



The TOUS study/Albany Storytelling Project



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Front cover image: the Albany arts centre in South East London
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Collected by Debra Westlake. All stories edited by Philip Brennan, Naomi Joseph, Will Long, and Rowan Padmore.

Note, some details have been changed to protect the identity of storytellers.

Introduction

The TOUS study (Tailoring cultural offers with and for diverse older users of social prescribing) is trying to understand how cultural organisations and creative activities or groups can support the well-being of older people (aged 60+) from ethnic minority (or global majority) backgrounds. Researchers are exploring how to 'tailor' or design cultural offers (activities, events, performances, or exhibitions) so they are attractive to different communities living in the United Kingdom.

The study is using a combination of methods - interviews and observations, as well as an approach called the Storytelling Evaluation Method (Storytelling). Storytelling involves collecting stories from people about their experience of being involved in an activity or group, either as a participant, a staff member, or a volunteer. It involves condensing people's stories into two-page summaries (based on their original words). These stories are then shared with interested stakeholders to identify key insights and common topics; this means that the stories are analysed in an inclusive, collaborative way.

The TOUS study is working with six different cultural organisations - we call these our study sites. The rest of this report includes stories from one of these sites. The stories provide useful insights into the benefits older people can experience from cultural activities and some of the issues faced by those providing such support. These stories were considered at a discussion event in September 2024, attended by 20 individuals; older people engaged in activities at the site, staff/volunteers working in the cultural sector, healthcare professionals and social prescribing representatives.

Right: Stephanie Tierney speaking at the discussion event described in this report



1. It's Love

I came here on Monday. I first of all joined knitting. Then they said, 'Are you coming on Tuesday?' I said yeah, because I love singing. So, I joined the choir. I started singing and then I joined them again, acting. Well, it's not acting at the theatre you understand. But it's something to keep you active.

The first acting we did was pretending we are elderly people that a carer comes to look after. Some of them they just come, within five minutes they gone. And some of them don't come early so when the elderly people are in their bed, they can't come out. They're hungry, they need a cup of tea, need breakfast or every other thing. Some of the carers within five, ten minutes, they are out. They are paid for the job, and they are not doing proper job. They're just doing it for the money, which is wrong. So, we make people know that this is what the elderly people are feeling. The acting it make me feel good, and also it is good for people to know how the carers are working. People love it and when they were clapping, I feel good. Yeah. I feel good, you know! We're speaking up for elderly people, old people. Because everybody will get to that stage.

My feeling is that they should take care of the elderly people, they should look after them. And also, those that can come out, should be able to come out and not sit in at home doing nothing. For instance, during the time of Coronavirus, we don't come to Albany because it was closed down. So, all our acting was on the phone. We play on the phone. Tuesday, we practice song on the phone, and anybody who want to sing, they have to sing on the phone, you know. Trying to make people feel happy. Come out of, you know, stress.

So, when we come out of here, we happen to meet people in the streets, they say where are you coming from? I say I'm coming from the uni. You know, then they will start to laugh. They know it's not a school, but I tell them it's school. It is a place of learning. It is a place of learning because a lot of us come in here, we look forward to it. We sit down, we chat, we drink tea, we eat biscuit, you know, we chat, before we start, you know, everything. That elevates your spirit. It elevates your mind. You know, it makes you feel happy that you've come to join your age group and you are working together as a group.

“...don't just sit idle because you are old. No, keep on doing something. That helps the body to be active and also helps the brain as well, right? You have to try and keep yourself busy.”

When I came here in the 'sixties, I wanted to act. I applied to Hollywood, and they asked me to come down. They tell me when to come and how I should prepare myself, that they are going to take pictures. So, I went to the hairdresser, did my hairdressing very well, put on nice clothes, and I went. When I got home, they wrote a letter to say, congratulations you are chosen to come down, whatever you want to

do, either singing or acting play. I told my husband. My husband says, 'No way, you're not going.' I begged, and begged, and begged. He refused. I was really angry, to be fair. I was really, really angry because that's what I wanted to do in life. And then he refuses.

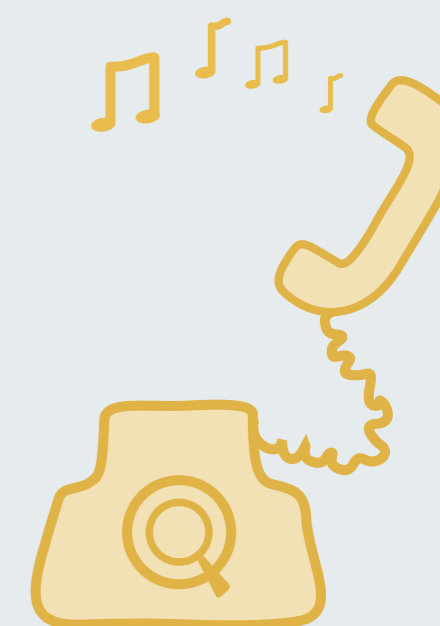
So, when I'm here acting my son says, 'Mom, this is what you wanted to do but Daddy didn't let you do it. Now, you are doing it, and I'm proud of you.' I said thank you. And they said anytime when anything like that is going on, we have to let them know in time, because they are still working, so they have to have time off to come and watch. They are proud of me. I feel happy that I'm doing something that they like. So, when I'm coming here doing acting play and all that, I'm so happy. And I've got the interest.

I feel happy that I'm doing something, at my age. I don't want to sit down without doing nothing because if you sit down doing nothing, the brain is sleepy. And that's why you see a lot of people having, what do you call it? The stress, and they don't know what to do with themselves. So, don't just sit idle because you are old. No, keep on doing something. That helps the body to be active and also helps the brain as well, right? You have to try and keep yourself busy.

It's something to do with health. When you're inside doing nothing, watching television, you fall asleep, then the television starts watching you instead of you watching telly. When you drop to sleep, by the time you wake up the programme you are looking is gone. Then you get up, you're going to eat, come back, sit down. No, it's not healthy. If you eat, drink and sit down,

watching telly, doing nothing, that doesn't help you.

I do things all the time. And I phone people in my age group that I know. I phone them, chat with them, see how they're feeling. Yeah, I introduce this place to people as well. I introduced two people. It's something that people have to try. I always tell them it's not good for you sitting at home, doing nothing or watching telly. You come out and help yourself. The doctor can only prescribe for you or give you medicine, or tell you oh, you should have that thirty minutes' walk, oh, you should do this. No. You have to help yourself. When I tell people about what I am doing, that makes them leave home, and help themselves as well. I love it.



