

Case Study (4)

Bardic Educational Arts & Media (BEAM) Creative Network

Young at HeART

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI)

February 2018

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1. Introduction

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) is recognised for its pioneering work in championing the power of the Arts to promote health and wellbeing. In 2009, as part of its five year Strategy *Ambitions for the Arts* (ACNI, 2013) the ACNI established an innovative Arts and Older People's programme (AOP). Now in phase three, funding for the AOP is provided through a partnership comprised of the ACNI (Lottery), the Baring Foundation and the Public Health Agency. Activities and priorities within the AOP are governed by five themes: (1) isolation and loneliness, (2) social inclusion, (3) poverty, (4) Health and (5) strengthening the voice of older people. In September 2016 a total of £127,000 worth of funding was allocated to 20 organisations across Northern Ireland. The value of the grants allocated ranged from £1,025 to £9,055.

Bardic Educational Arts and Media (BEAM) Creative Network in County Tyrone received an AOP grant of £7,500. The funding was used by BEAM to deliver the Young at HeART project for people aged over 60 years. Young at HeART was

comprised of an eight-week furniture upcycling course and an eight-week painting class. Young at HeART was found to have a transformative impact on the lives of the older people who participated in it. The project was highly successful in alleviating social isolation and loneliness and promoting the health and wellbeing of older people. A key element in the project's success was the use of skilled tutors who encouraged creativity and nurtured confidence in the participants.

2. Context

Societal changes have resulted in an increase in social isolation and loneliness. Loneliness is a subjective feeling that occurs when the number and quality of social contacts that a person has is less than what they desire. It is thought that men and women experience loneliness differently, with men placing greater emphasis on quality of relationships and women enjoying wide social networks (Bernard, 2013). Social isolation is more objective than loneliness and is characterised by lack of access to resources and little or no social contacts. Factors such as loss of family, friends,

employment and decreased mobility make older people more vulnerable to social isolation. Physical isolation, including rurality, has been identified as the factor most closely associated with feeling lonely (Pearce and Lillyman, 2015; Age UK, 2010).

Loneliness and social isolation are associated with higher all-cause mortality rates (Holt-Lunstad, et al., 2011; Steptoe et al. 2012) and increased incidence of Alzheimer's disease (Holtzman, 2004; Wilson et al. 2007). The risk to health posed by social isolation is comparable to the risk associated with cigarette smoking, hypertension and obesity (Pantell et al., 2013). Social isolation and feelings of loneliness can exacerbate symptoms associated with mild cognitive impairment (MCI) and dementia. Moreover, the protective effects of a rich and large social network on preventing dementia (Wang, et al., 2002) and promoting good cognitive function (Sorman et al. 2017) are recognised.

3. The Arts Intervention

Bardic Educational Arts and Media (BEAM) Creative Network

is based in Donnaghmore, Co Tyrone; a rural village on the outskirts of Dungannon. Established in 2002 BEAM's vision is to "foster creativity and excellence through all mediums of the arts; provide programmes and activities that encourage awareness, participation, and appreciation of the arts and to encourage and promote communication, learning and personal development with all age groups and abilities."

The AOP grant was used by BEAM to deliver the Young at HeART project for people aged over 60 years. The project consisted of an eight-week furniture upcycling course and an eight-week painting class.

4. Methods

Focus group and individual interviews were used with four older people and the project manager to explore the impact of the creative Arts project on the lives of people in a rural community. The interviews were carried out in the BEAM centre. Informed consent was obtained from all participants for audio recording of their interview. Anonymity of AOP participants is

preserved in reporting their contributions.

Photographs used in the report are courtesy of Grace Girvan, Project Manager at BEAM.

5. Impact

“This is a secret amongst ourselves...I painted a chair. I have a blue cooker and I painted the chair to go beside it; and then I had a white mantelpiece and I painted that. While I was doing that — some paint fell onto my sandals— ancient old flip flops that I have had for years. The most comfortable shoes that I have ever owned. So, I decided, why not paint them. And I painted the shoes and they’re beautiful.

The children are saying ‘mammy you can’t wear those’. I wear them around the house, yes, but I’m very proud of them. I know the children go on about them and say, ‘mammy don’t be going out in those’. But you wouldn’t know that it was ordinary paint and when the time comes you can lay me out in my blue sandals.”

(woman, aged 80years).



5.1 Isolation and Loneliness

There was a clear demarcation for participants – life before AOP and life after the AOP. People were frank and honest in their description of how lives that had once been filled by work and family had started to become lonely and empty.

