

## Story telling at AOFS

ANNE PIRIE AND LIZ FIRTH

It has always been important to AOFS to understand what changes happen in people who participate in the arts at the Old Fire Station. What impact does being part of AOFS – as a volunteer, artist, trainee, staff member, trustee, audience member, partner or friend, and doing anything from putting on a show to sorting out the accounts – have on the people who do it? How does it affect their life? Why is this important to them?

In 2016, we worked with staff to think about ways of developing an understanding of impact that went beyond quantitative outcomes monitoring, and that would allow

- AOFS participants to have a say in defining what impacts they felt
- A better understanding of the very personalised, diverse outcomes that participants experience
- A holistic approach to understanding impact and how it is achieved

We suggested that AOFS use an adapted version of the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique – often called ‘monitoring-without-indicators’. MSC is used often in international development circles, and in community development work that starts from people’s strengths rather than their needs. It involves the collection of stories of significant change from participants, and the participatory interpretation of these stories. Unlike conventional approaches to monitoring, MSC does not decide in advance what a ‘good result’ looks like – the story tellers decide on what is the most significant impact for them.

MSC is good for measuring change that is intangible or fuzzy – unexpected, emergent, personalised or diverse – and understanding *how* change happens. It is focused on the richness of lived experience. This seemed perfect for AOFS.

So in autumn 2017, AOFS recruited a team of Story Collectors – AJ, Beth Crosland, Jonny Peacock, Simon Garood, and Steve Hay, together with Rachel Harrison, who organised the AOFS end of the project. And on 23 November, we held a training day to work together as a team to develop our story collecting methodology. We focused on ways of supporting the development of a conversation between story teller and story collector, rather than a more formal interview.

By the end of November, stories were being collected from artists, members, staff and volunteers. 15 amazing stories were collected, and Katherine Tomlinson transcribed the tapes of these conversations. We then took these and edited them down into manageable stories. The guiding principles were to

- Create a 1-2 page story, that is vivid and captures the reader’s attention
- Faithfully reflect the teller’s insights into impact and its significance for them
- Accurately keep the teller’s ‘voice’ in the story – telling it in their own words.

## Significant Change Stories

A home in Oxford	3
Good experiences	5
My work has captured someone's attention!	7
A shot of adrenaline	8
Drawing out potential	10
Community is everything	12
Witnessing transformation	14
A place of growth	16
On stage I feel free	18
You're looking at me – what my talents are	19
Everybody's learning something	21
Trying on new labels	23
Coming out of my shell	25
Being a person	27
A big smile never hurt anybody	29

## A HOME IN OXFORD

When I first came here to Crisis, I didn't really feel I needed the various services for people who are homeless, or practical, pragmatic things like language, or basic skills, or renting a place. But Liam told us that in the same building here there is an arts centre – and as a Crisis member, you can get free tickets to the shows. I thought that was absolutely astounding so I became a member. I can tell you when I first came here and I understood what takes place here I decided there and then, precisely on that day - I want to be involved in this somehow. I just thought, this is for me - this is one thing in Oxford that is absolutely designed for me! And, despite whatever difficulties I've had in my life, this is an incredible opportunity and so I'm going to be involved. Basically I thought — I am going to be involved, I mean if needs be, I will clean the toilet or do anything - and then it turned out to be much more meaningful and rewarding after that.

Throughout my life, arts have been something that isn't only enjoyment or fun, but also it's been a way to understand myself and also understand other people and the world. Here, I like the way how, because the shows are a small stage and they are all independent companies who have limited resources in terms of money and man power, but they have unlimited creative and imaginative skills. The shows are really — I find them meaningful and also really quite striking and inspiring.

And when I go to theatre or when I see an exhibition, I feel that I have connection to those people who are there. It's more than just the piece of art. And I can also see it in the audience here - they chat to each other and, just try conversation just like that. I did have many years when I didn't have that in my life, and when I started doing it again I felt like - this is what I enjoy in my life. I'm sure that many of the people who come here who are going through difficult times. To them it's not just a 'nice to have' - it's something quite essential, like it is to me.

When I first went to drama group, I went simply because a friend of mine wanted to go. I always thought that I would be quite shy and I certainly wouldn't want to be the centre of attention in any way at all. And, it turned out, I absolutely loved it. It was all improvisation and I realised that, when it comes to improvisation, I don't have any anxiety or inhibitions. I could just jump up and do it there and then.