I'm proud of myself, when I look at my age, I'm proud of myself. I've got a walking stick, but I never use it. When I'm going on holiday, I will fold it and put it in my bag just in case I need it. But I never use it. Because I can walk without it. I try, I make exercise, try to keep myself going. You know. That's the only way you can help yourself. You help yourself; nobody will help you.

I love coming out meeting with people that are older than me and you know talking with them, chatting, smiling, you look forward to it, to go to meet your age group. When you're in not doing anything, you can only wash plates or wash clothes, or sit down and watch telly, or play music. No. That makes you put on weight all the time. To put on weight is very quick, but to lose it takes time. So, therefore you have to be active, to remain the same weight. You yourself have to help yourself. So, my coming here, I'm helping myself. And it's good.

When you gather, you chat, you drink tea, eat biscuits together, it's love. Because if you don't love something, you won't do it. It's true love when you do things, if I come here and I don't like it, I won't come back. But as I come here sitting with people, we chat, we recognise one another, we exchange telephone number, you know, phoning each other. Checking on people and also if anyone passed on, we collect money, buy flowers, you know. If anyone can go, they can, but if they can't go, we send a wreath to the family. You know. African, Jamaican, white people, you know, it's mixture of different countries. And it's very good. Yeah, because it's

not like we're all from Africa. No. this is a collective something. You chat. You sit, and you chat. You have a laugh, you free your mind, you know. You free your mind. Well, when you come here when you are talking with someone, I'm freeing my mind. It doesn't matter whether you are Black or white we all need help. We have to help one another.



2. One Big Family

I lost my husband in 2016. I went to bury him, take the body home to Nigeria for burial. I spent six months there. When I came back, in 2017, my friend came to visit me and we were talking. One day, she just said to me 'Come on, get ready. We are going out.' I say 'Where?' She say 'We are going out, I'm not going to allow you sitting down here brewing.' I said 'Okay, let's go.' I was thinking we were just going for a walk. We end up here. I think that was a Tuesday. We were sitting downstairs, and they announce for choir members to come. The choir mistress ask if I come and watch them singing? I said, 'why not?' At the end, she said to me, how do I find it? I said it was great. While I was there the following week, I was told that I can join if I want. I said oh, that was good. And since that day I never look back.

The third week of the choir, the man who organised the drama came to me. And he said, we have a drama here on Monday. Are you interested? So, I said, well, I don't know if I'm interested or not, but I will come and see. If I like it, I will stay. If I don't, I don't have to come. He said that's fine. And I went from that day till today. I never looked back. So, every Monday and Tuesday, I'm looking forward to come here. I've never done anything like drama before. We are all about the same age. When I join, I think I was the youngest among them. But we all just like brothers and sisters. That's the main thing I love about it. Nobody looked down on you. Nobody snub you. Once we are together, we just like one big family. I find that interesting. That's what really keeps me going.

We talk, we don't read a script. It's like: life experience. For example, when I came to this country, I found it very hard to stay. The very day I arrived, the second day I wanted to go back home. The racism is beyond me. I have a European friend who used to talk about Europe. So, when I came here and I see the people I said no, this is not what I heard about. When I came here, I feel privileged to come. But when I see the way people are behaving, the way we're treating ourselves because of colour is ridiculous. It's only the skin. The blood is red, like your blood. It's just the skin. But they don't see us as them. My husband won't let me go back. He said you just need to ignore them, and that's what I did. It was difficult, but we survive it and God put us through. That's why everything I do, I give glory to God. Gradually things are improving but not yet. There's still a long way to go.

I always look forward to Albany. I don't feel nervous. If I like something, I don't feel nervous about it. All my children, my grandchildren know on Monday and Tuesday, you don't disturb mummy, or grandma because that's Albany Day. I didn't find any racism here to be honest. No. It might be, but I didn't find it. All the staff we work amongst, we play together, we've made joke together. Albany changed my life in many ways. It makes me to be talkative. Because I used to be very, very, very quiet. But when I start at Albany, I talked to people, see people for what they are. We just carry on this

way. They welcome you with open arms. I think that's the main reason we want to come back. The friendly welcome.

There's so many places that I thought in my whole life, I wouldn't have been to. Albany took me there. Places like House of Parliament. Victoria House in Greenwich. We've been to theatre in Waterloo twice now. We were there when Harry get married. Those are the places I wouldn't think of taking my feet. They wouldn't even allow me to walk inside. I can't afford to go to that kind of theatre. That's one thing. Because everywhere you go is money. And the money I don't have.

Albany is the best place. You can go and have a chat, have a cup of tea, talk to people, nobody looks down on you. It changed me to love myself. Yes. And to share the love to others. I can't really describe it. There's so many things they are doing, like the choir and the drama. And exercise. Art, I'm not interested in. I just go there say hello, that's it. I'm not good at drawing, so I don't want to go there. I love the choir. Everybody in the choir is just like the drama, like one big family. When we are in the choir singing,

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we are just one accord. And we all friendly - missing one another when we don't see each other. Every time you are singing, you are in a different world. That's one thing that I can't explain. A nicer world. A beautiful place to be. It makes me happy, makes me feel alive.

When Harry and Meghan married, we went to sing in Waterloo. We also performed a play from the drama group. The actor lies in a bed in public. There were a lot of people watching. I remember when I was in the bed lying down there, this man came, he said, 'excuse me, I'm a doctor from Saint Thomas Hospital. Is there anything I could do for you?' All of a sudden, I see the bag with the stethoscope and I can't talk. So, luckily the people that was with us, they saw him, they came and tell him it's a play. I just loved it. The purpose of doing it is to show the world what loneliness is. That was the main reason we had those beds. It's just a time of loneliness.

If we can have more places like Albany, I think the loneliness for elderly people will be a bit less. Places to go - and talk to people. You know, there are lots of people who haven't had a hello from anybody today. Day in, day out. Sometimes they will get a phone call once in a month. It's not only acting or singing. You come here, you see people, you talk to people. You know, how are you feel? When we stay at home, you just wear out. That's why I tell everybody, go out and socialise with people, you live long.



Palace of Westminster by Squirrel Photos from Pixabay

In another play, the council are forcing people to move from where they live. Strong hearted woman who live in a place for thirty years. And all of a sudden she have to move. Did she tell you she want to live closer to her daughter? You can't decide my life for me, you don't know my life, so you can't decide for me. I know my life. I will tell you this is who I am. Not you telling me. That was the message of that programme. This does happen to elderly people.