“This was a god-send away from the four walls. Mentally I just thought to myself ‘my life is over now’ I’d worked for 40 years and felt a failure”

(woman aged 78 years)

Powerful language was used to describe the sense of fatality and life being over that people experienced, stranded at home and feeling lonely.

“Resigned myself to just sitting in the house being looked after... I had resigned myself that I had more behind me than in front of me and by heavens it has all changed now.”

(woman aged 73 years)

Young at HeART was advertised through a variety of media including the BEAM website and newsletter, church bulletins and local newspapers. Word of mouth and encouragement or gentle persuasion from family, friends or the project manager appeared to have the greatest impact.

“My daughter pressed me to come out to an art class. I met an awful lot of nice women who would give me a lot of scandal and I could go home to my wife and say wait til you hear this one that I was told today or whatever.” (Man aged 81 years)

So inspired was one woman by her husband’s enthusiasm about his art class that she registered for the ‘upcycling’ group.

“My husband had previously been here doing art and he enjoyed it so much that and i thought well why not - I’ll give it a go and find out. The only downfall is that I’m looking around the house constantly

thinking I could paint that or could cover that.”

(Woman aged 80 years)

The project manager liaised closely with local doctors to plan the project and at least one participant attended on a recommendation from her GP.

“The GP had suggested the group just to get her out I only know because she came forward at the end with her daughter and told me”.(5)

There was a sense that older people in rural areas were invisible and forgotten about. Young at HeART was therefore greatly welcomed. Participants’ gratitude and appreciation for having a project designed for older people was a strong theme throughout the interviews.

“We are having fun and we are learning and it keeps the brain cells going. There’s things for infants, toddlers, mums, teenagers and then there’s a gap and you are into waiting for Godot. There’s nothing in this area for our age group.”

The importance of Young at HeART to the lives of older people was put into stark relief on the final day of the project.

“The benefits can be seen on the last day and the amount of regrets there are that it is all over. Everybody wishing that it would continue.”

5.2 Making Connections

The social dimension and opportunity to meet people, reconnect with old friends and make new friends was the most valued aspect of the AOP.

“I met people that I hadn’t seen in years, I met new people, I met old friends ... the whole social part of it meant more to me.”

The arts classes provided people with common interest.

“you are meeting people, talking to people that you normally wouldn’t meet during the week – you can work and socialise at the same time.”

The act of creating together, was a strong social lubricant.

“you are working, and you have time to talk- everybody is friendly.”

The AOP participants described how the relaxed informal environment resulted in banter and a fun atmosphere.

“You’d be doing something on to the canvas and the next thing you’d start laughing and at the

same time you’d be listening to something someone else was saying so that you could comment.

The upcycling and painting gave people a common purpose and acted as leveller that eliminated social and economic differences.

“There is no class barrier – that cements us as a group.”

“All walks of life.”

There was a strong sense of being in this together, with bonds of solidarity between the participants and a willingness to help each other.

“Everybody helped you and helped each other.”

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*Whenever I had a problem people would come along and say try this or try that or do this and did you think about? So the camaraderie between everybody was wonderful.”*

The art classes resulted in the development of stronger, reciprocal and fun relationships between grandparents and their grandchildren.

*“I have a better sense of the grandchildren when they come.”*

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“she said to me – if you put it down on cardboard granny and cut it out it will work.”

5.3 Creativity

The idea that the ‘Arts’ were for other people was a barrier for some participants. The BEAM manager was credited with helping them to overcome these notions.

“Grace was always saying to me – you must, you must, you must, and I would be saying ‘not at all Grace I can’t do anything with my hands’ because I thought that it was for people like WI [Women’s Institute] who could sew and bake and were handy with their hands”

(Woman aged 73 years)

The AOP Young at HeART project gave older people the freedom to indulge their imagination, unleash their creativity and live a little dangerously.

“in your own mind you can travel distances, you look at things differently. you’re active, you are keeping brain cells going, your imagination.”

The experience was credited with helping people look at the world afresh.

“Look with different eyes – don’t go with the safe option.”

The AOP gave participants the freedom to indulge their imagination.

“Ah imagination – you can drift into a different world and it can be yours. Nobody says there has to be green grass it can be pink grass because it yours and there’s a freedom in that that is very important at this age.”

The creativity in art provided a valuable way to break free from the labels and limitations, including aches and pains, that were associated with ageing.

“...was no sense of age you could have been 14 years of age again. (4)

The AOP Young at HeART project resulted in upcycled furniture and paintings. These tangible outcomes were a source of pride and satisfaction and judged to be of great importance in the overall success of the programme.