The team that works here, they are very ambitious, and they put the work into reaching those ambitions — when they get an idea they also decide to make it actually happen. I learnt about the Hidden Spire project, and I was involved in the later stages of the play writing, I thought that was really an incredible project. Just the scale and scope of it was just something that I found mind-blowing. I started full time work in April so I couldn't take part any more, but I went to see the show and I was — moved, I was — I was surprised. I don't think I should have been, but I was still surprised by the stage and the number of people there and how it all turned out to be much bigger than I had expected. And I was really moved by the show itself, and by what everybody involved had achieved - it was absolutely wonderful.

This place - many people would say that, well it's not necessary. It's over and above what people need to live - to have a roof above their head and, have a job or, have, enough money to buy food or, overcome their addictions, or whatever. It is something extra. The bushmen in Kalahari have this saying that there is a little thirst and there is big thirst, the little thirst is for water and sustenance and the big thirst is for meaning, and — I think it's very exceptional for people who are facing lots of difficulties that are pragmatic and obviously also emotional and psychological.

I've moved quite a lot in my life and so many times I've needed to create a new social circle from scratch. So I've always had this kind of thing that, ok I need to meet some people I know I have at least one thing in common with. It's turned out to be that this one thing that I have in common with these people that I've met through — really through this place — is love of arts. — And through this, I have made friends. When you go to, for example, the running club you tend to talk about either your personal best, or your injuries! I have found that with people that I've met through here, we talk about everything quite openly which, I think is quite unusual. We end up talking about quite a variety of things - often things that involve emotions or politics or maybe just aesthetics. We are much more open about how we are feeling. We talk about everything, it's very straight forward and people are quite ok to talk about things that are not particularly happy and I think that's quite important.

One of the people who was part of the writing group runs a writing group independently, so now I meet her and the other people in that group every Sunday. And I started going to the over-forties acting group at Playhouse. That is definitely something that I would have never thought of doing. But because I loved the drama group, which I couldn't take part in anymore, I decided ok, I'll carry on doing this, so it's turned into a new hobby.

In the spring, I applied for a job here, and I didn't get it. Now in fact I'm quite pleased I didn't because, I don't actually have the experience for that job. But I had a really good interview and then soon after Jeremy Spafford mentioned to me that he would be interested in getting me on the board of the Old Fire Station because of my professional and personal experience. I decided yes, so now I'm on the board. So I've been involved quite intensely since I first started coming here just under a year ago.

What I really want to do is encourage more people to get involved - more people who, somehow, have difficult backgrounds. And I've seen that one of the hurdles for many people seems to be — it's to do with class. It's not to do with their background in terms of homelessness or living in difficult situations. They have this sort of invisible, but very real, boundary that they feel that it's not for me. I have never felt that I'm treated here in any way as somebody who has problems, or is somehow vulnerable, which is kind of label that I really dislike. It felt inclusive - I couldn't make any distinction between the people who worked for Crisis and who worked for the Arts centre and I didn't feel that I was treated as a service user- I was just somebody who popped in to see a show, have a coffee or come to a meeting or a class.

And they are always genuinely interested in how I'm doing, what's happening in my life, and they are always excited about what's happening next for me - and it's very encouraging, it feels like there's genuine, genuine interest and they are happy for me when things are going well.

To me it feels like it's given me a different kind of place in Oxford - I feel at home in Oxford now. It gives me a sort of point of contact, and something that I find really meaningful. It gives meaning to me being in Oxford because otherwise I could be anywhere in the world.

I can say completely frankly that I am proud to be part of this organisation.

## GOOD EXPERIENCES

I'm a Progression Coach, and I've worked for Crisis for five years. So my role is to be a Coach rather than an expert. We are trying to allow people to take steps themselves so using coaching skills, using different styles of working with people to try and help them decide on change and help them do things themselves. That's the kind of the ideal - with our client group we do have a lot of people who come to us in crisis situations where actually they do need maybe for you to advocate for them, or give them guidance. We're generally looking for solutions - we don't do counselling, we are generally looking forward trying to find a plan rather than spending lots of time talking over things that have already happen - it is kind of more future focused than that.

So obviously, I've shared the building with the Arts for nearly five years, which in itself is just such a nice way to have a building set up. In terms of my role and how that's interacted with the Arts, there's been lots of interactions with people like Becca, and more recently Rachel over engaging members that I work with into the training scheme or into ushering or arts projects.