When you are in theatre, you are a different person. You're not yourself. Sometimes what you are showing will relate to your true life, but not all the time. I love playing people who are not me. It made me see things in a different angle. I might sit down and say, 'oh, I wish I'm such and such person.' I don't know what they are going through. Until you tell your story and I'll say, 'oh my God.' You see, that's what it is.

Old people have wisdom that the younger people don't have. For example, what I been through in life, my children don't go through it, right? So, for them to know it, I have to tell them the story.

My family love it. My beginning was not as good as what I have now. They said after going through all that, God had blessed me with all this. So, yeah, they are happy. They always tell me they are proud of me. They always say, yeah, you are so popular now, we have to book appointment to see you. 'Famous grandma.'



3. A Perfect Match

I used to work as a social prescriber. It was after a year of lockdown and I'd been working on a telephone helpline for people needing services, particularly relating to COVID. It had been quite full on. I don't mean to critique social prescribing, but I personally felt like I never saw where people ended up. You'd make relationships in the couple of hours that you see them and then it's onto the next thing. You just hope that you've helped. I wanted to work with people longer term, and see that change, and see the benefits of a group. I also have my own artistic hobbies, and this job is part time, so it was a chance to combine my professional experience and my personal interests. Kind of a perfect match.

Pre-pandemic, people were coming into a physical space and the producer was able to see how people were doing. When the pandemic hit, suddenly it was hard to check in with people visually and just ask someone how they are. We were calling people individually and it's not just the usual hey, how are you? It's quite often big stuff. To retain all the members, we used Skype to make these group telephone calls, and my role was to get people signed up to the calls and supporting them with any access needs. So that's where the role came about - someone to be responsible just for the members.

As we've gone back in person, it's about taking referrals, checking access requirements, making sure people know how to get to the building and know their way around, making sure they're welcomed,

taking feedback, seeing if they want to come back. Checking up on any members who haven't been for a while. Doing birthday cards! We're very lucky that we still have a transport service outside of dial-a-ride, so there's volunteers who drive people to our groups, and I book that transport.

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I really enjoy seeing the same people every week. You get to build relationships. My previous work has helped me to be confident to ask about someone's care package, to give us the reassurance that they have support outside of the group. Sometimes it's hard to know where the boundaries are between the social group and people's personal lives, and social prescribing can put a lot of emphasis on the community group holding a lot of that person's life. I guess my previous experience gives me confidence about where those boundaries are. It can be quite stressful if you're a volunteer and not used to working with older people, you hear something like this person is scared of falling in the shower - what can we do? Really, we can just make a quick referral to social services with the person's consent, letting them know the situation, but beyond that we can't challenge situations.

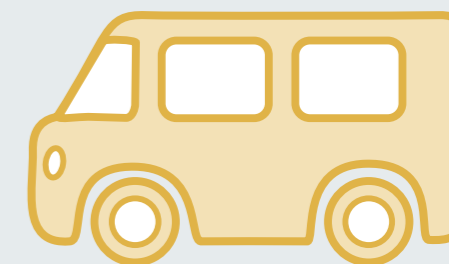
Some people came out of the pandemic and their health had declined quite a lot. They weren't moving around like they used to, so there's more concerns, more falls risks. We can refer them to a falls service, or recommend an occupational therapy assessment, or a referral from mobility aids. Perhaps there's things that we can purchase if we have the budget. We want to be open and accessible to everybody. Particularly with social prescribing there's lots of people living with long term health conditions, as well as natural ageing things that might cause barriers for them accessing a group. We charge £3 to cover teas, coffees and activities, and if that's a barrier, we waive that fee. So people get to try things that they perhaps can't afford to usually.

We try to let the members own the group collectively. We have meetings where we let everybody know what's coming up and get their votes on what they think about it. There's a bank account that they have access to, to manage the funds how they want. If there are activities they want to try, we try and get an artist in. Being in the café space it's also very visible. Very much just members of the public using a community café.

It's a chance to get out of your own headspace. You don't talk about individual problems; you just focus on the creative activity. Some members are very engaged outside of the group, but others, it's the only thing they do in the week. I know one lady, it used to be that this

group and the church were her two things that she went to, but because there isn't a tailored environment at the church, she doesn't go there anymore. We have transport, we can walk her to the car, all that extra support is available.

The members come out with amazing work. There is one guy who made lino prints, I don't think that he's done art before, but he just has this natural talent. People always come and say oh, I can't do that or I'm not doing that - we say the main part is just coming along and giving it a go. I wonder if some older people's groups might get a little bit like, highbrow. We've got people who have done things to a high level previously, or never given it a go at all, and they're all in the same room. The artists are very experienced so they're getting high quality instruction. It really does pull out unknown skills in people rather than just like: older people like knitting so let's just keep doing that over and over again. Although we do have one group of knitters and crocheters as well!



The volunteers are excellent. If someone's struggling, they'll help, or break an activity down into parts. We try and be a bit creative. And if anyone wants to try something different on the day, that's fine. I often get referrals for people who are too young to join our groups through social prescribing, so instead we might encourage them to volunteer. We also get a lot of kind of young creatives, students or people just out of uni. If there are access requirements for a particular volunteer, we would focus on which tasks might be appropriate for them, but beyond that it's just being welcoming and friendly.

We make sure artists aren't coming with their own agenda. We've had some things in the past that just haven't worked - people have felt like they're being done to and talked at and they're having to fit in with someone else's project. We try to make the artists as diverse as possible too, so that they represent the members, whether that's age, ethnicity, or gender.

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There is representation on the posters and adverts that we put out, because people want to see people that look like them. We make sure comms that we put out isn't too wordy, in case English isn't someone's first language. It's worth considering what the activities are and if they might be more likely to appeal to certain demographics. What are the songs that you're singing in choir? It's a majority female Christian group too so I wonder if that's something we need to work on. We've got to a point where it is an ethnically diverse group and I think people feel welcome when they come in, I'd hope.

I've had very corporate jobs in the past - just been told I need to iron my shirt. I guess it's about being in an environment that nurtures your interests, just feeling comfortable. I'm much happier now.



4. Creative Practice

I've always been passionate about the arts. I used to be a spoken word artist. I also used to be very shy! I still am a bit shy now, but writing and performing really helped me come out of my shell. I think it's really important to allow people to express themselves through creativity and that's one of the reasons I wanted to become a volunteer.