“Physical proof - you did that – sense of pride and achievement.”

People talked about the great ‘buzz’ they got when they looked at the pieces at home.

“That is mine, I have created that.”



5.4 Confidence

The arts classes were credited with injecting a much-needed sense of purpose and increased motivation into the lives of older people.

“we worked all our lives and you need a reason to get up and out.”

This enhanced zest for life was evident from the moment that they woke up in the morning.

“Even get up in the morning and putting on your clothes you can’t wait to get out to see my friends.”

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*“The time is set – you have to go, you want to go.”*

Participants enthused about the way in which the classes had turned their minds from focusing on the past to making plans.

*“I seem to look at things in a different light... constantly looking and planning what I am going to do.”*

For some people the AOP was the first time in their adult life that they had the opportunity to put their desires first and the new-found confidence was a source of great excitement.

*“I was always the one giving and now that I think about it there was very little time for me – the me that was before the granny, the mother and the wife – and I found in me something that I never knew existed – an artistic streak and it has opened up a whole new world.”*

The manager at BEAM reported the powerful impact that the project had on people’s confidence.

*“I noticed the confidence grew every week.”*

This observation was borne out in the observation and reflections from the older people. They talked about how people in the class had grown in confidence

and flourished. Quiet and shy people became more self-assured.

*“She was so proud she brought her daughter in and introduced her to the group. In the beginning she used to rush out as soon as the class ended and by the end she was staying back with everyone else.”*

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“F has blossomed and become more confident – not timid. Will initiate conversation.”

The AOP participants joked as they reflected on how nervous and anxious they had been at the beginning of the programme. As confidence grew they became more daring and adventurous in their artistic endeavours.

“The first week C brought in a chair that a pre-schooler would sit in and ... she was doing a whole big sideboard from a tiny chair to that.”

People also spoke about how enhanced self-confidence had whet appetites for learning other new skills.

“I can do a lot more than I thought I could do. I like painting, I like poetry, I like writing, as regards painting there are areas that I would like to try like cubism

and I’d be prepared to give it a go.”

A renewed sense of daring and willingness to take on new challenges and give things a go was a recurring theme.

“Even if you go into one of these interior design shops you are looking at things and thinking that’s a great idea I could maybe do that.”

5.5 Health

The older people attributed a range of health benefits to their participation in the Young at HeART project. Commonly reported health benefits were improvements in mobility, cognitive function and confidence.

“my sister said to me the other night ‘the change in you mentally and physically is unbelievable’ it has opened a door for me that was shut for a long time – I love it I love it.”

The buzz from the classes was carried home and family and friends commented on the change in people.

“when I went home they said to me ‘so what did you do?’ and I said, ‘well I was painting, and I met so and so, and this fella wait

til you hear what he said about my painting'. And they said, 'you know you are actually animated'."

The painting and upcycling whilst enjoyable were cognitively challenging. People talked about how thoughts of design and what paints to mix to get a desired colour were now dominating their thoughts.

"You have something more up here (tapping head) to think about it."



Both classes encouraged physical activity. Although the gentler option, the painting class, promoted dexterity and hand to eye co-ordination and the camaraderie within the group meant that participants were constantly walking around

looking at each other's paintings. The upcycling class included a range of physically demanding activities including sanding, scrubbing, screwing and hammering.

"when you are making something – you are thumping and banging and walking up see what X is doing."

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*"You were bending and stretching."*

Improvements in joint pain and overall flexibility were ascribed to the physical demands of the Art and the healthy competition within the group

*"I have arthritis and that hand was really starting to stiffen up and I found myself walking around with the hand curled. I wasn't happy, but I was accepting that this was just part of getting old. And now I can move my hand no problem. Also ... in the group there were people who were older than me and they were able to things no problem and I started wanting to be as good if not better than them."*



## 5.6 Facilitators

Skilled and sensitive facilitators were central to the success of the Young at HeART project.

*“Great facilitators very patient, easy going great at explaining things even the painting – the painting still mesmerizes me if you were to see one of those classes and how he starts out – I’d be sitting there thinking I’d never be able to do that. What you produce at the end is amazing.”*

Experts in their field, the facilitators were also highly experienced in adult education. A vital skill in working with a group of older people for whom memories of school and thoughts of ‘education’ provoked feelings

of anxiety, nervousness and fear of making a mistake.

*“It wasn’t like school where you must do...”*

The facilitators eliminated these emotions by creating a safe place that was about creativity and experimentation and there was no such thing as a ‘mistake’.

