busy – too busy
- Quality of art vs social
- Accessibility – opening up scary spaces.
- Giving voice/ownership.

Second Group feedback

- Transformation of individual and their outlook.

- The importance of the activities and participation helping reduce social anxiety.
- Encouragement of being part of a group
- Joy.