I started volunteering in 2022. I saw firsthand how amazing the programme was. It's really inclusive and a lot of the projects that run are tailored towards people from different ethnicities, backgrounds and experiences. I think the fact that the programme is in the cafe as well really helps because that makes it feel quite cosy and homely. It's a really nice space to be in, it's light and open and you can access the garden as well. It's kind of like a community centre here. There are lots of different organisations and charities and people feel welcome, they can hang out and be themselves in a safe way which is lovely.

There's something quite liberating about having a creative practice. It allows us to have that sense of playfulness that we all have as children and then maybe we lose that a bit as we get older. Here, all abilities are encouraged to express themselves. Sometimes we may find it difficult to talk about certain things but expressing creatively is a way to process and get things off your chest, and to express joyful things too. The members really enjoy what they do, and everyone is always really encouraging of each other.

As a volunteer I'd help introduce new members to the others. Sometimes people can be a bit nervous and so I would sit with them and comfort them, make them feel at ease. There was one man who was often quite self-critical of his work, so I would try and encourage him and make him see his work in a different light. I'd also help get the materials people needed to do their painting, or I'd get teas and coffees, and if anyone needed extra support walking to different spaces, I'd assist them.



There's a nice social aspect to volunteering. I saw the benefits the programme had not only for the members, but for me personally as well. After the pandemic I was keen to get back out into the world, meet new people and develop my confidence. Talking to people from lots of different backgrounds and age groups was nice, it really helped me. Although you're there to help other people and give your time to a good cause, you end up making really good friends. I've made some older friends and friends with different

lived experiences which I think is really important for broadening your perspective of different ways of living. The more that we communicate with each other, the more we can bridge gaps between people and hopefully start to understand each other better.

Sometimes, if you are socialising with the same sorts of people, without realising it you see things from just one perspective. For example, when you have a friend living with a disability then you start to realise some spaces aren't accessible. I definitely think a lot more about things like that now, whereas before, it sounds terrible, but I might not have thought that. It's something you take for granted until you're socialising with people that have that lived experience. Or to give another example, living as a white person, I don't face discrimination that someone of a different ethnic background might face. So, it's really important to look outside of your own experience in society and try and make spaces more accessible and safer for everyone.

Before I became a volunteer, I was freelancing as a copywriter and then after that I was working for a PR agency. But it wasn't something I was passionate about. I was really hoping to work in the arts and so I started volunteering so I could get a bit more experience. Then when I was looking for jobs, I saw a role advertised here. I just applied for it. I didn't expect to get it, I just thought I might as well give it a go. Then I got the interview and got the job.

I really love working here, and I'm not just saying that! I think working here has really improved my mental health. As part of my job, I have to be in every day and people pop in the office all the time. I'm always bumping into people that I know from the different programmes. One member likes to walk along the corridor rehearsing his lines. He always comes in and says hello. One time he even asked us to zip him up in his costume! I also talk to the other volunteers who still volunteer here.

As a building, it's a really nice place to work and to get to know so many different people. It's just got a community feel. I really love it here.

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5. A Different World

I'm about one of the oldest in the block, I'm 74. I suppose if it was a building that had stimulation going on in it to motivate people, people would become more friendly towards each other and interact with each other, but nobody interacts with each other. They don't go anywhere, they don't do anything and there's no centre for them to go to, except for one, and that's not exactly free and if they're doing any kind of leisure thing or anything it's a lot of money. There is nothing really to motivate a person who wants to leave home in the morning, something to go and do for the day, that's lacking greatly, it's just lacking.

I moved here 2018 and my first instinct was to look for a community centre, somewhere to interact with people during the daytime. So, I decided to go on the website to search for community interaction social clubs and on the website, there was one which takes place on Thursdays between eleven and four, that's the only social gathering you can go to for the whole week, there is nothing here in my borough.

If you want to interact with other people and you come into another borough you don't qualify. One example is they have courses in the adult institution in this borough. The staff went through all the details with me to apply on the computer, I felt very happy about it, and after she had done all the assessments on the computer, she came back to me and said to me, I'm sorry, you cannot because you don't live in this borough. My other question is surely if

they're working in partnership, these boroughs should really know what is lacking in each borough for ethnic minority people. I think it's all to do with funding and kind of control, it's all to do with the money, because if organisations had the money, I don't think that would be happening. It's money.

“The staff is amazing here, the staff are really caring, you could talk to them if you've got a problem, they would literally spend their time and listen to you.”

I'm quite surprised at myself that I literally made the effort to search for places to go. I didn't just stay at home and say oh, there's nowhere to go, you know. I don't know how I did it, but I just kept searching and I said I'm not staying at home because what am I staying at home and doing? Watch the television? And I thought psychologically it's not a good thing.

I've been coming here for a while now. It took me a while to build up the courage to come out because of the pandemic thing, psychologically it did have an effect. I was the kind of person who did isolate myself, too frightened to come out, and when I came to Meet Me at the Albany it literally got me out of this insecurity feeling. I became familiar with people,

I didn't feel oh, I'm black, I'm different. That's just not in here, people treat each other as human beings, right? People do not kind of have this clique thing or I'm sticking here with this or I'm going with that person over there. People do not do that, they make you feel welcome.

You can come here, and you can sit anywhere, no one says to you that's that person's seat, that's this person's seat. There's no antisocial behaviour attitude in this place and the staff would not allow that anyway. They would not tolerate that at all because we're all human beings and we all leave our homes to come out and interact with each other. We all come from different lifestyles, different backgrounds and nobody knows what life experience people have had. Some people have had depression, some people have had bereavement, some people have been going through, you know, I say hell is on earth as well as hell is wherever it is, there's two hells. No seriously, there is two hells, because if you tell me what turmoil's going on on this earth, this is a living hell. A lot of people, including myself, we've had those experiences and when we leave our homes and come out, we shouldn't come out expecting people to be antisocial.

The staff is amazing here, the staff are really caring, you could talk to them if you've got a problem, they would literally spend their time and listen to you. I've noticed that no one is favoured, no one is ignored, you don't feel tension or temperament kind of feeling and the atmosphere is relaxed. That is what people need, that's what

motivates people. When I wake up on a Tuesday morning my first thought is on Meet Me at the Albany and it's a motivation knowing that it's something to look forward to. I've visited other centres, and I literally feel at home here. I had an issue where I didn't really trust anyone and therefore, I would shut myself off and not talk to anyone, but that's gone now.