Actually some of that has had a really big impact on me, and gives me a lot of good feeling for my role. Seeing some of the people that I've worked with and supported onto the training scheme and what that's then done for them. It's definitely been something that has had an emotional resonance with me - seeing the confidence that it's brought to a lot of people that I've worked with, and just the real change for them, you know when you go home from work and feel really positive.

And I was quite heavily involved in the Hidden Spire project 2 years ago, *Before the Tempest*. I acted as a key person for the Crisis Progression Team in the production, which basically was in terms of supporting the members who were taking part, and also supporting the professionals to work with the members. I was there quite early on in the process so I was involved in a lot of different bits of it, which was really good. And particularly once it became a company and the weeks preceding the production - being around every day and part of that was something that personally was very satisfying because I've always had a toe in to the arts in the past and it's something I really enjoy.

My role was quite different to my normal role – normally I focus on finding solutions to members' situations, but in Hidden Spire I was actually supporting them to engage with creative process. I also really enjoyed working with the professionals, discussing how they were working with the members, things they were finding difficult things they weren't sure about: whether this is ok? or should I, you know? I think for me, it was just nice to feel part of that arts company. It felt good for to be involved a bit with some of the members in a different way and be part of a team that had members on it.

I think, in any sort of social care or client support work you have to be very aware of professional boundaries and that's very important - and it's not that those weren't there, but equally there was something very nice about being individually alongside members from Crisis, all of us part of a bigger thing. That's something that's empowering for members but also it's quite a positive thing for me as a staff member to get to do that, and engage with people on a slightly different level than you would in your normal day to day work.

And likewise being involved with the Arts team, the professionals, and being part of a team that isn't my normal team that was a really nice experience for me. We all had different roles but actually it felt like I had quite a specific role which felt useful. Going to see the show, and going to see the members and the people I'd worked with in it, it felt like actually yeah, you have been a part of this process - and that was really satisfying. There's something very special about those sorts of short

term teams that exist for a project - you can get quite a lot out of it because you learn different things from the people you're working with – it is quite an intense process.

I think another thing that comes out of doing things like Hidden Spire, which sounds slightly trivial in comparison, but actually is really important, is the opportunity to genuinely get to know colleagues from the Arts. Everybody's very busy in the building, and it is quite easy to get to a point where there are a lot of people who you sort of say hello to. But to really see people working, and get them to see you working, and just to chat, and be involved in a project with them - I think that's really, really nice because it helps with the relationship between the two organisations. And also on a personal level for me when I'm at work I often will just focus on what I'm doing – being able to then suddenly kind of, be pulled out of that comfort zone slightly and actually be chucked into another bit of the building with other people and see what they're doing and get involved in it is really good. I think it's good for everybody to be moved about a bit sometimes and, in a different space.

On a personal level [being involved in Hidden Spire] reminded me how much I enjoy that kind of thing and actually it made, it made me want to do more creative projects in my own time. I've done some great stuff before and then, you know, work and life and things happen but it's definitely made me think, no actually that's part of who I am and that's something that I know is good for me and it's something I like doing. It was a reminder for me that often experience is more important than the outcome of that experience. On a personal level, that's something that I've tried really hard to learn, because one of the reasons why I often haven't done things creatively in the past is that thing feeling that, well, the outcome's going to be rubbish and then you don't do it. And actually if you realise that that doesn't matter then you can just have good experiences, and the end result isn't necessarily the be all and end all of it. And sometimes that has good outcomes as well.

It also refreshed some of the ways that I approach things professionally, not least the importance of things that may not seem that important - if that makes sense? You know, working for a homelessness charity, a lot of the time I'm trying to help people with very, very concrete things like, getting their benefits back, or getting into a hostel, or helping them find work – you know, which are very important. However, that doesn't mean that the artistic endeavors they can do in the building are just an add-on to what we do. I think that's the thing that it really refreshed in me, is actually, a lot of the time those can be just as important as the practical side of it. So, actually something being a good experience, that's enough, it doesn't have to be more than that. And actually that can be life changing for somebody - it doesn't have to get them a job or get them a qualification, or get them money - it could just be a really positive experience. Because, at the end of the day, you can have a bit of money, you can have a house, and that doesn't fulfil you as a person. Being able to get fulfilment, get an opportunity to express yourself, to learn things - that is actually just as important for a lot of our members, and it reminds you that, when somebody comes in to do an induction with us, and they've got, sleeping bags and you know they're out on the streets – it's quite tempting sometimes to think, oh well, there's no point in spending lots of time talking about the music classes because, you know.... But actually, that's not true at all - you know the amount of people that I've worked with who have been sleeping out who are now coming to do art, coming to do drama, music or watch shows– you know, that might be the thing that keeps them going through that experience. So when you think of it like that, I think actually that's a really important thing for a homeless charity to do, rather than just deal with the concrete stuff.