*“you can’t make a mistake have a go and see how you get on.”*

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“Was wonderful and she said just get stuck in.”

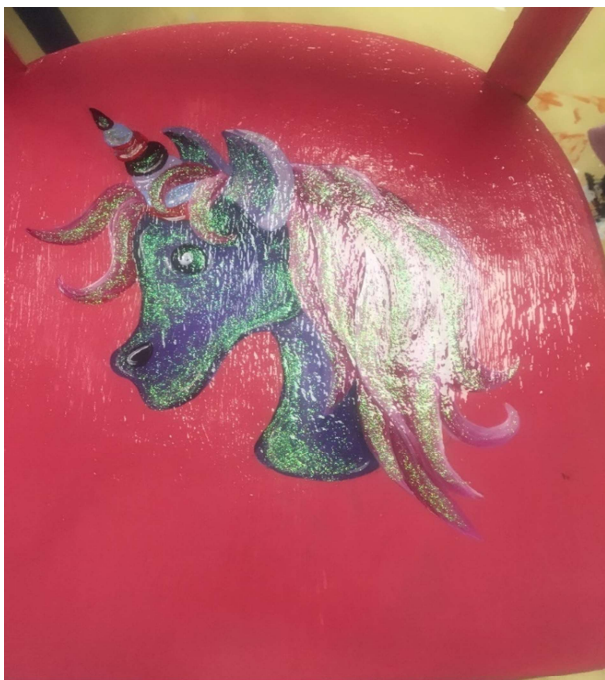
Although the class was fun, and people had the freedom to unleash their creativity and develop their own unique style, the quality of the final product was of a very high standard. This fact was important in engendering satisfaction, delight and pride in their accomplishment.

“The artist was first class and beauty of it is that I did it – (artist) would say ‘try this and try that’ — but I did it.”

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*“Great facilitators very patient, easy going great at explaining things. I’d be sitting there thinking I’d never be able to do that and what you produce at the end is amazing.”*





## 6. Discussion

This case study distils the learning from the AOP Young at HeART project. The project was aimed at alleviation of social

isolation and loneliness for older people living in a rural area of Northern Ireland.

Young at HeART consisted of an upcycling and a painting class each of eight weeks duration. The case study highlights the emptiness and loneliness that characterises the lives of socially isolated older people living in rural areas. The power of the Arts to alleviate social isolation and loneliness is illustrated through testimony from people who participated in Young at HeART. The importance of creativity and skilled tutors is emphasized and the impact of the project on physical health, emotional well-being and confidence is identified.

The Arts classes generated a sense of purpose and lubricated social interactions. The confidence and mastery that resulted from participation in the classes gave a great boost to self-esteem and participants were emboldened to try other new things. Improvements in flexibility and reduction in pain were attributed to the increase in movement and exercise that resulted from the classes.

If one word could sum up the impact of Young at HeART that

word would be friendship. The creation of a social network was the most important factor in the success of the project. People spoke openly and frankly about how Young at HeART had transformed lonely and isolated lives into lives filled with friends, beautiful pieces of art and plans.

The Young at HeART project was made possible through the AOP and participants spoke of the sadness and regret that they experienced when their classes ended. People living in isolated rural areas do not have the same access to resources that their urban peers do. In addition, due to the sparseness of population distribution and poor transport networks, older people in rural areas are more susceptible to becoming social isolated and feeling lonely. The AOP provides as excellent example of how this inequity can be redressed. The project also served to reveal hidden artistic talents amongst participants and the art pieces that resulted were of such high quality that there may value in exploring opportunities for investment in and mentoring of small business ideas, based on upcycling for example. Income generated could be reinvested into Young at HeART to make

the project sustainable and accessible to other older people in the area.



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## Author

**Dr Una Lynch** (D.Gov, MSc (Community Health), RGN, RM, RPHN), Director of Sonrisa Solutions Ltd. A career in public health for over 30 years, she has worked in practice, education, research and policy across the island of Ireland, in Latin America, Australia, and Ghana and with the World Health Organisation. Her doctoral research (2007) was a case study of Public Health governance in Cuba. She is currently a board member for two international research projects on active ageing led by National University of Ireland, Galway and the University of Sheffield; and is a Senior Associate with the Dementia Services Development Centre in University of Stirling. A focus on ageing with dignity across the lifespan, stakeholder engagement and the translation of research into policy and practice informs her work. She led the ACNI study 'Not so cut off' (Lynch & Alexander, 2016). This case study work used qualitative interviews in conjunction with shadow casting and shadow mapping to illuminate the impact of the Arts in alleviating isolation and loneliness for older people.