Life is a journey and life has its ups and downs. Life has people who disappoint you and the ones you don't expect to disappoint you, they're the ones that disappoint you. Then eventually it builds up into mistrust in people. So I was a person who isolated myself, I wouldn't talk to anyone and gradually that faded off, and I got to become more open verbally and I got used to the people in here. If I'd stayed home, I wouldn't have been experiencing what I'm experiencing in the Albany. When I came here I started doing the art. And it's sad that there is things that lie dormant in me and it was like when I came back here it's like, it's awoken.





Image by Bodobe from Pixabay

A few months ago, I got so comfortable indoors that I stayed indoors for a whole week and then I literally lost track of time. So, Tuesdays I look forwards to coming out and interacting with people. Never mind it's a journey, at least the bus route is not difficult. It's just all down to me motivating myself. I can talk to the staff, and at the end of the day when I go home it's like doing a job and you're just going home from work. You've valued your time, you've valued yourself, you feel life is worth living because you've done something for the day, then not only that, but you also know what you're going to be doing tomorrow. It's all to do with the staff, the relationship, the communication, it's to do with the atmosphere.

I mostly like doing the art side, I like the dance group, anything that's to do with movement, anything that's motivating or keeping your mind active because a lot of the things we do here is keeping your mind active. It's just when you're doing the things, you're doing it in a relaxed kind of way, somehow, it's like everybody is doing the same thing and everybody is connected, and you can see everybody is enjoying what they're doing.

To tell you the truth, last week I was in a lot of pain, and I noticed that one of the movements really eased my pain. I stood there and I thought what I just did, I was left feeling relaxed in my leg. So, I thought well, this dance, these groups, they're literally therapy groups. I learned that the movements literally do have an effect on your body. So, what they do here in the

Albany it may look like just simple leisure and activities but if you look at everything that's being done in here, it's all to do with your health.

It's amazing because the lady who leads the singing, the teacher, I used to go to her classes years ago in the nineties. I didn't know she was here. When I came here I thought, oh, I know her, and then she got to realise she knew who I was. When I joined the singing group I thoroughly started to enjoy it, and everybody enjoys it. I find the singing group, even if you can't sing, it makes you feel that you can sing even if you can't, and that's therapy as well as for your lungs. I realised it's to do with your emotions as well, it's to do with your feelings. It's not just about the singing it's about the health effect on your body.

When I come here, I don't know, it's just a different total world. Coming to Meet Me at the Albany has been a blessing for me, it's made me feel that I can do things, I could explore my mind and continue to do things at home. It makes me feel like my day has been fruitful and when I go home, I don't have this thought of reflecting back on the past negative experiences. I feel like what we do here, it gives me a happy feeling. It's the only kind of social gathering I really attend that makes me feel I've used up my day, and when I get home, I sit down, and I reflect back to my time in the Albany, and it makes me feel good inside. To tell you the truth there is nothing more than could be done here because the staff, they've done their best.

6. A Welcoming Space

I've worked on the programme for three years in the producer role. I'm employed by one organisation, but I get to work closely with the arts team of another. It's an interesting role because you see both sides, the behind the scenes of the fundraising process, and then the on-the-ground work. The programme should be owned and led by the members, which it is, but they still see me as someone they can go to and ask questions. So, we have regular big meetings which are kind of like eight to twelve weeks, where we come together to share what's coming up in the programme and to see how people feel about that. They're not scared to say if something's good or bad, which is a good way for us to learn how to evolve the programme each time.

It's really interesting when asking the members: what do you want to do? There's a strong group of people who love the dance and the movement sessions. We try and explore it in more of a creative way than what dance and movement might be, by getting in different groups to lead those sessions. It's very positive physically and mentally for the members. It uses their brain in a different way. Those living with dementia that joined us really connect with those sessions.

In terms of other activities, it's often based on an art form, like lino printing for example. What often isn't suggested by the members is a broader theme, which is where production comes in. We've explored what climate change means to people, and how older people can

be listened to more, and have their challenges heard. We've also done storytelling and poetry writing sessions.

It's great to see the members learning a new skill or getting active. Some people are a bit achy after all that movement, but there's physical and mental health benefits. That's what's maybe a bit different about the project. It's not the same each week, which sometimes is confusing, but largely this is a safe space to try different things. Variety is important because it helps undo the stereotype of older people being resistant to change. There is something about challenging people, like very recently with the lino printing - people are surprised that they've done it. It gives such a sense of achievement. They've created something new, and they've never done this before.

“Variety is important because it helps undo the stereotype of older people being resistant to change.”

There's also this idea that older people are always looking back to the past, which is the case sometimes, but there's a real curiosity in the members. If we've got new volunteers they ask, oh where are you from? What have you done? What do you do outside of this? And that confidence and curiosity comes from feeling safe.

We try to create a balance by bringing in artists that are reflective of our broader membership. That means taking into account the skill of working with older people. We want to support artists who haven't done that before, but also find artists that have. There's also the balance around ethnicity. With the dance sessions, one of our long-term partners has a real focus on West African drumming and dance movement, and that attracted new members to the group from those backgrounds. Then we have our choir facilitator, who brings people's cultural backgrounds into the sessions, which I think's really key for people to feel heard and listened to.

We recently worked with two poets specifically with Caribbean members on a poetry project. Things had come up about having space to talk about Windrush experiences and experiences of journeys and migration from members. Members were writing their own poetry, and now they've got an anthology based on those experiences. We had a sharing of the poetry, where all the members got to hear what had come out of it, and that sparked conversations from people who haven't had that experience. It's like a crossover of learning. Poetry slowed things down and gave space to listen and reflect.

Right: Image by [terimakasih0](#) from [pixabay](#)



We try and encourage people to crossover and interact. People have their friends which generally will be someone of a similar background or ethnicity. But the beauty of being in this kind of public space, the beauty of having different activities, means that people are like, oh, actually, I'll sing, and then it's not necessarily about what type of song, it's about singing together. And the same with dance.

