

The power of the arts to bring about change in psychiatric hospitals

Theatre Nemo believes in the power of people. That is the ethos that underlines all their work in the field of those with mental health issues. You can perceive that in the way they treat people with real meaning, empowering individuals to learn recapture and reawaken lost talents and abilities. Why is this so powerful? Because they are dealing with individuals caught and entrapped in institutions that can cover the human spirit. We are also dealing in some cases with people who through their mental illness have criminal pasts, and for some of these patients this is fortunately where Theatre Nemo can help.

Leverndale, Rowanbank, Stobhill, Southern General, Gartnavel and Carstairs are all hospitals in which Theatre Nemo have worked very successfully over the last few years. They have found that the qualities and opportunities that animation offers is the best template for the people that they have worked with. The process uses all the art forms such as storytelling, visual arts, building scale sets, making and animating characters and giving a voice to a character of ones own creation as powerful ways in which people can express themselves, communicate as a team, problem solve and regain identity.

The environments which we take for granted, such as to learn, create, express and enjoy are arenas not common to participants, who have often deeply withdrawn into themselves and in many cases stopped communicating with any real meaning. As individuals have started to feel comfortable in these groups, their confidence grows, they start to communicate with one another and peer dynamics become apparent. And within a very short period of time these men have taken on complex roles, which they have been able to sustain.

“It is seldom that individuals in forensic settings have the opportunity to be in control and directly influence aspects of their being without some form of constraints”. From a clinical psychodynamic perspective utilising exploratory approaches like play tap deeply into previously unarticulated emotions, something which many individuals have never had the opportunity to express, or at least not within their present settings. (Cheryl McMorris head Occupational therapies)

Individuals who have previously had low levels of expression, disinterest in taking part in any form of community activity have become enthusiastic in these unusual, stimulating and unique settings where fun, creativity and successful activity have brought great benefits to all concerned. Not only has it enlivened people, but also it has given vision to those staff that work in these areas. They have seen collaboration, stimulation, relationship building and enthusiasm which have endured in the lives of those involved beyond the period of the projects

“John now initiates a conversation, and puts forward his own ideas in a group setting”. Tom “vocal in sharing ideas and opinions and using new equipment”, Stevie ” now confident to share ideas and listen to feedback constructively”, from individuals who have previously shown little aptitude or interest in organised activities. (Hospital Staff)

Focus group took place with hospital staff at finish of project with emerging themes evolved with everyone describing positive comments. The celebration of work was thought to be very significant. One discussed celebrating the achievement of making the animation and DVD and being able to show this to his peers and staff. This theme was further enhanced by another individual who stated "I enjoyed spending time with my family at the premiere of the film, as a result I have made more of an effort to see my family on a regular basis". A third participant reported he was not afraid to suggest new ideas, and was willing to listen to other people's ideas "I felt like people were listening to my ideas".

When asked what changes they had noticed Collaborative working emerged as the key theme, "I noticed that all the patients involved in the production of the film all worked together and helped each other" another individual stated "I noticed that all the patients who made the DVD have a better relationship with each other". "it gave me a new interest" " I enjoyed working the camera and making the background" The men involved have inspired their peer group to consider future attendance with occupational therapy and it is fair to say the culture of theatre Nemo is embedded within the ward environment.

A lot of progress is down to skills and qualities of those who lead these activities.. They are friendly and unpretentious in the manner in which they approach their work and this can be a unique experience for those involved. Some of Glasgow's most damaged and vulnerable men have responded extraordinarily to this person centred work, which has deep and enduring results for those who never thought it possible. At the end of each project there is a showing of work and families are invited to attend, not only helping reunite families but portraying the members of their family in ways never previously seen. This "highlights and demonstrates how this facilitates the recovery process" and gives hope where hope had previously never been seen. Theatre Nemo continues to break the mould of social constraint through the process and power of the arts and bring great benefit to those with little hope.

Hugo Butts

Put together from observations and quotes of staff at these psychiatric hospitals.
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