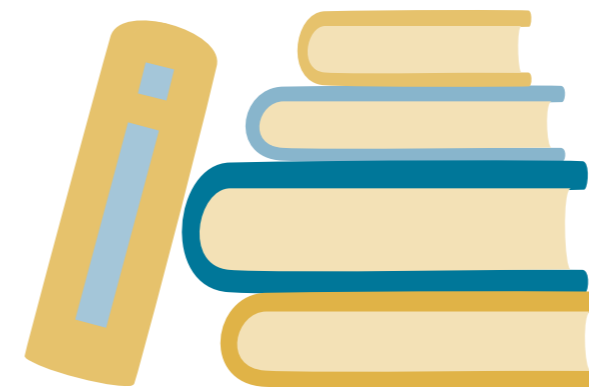
As part of our volunteer training, we remind them that it's like a shared space. If people come over and are curious, chat to them about what we're doing, encourage them to get a seat, you know, trying to be as open as possible for people to come and sit with us and experience it. We get social prescribing referrals and through other networks throughout the borough and also family, friends come through, members bring their neighbours, especially if they're kind of in supported living spaces, and then people do walk in off the street.

One difficulty is that, over the past three years, funding has fluctuated a lot. That's meant that the security, breadth and ambition of the programme has ebbed and flowed. The exciting ideas and the innovation can't really happen when you're just trying to run the programme on a weekly basis. You start to question: am I not doing this as effectively? It's quite frustrating when you're trying to like really push it. You want to be ambitious and then you just can't really forward plan.

I've learned so much about care in the arts and what makes for a really good engagement project. I also feel more confident to question when people present us with opportunities. What are the members getting involved with? What are they getting out of it? How is this going to work? It's not gatekeeping, but an element of protecting the members and the space that we've created for them. My role is like a facilitator, but it's also about recognising that I'm not the expert with the lived experience. But then, sometimes it's hard to recognise the expertise that you have developed, because you're in it. That's what I'm thinking a lot about at the moment. What is it that I do? Because it's sometimes hard to explain.

“We get social prescribing referrals and through other networks throughout the borough and also family, friends come through, members bring their neighbours, especially if they're kind of in supported living spaces, and then people do walk in off the street.”

I've recently realised how important it is because of family, and older people in the family who are isolated. It does get quite personal. I lost grandparents when they were young, like sixty or seventy. They were very active and quite out there. People can benefit so much from community arts engagement. It just makes you feel better. People feel camaraderie, they feel part of a group. They have friends. The importance of friendships as you get older is so incredibly valuable. And so is an open mind - to push yourself out of a comfort zone. Because even to step into a place is incredibly hard.



“People can benefit so much from community arts engagement. It just makes you feel better.”

A friendly, welcoming space transforms people's world. We've heard that through one of the members who passed away recently. Her son came in to tell me because we hadn't been able to get through to her. She hadn't been coming for about a year as she'd not been well. He came to tell us and he said how valuable it was. She loved coming in. She loved socialising with everyone. She felt part of it. And it kept her healthy. The project literally means that people are more active for longer, and I think that's amazing.

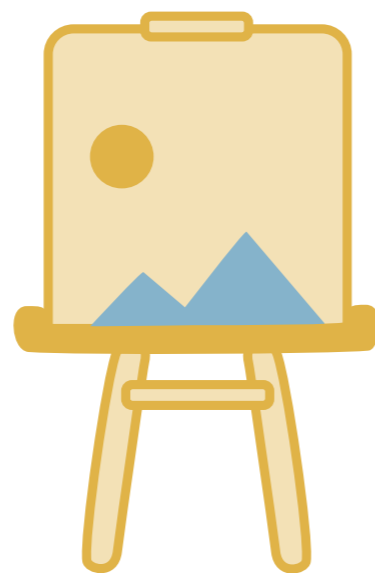
7. Keep Moving

When I worked, I used to get off the bus and walk through the market, you know? I used to be more stronger then. I always see people standing outside the building. Because I would get off at the front on the bus and I walked down and then looked and I always see people standing outside at the building. There is a lady I know, and I said to her, 'what's going on?' She told me that they have a club and if you join it, they take you out. I think in those days they used to take you out to the seaside and all that. I said 'oh, that's a good idea, when I've stopped work, I will try it.' And that's what I did. I put my name down but because it was the COVID I couldn't start it, you know? So I started to come here and think when someone phoned me and told me there is a vacancy and I could come and I said that's all right. Just about then I actually retired, so I have more time on my hands, so I started to come. I started to get my pension at sixty-two, but I worked part time up to sixty-five. After you're a certain age, they don't tell you 'Go,' but I could see they were pushing me around, you know? And then when I was about sixty-five, they said, 'That is it.'

When I first came, I did feel a bit like, I don't know, I'm going back to nursery school now! I never used to do arts and crafts. But I think it's great now, I look forward to coming out. It's only if I'm not feeling well on a Tuesday that I wouldn't come. Anything they ask me to do, and I can manage it, I will try and do it. I do the painting, the exercise, and the dancing. Over the years I've done different painting and things, yeah. I don't do the choir, you

know? Because I go to church every Sunday and I'm saving my energy! And sometimes you just want to sit down and keep quiet.

I only come on Tuesday here, but I go to one in another town, a West Indies one they do, that is on a Friday from twelve to four. You do the same thing again. They start off the day, play music and you do an exercise activity, they do craft, they do lots of little things. They don't say you have to; they ask if you want to join in and you join in. They don't want to force anyone.



They start off with exercise for half an hour after that, we do dancing, they play music and you're dancing and they tell you move there, turn there. If you can't stand up too long you can sit down so you're still moving about. You're moving about and that's what we need. When you sit down it's like you seize up, don't you? Your body seize up.

“I never used to do arts and crafts. But I think it's great now, I look forward to coming out.”

Meet Me is a good activity. You come out and meet other people, you just talk general everyday things, and that's good, you know? You're meeting people instead of just sitting at home. For some people life is maybe just sitting there watching the TV and that is it.

I feel happy to go out. There's lots of places I've been since I've been coming here. We go to the museum we go to other towns, and we do dancing and whatever is there, we even go up to the museum in the city, we go and do baking and things like that.

I say hello to everyone, like if you come in and people are already here you say 'morning, hello' and things like that. A couple of the ladies, we talk. It's all different and personal. Some people, you'll go to them, and you say 'hello' and they say 'hello' and some people just start talking, some don't, you know? It's just up to people. Some places, they don't even want to talk to you, but here I don't find them that bad.

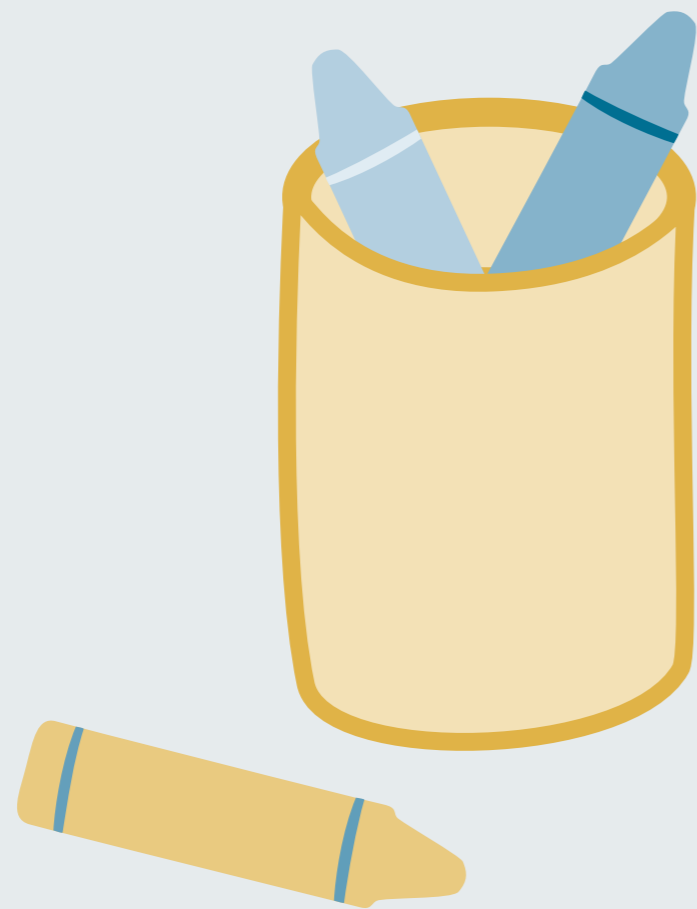
I go to the meetings to discuss the programme. We all say something, you know, whether they're going to carry it out or not, but it's all right, yeah. The volunteers are all right, you know, they help us as well. If we're doing exercise they come around and join in.

It makes me feel happy in my own way, you know. I come out and sometimes when I've finished and I'm walking up the high street if I see someone I know and I try to tell them and they say 'oh,' like they don't think they could be bothered with coming. I tell a couple of people and they come and then they won't come back again, I don't know why. I'm not going to force it if they don't want to. I have a cousin who used to come here but then she have a knee operation and since that she took sick and so she hasn't come back since last year.

“You're meeting people instead of just sitting at home.”

I find with the African-Caribbean background, we come out more, but the Asian, they don't because there is an Asian lady on my street and I tell her about it and she is going 'oh, you know? She always pretend over the years like she don't understand English but she do understand because I told her, because when she see me going and coming and I tell her, I say 'you can just come and put your name down,' and she never do. Her daughter said, mum, you don't understand English, and I said well if she come out there she will learn, you know? I am sure there is something just as well, maybe they run their own groups somewhere.

My daughters and son look forward for me to coming here. My son, if I said 'oh, I'm not going today' he'll say, 'go on!'. They have friends whose mum or their dad, they are bit more slow. My son said, 'I'm glad you can still get around,' so I think they like me going out like this. To get out and mix.



8. Inner Happiness

I'm a mother of six. I've got six children, and they are all graduates. My baby, my last born, is a medical doctor. Then I've got ten grandchildren and one great-grandchild. So you can see part of my happiness, where it comes from. My great-granddaughter will be four in July. She does acrobatics, she likes singing, she likes dancing, she's very clever, she does good acts at home. I'm very, very, very proud of her.

I'm really pleased, I can't thank God enough. The only bad thing is I lost my sweet loving husband to the COVID. He's a good singer, we dance together, we sing together. But life just has to go on. I was attending a group in (town) with my late husband, rest in peace. From there I met people from the Albany, and it was them who invited me down here.

I'm always confident and happy. I'm very positive, so wherever I go I like to make an impact. I like people, I like socialising, I like making people feel valued, and I like being friendly. So my positivity carries me afar. Because it's in you - you have that confidence, you are proud of yourself, you are proud of what you do, you are happy within. That happiness, you bring it out, you impact it on people. I don't even know I'm doing it, you know? From the inner heart, happiness within you and happiness within your environment. People say I'm always smiling. I am always smiling!

I like volunteering. I like helping people in any way possible. Listening, pointing them in the right direction, make people feel wanted, make

people feel valued. For example, I am a member of a pensioner's forum. I'm a committee member. I'm on the steering group for a council forum on positive ageing. It's meant for the elderly, over fifty. We hold meetings quarterly. We invite elderly people, try to point them in the right direction. They can make an appointment to look at their gas bill, their electric bill, their water rates, to see if it's too high. They can get electric bulbs that save energy, a shower head to save energy, they give it all for free.

“I made new friends at the Albany. I met new people. The staff here are very good. So, you meet these nice co-ordinators, you meet nice people, you make new friends, and you learn new ideas.”

I'm a member of several cultural clubs. One is for vulnerable women, on the first Sunday of every other month. We go there, we eat, we drink, we dance, we socialise, we do a yearly dues of £60 and that money is kept in the bank or kept in a purse. If a paid-up member is bereaved, we visit the member and take money from the purse to give to the member. It's about getting involved and mixing with people, being a part of your

environment, being a part of your culture. Socialising, meeting your people, knowing your people, enjoying the good things and the bad things with them. If somebody is bereaved, if she wants, we go there and stay with her, take turns to spend the night with her until she feels strong enough. So that tells you how good the group is.

I'm active, I'm pretty, I'm brilliant! I love my dancing and singing. It makes me feel happy, portrays the happiness, it makes me feel good and it brings beautiful memories. I love travelling. It's important because it keeps me going, it keeps me happy, it keeps me mobile. 'One Day at a Time' is one of my best songs: 'One day at a time, sweet Jesus, that's all I'm asking from you. Give me the will to do everything that I have to do. Yesterday is gone, sweet Jesus, and tomorrow will never be mine, so let me today, teach me to take one day at a time.' Be hopeful and be trusting that whatever circumstances you are in now, it is not permanent, you will be given better. When you fall, like Obama says, when you fall, you get up, you clean up and you move on.

I made new friends at the Albany. I met new people. The staff here are very good. So, you meet these nice co-ordinators, you meet nice people, you make new friends, and you learn new ideas. Like one of our

senior ladies here talks about, where your hair is falling out, where we are ageing and the hair doesn't grow proper, she will talk about using plants like aloe. You take out the gel and rub it on that part of the head that is itching. Things like that, you learn from people.

My family are happy for me. My children know I like socialising. I look forward to going out every Tuesday, and they're happy I'm going out. I tell friends to come here, that we dance, we do choir, we do knitting, we do drawing, we meet good people, we while away the time. They are interested, but there is a waiting list at the Albany.



Doing this kind of thing is important because it eradicates loneliness. Because you go out and you meet people. You socialise, you get involved, and by the time you get home you are tired, you are exhausted, and you've had a good day. The days just feel like that. It's better than sitting all day watching television, doing that and getting bored.

Some people feel reluctant to mix. The lack of self-confidence. To encourage people to get more involved or to come out of their shell, you need to help them feel free, to make them feel like nobody is judging them. We are there to help and learn from each other and value each other. What I've learnt so far too is that to make people feel valued goes a long way. When somebody comes in, you say 'oh, hello, hi, how are you?' I always say, 'nice to see you, to see you nice!' People feel welcome, feel valued, you see. That type of welcome makes them feel at home and some of them who are shy, they feel not entirely comfortable, but they feel comfortable, they feel welcome. It goes a very, very long way. It's a matter of encouragement at the end of the day.

“Doing this kind of thing is important because it eradicates loneliness.”

It's very, very important to be multicultural. Very, very important. I mentioned just now about the lady who told me about using plants. We also discuss different food, different traditions, different cultures. It's a matter of keeping going and trying to bring in new activities or new ideas as you go along. We learn every day and they learn every day. Just to try to bring in something new and exciting once in a while. It's important to have the variety. Variety makes you feel activated, variety makes you look forward to having different types of fun, variety makes you feel happy to attend or to get involved. It's a part of life, it's challenging, but it keeps you going I think, it keeps you going.

9. Hear The Way I'm Speaking Now!

When I first came to this country I was crying. I was crying to go back home. I was invited by a friend to London, and that friend had a sister living with her, and we all lived in one room. I had to sleep at the foot of the bed and do all the chores. I was treated badly, and I broke down in tears and wanted to go back home.

I went to church, and we usually have a coffee morning, but apparently I always like to keep my home tidy, so I was trying to do all sorts of things and I didn't have any drink or no breakfast. By the time I got to church I fainted and bashed my head on a pole. I landed on my shoulder, it's aching, and my priest came over and I was screaming my head off because of the pain. I ended up in hospital for about four days!

Since I was living on my own, the nurse and the doctors asked how would I manage afterwards. Living alone it's not all that nice, because I am a person who used to travel a lot and do things as I worked in an office in the city. The doctors decided that after I left the hospital that I would need some companionship, or somebody to help me along. They referenced a number of different organisations, and I chose Meet Me at the Albany.

I'd never heard of the Albany before, but I was so happy when I came here. Everyone was so friendly, and they make you feel at home, which was beautiful, because I was very depressed and I didn't know what to expect. I was so happy people speak the same language, and you learn

from different accents and from different people. There is prejudice everywhere in the world, regardless of whether you're black or white or whatever, but I didn't find that here. We're like one body together.

I really enjoyed the poetry classes. You're on your own writing, and then you're listening to research and to other people's poems. I become like a fluent speaker since I've been coming here. I'm so grateful, because I didn't want to speak or anything like that before, and now,



coming here really help. My mouth is going! My granddaughter, she's a doctor and she said, 'Nan! by gosh, hear the way you're speaking now!' Even my daughter said what a change in me.

The volunteers and the staff and everybody are so nice and make you feel at home. It's a beautiful place to come because it's just togetherness. And anyone, if you're lonely, this is the place to come meet people - very, very nice people. You feel like you're a member of the congregation, if you get what I mean? There's no being scared to say something, you can speak freely and ask questions if you don't understand. You can feel that love inside you. My spirit just went out.

“The volunteers and the staff and everybody are so nice and make you feel at home. It's a beautiful place to come because it's just togetherness. And anyone, if you're lonely, this is the place to come meet people...”



Image by ssssanjeevi10 from pixabay

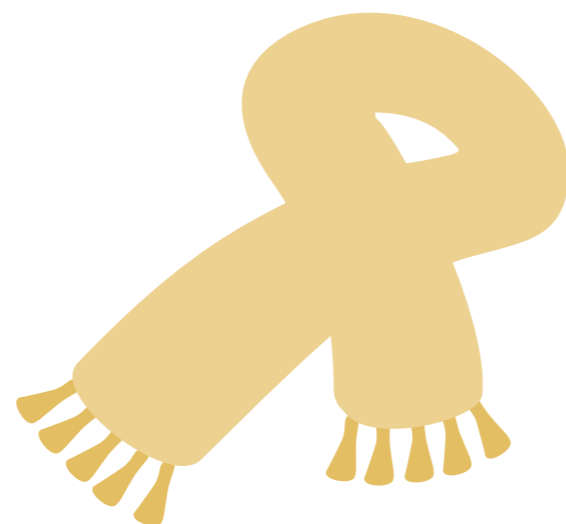
Before I went, I worried that I was going to be like an outsider or something, just sitting in a little corner. But not at all, not at all! I surprised myself. It's so lovely. A lot of people are on their own and they're far younger than I am and with their Zimmer. I'm 91 years old and they were saying about dementia and all this sort of thing, do you hear anything about dementia? Because I like to go to meet people and have conversations. It's quite interesting meeting people from different backgrounds and things like that. It's a pleasure and you're never too old to learn when you meet people with history, people who have been abroad and have gained experiences. You can bring it back and speak to people who have no idea, and you learn quite a lot.

“ I also did a lot of knitting, crocheting - I can do all sorts. And I made a lot of hats and scarves and so on. ”

I never know how to draw, never in my life. But they have some pictures that I've drawn. I can't believe it's me who did that drawing. I also did a lot of knitting, crocheting - I can do all sorts. And I made a lot of hats and scarves and so on. There are so many things to do, that if I don't feel like doing drawing, I'll do something else. I don't think anything can be improved about the programme. Somebody is always willing to help you. Everything you want is here.

Anything and everything. You're bored of one (activity) you go on off to the next, you know what I am trying to express?

I look forward to coming here because you learn so much from the people, it's such a lovely feeling. It's good to be able to express myself in such a fashion now compared to before. I used to sit there and think I can't do this, and I don't want to do that - but now I can't stop! Everything works out in the end, because of where I am today.





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