## MY WORK HAS CAPTURED SOMEONE'S ATTENTION!

I've been coming here since late 2015, as a member of Crisis. I get to use the Studio and other different workshops - like using the computers and other activities. At the start I was a bit worried about coming here – it took me a while to get used to the place, and then people started knowing me and there was more trust. Like at the beginning I was just not sure what I'm doing here!

With time I've got used to coming to the arts. The art classes— some of them were structured and some of them were drop-in sessions. So after two years, I had an exhibition. The exhibition was called 'Transient City' and it was about Oxford, how we perceive this place as people who live here or visitors from outside.

The idea of having an exhibition was supportive because I've got all these art works and I'm not doing anything with them. I thought, I was doing art for a couple of years, and I was just not getting anything out of it. I thought I was just doing it and then had to keep it myself.

I got some help with setting up the exhibition, we had to find frames and then get them framed - it was a bit difficult for me because at the time I didn't have money to buy frames, and I was a bit like, worried about whether to have the exhibition or not. Crisis was very supportive in buying the frame for me and then paid back afterwards once the painting sold. And Becki helped with the display - putting the art works on the wall, knowing how the hanging system works.

I had about ten artworks on display and I sold three of them. That was really positive. It was exciting when I found out that I had sold a few in the first week — I thought I'd never sell any of these paintings, probably because I had a misconception about my own work - I just don't quite like my own work. I want it to be better- perfect! Then when I found out they had sold, it was just like, yeah, so it's working! So it has captured someone's attention. Not just that it was sold, but that somebody wanted it! It kind of gave me a bit more confidence to do more paintings in the future. I think with the culture where I come from people don't really attach anything to art and paintings. When I had my exhibition and then heard people really like this art and get really attached to them – it was great.

I thought it'd just be great to have another exhibition because it was so positive. I was meant to do another exhibition at the Churchill Hospital last month, but because I didn't have the budget to put the exhibition on, I had to drop the idea, and then maybe do it next year. But, my mental health just doesn't really help – I don't know how I will be, or if I will want to do more paintings then.

I think having an exhibition here is very good also because you kind of use that as a reference to go and have exhibition elsewhere. The only thing is that it is very competitive and if you have want to have an exhibition you have to wait. It can get you very depressed sometimes- as an artist it's just really hard.

I did the training (Arts Training Scheme) – I think it was for three months, I can't remember. I had some very good sort of mentorship, from a few people here — they were showing me how to do the cashing up and how to use the system to do various things, so I think I gone away with a lot of support. It was great to kind of see how everything works. It seems very complicated from the outside, and then when you get on the system it's really simple things. It was useful, I filled my CV in, for a future reference. I think the idea of having this training scheme is good. It was kind of worth it for me because I was here and I was doing the arts and coming here for two hours just to do some admin was very good because I got the training as well as learning the new, latest database.

## A SHOT OF ADRENALINE

I've been working in professional theatre for forty years, mainly as a playwright, before that I did a lot of acting and directing and writing, so theatre was kind of in my veins from the age of about fifteen. I finally turned professional as a writer full time, in nineteen eighty-two. But lately, the past three, four years as austerity, and arts funding cuts and cuts to the BBC and reorganisation at the BBC, have taken their toll, I've found myself basically without work. And when that happens you can't pay the bills and if, as I have, you've got a typing induced bad back, a long-standing back problem, it's difficult to find anything else. Which is how I come to be at the Old Fire Station through Crisis, and just from my point of view is pure chance really that Crisis is so arts orientated. I've been coming nearly a year.

I came in here a very crestfallen and rather miserable old bloke. I came for two of those [Marmalade sessions], and got really involved, and I remember Liam my Progression Coach came up to me and he looked a bit startled, and said, god you look different what's happened? I said, well how do I look —? And he said well you look younger you look —and I said well I feel like I'm getting up in the mornings and I've got a purpose in life, I've got something to do that I'm engaged with, I feel is useful not just to me but to other people. It's great, it gets your adrenaline going, makes you feel differently about yourself and other people.

I went to the playwriting class, doing the sort of thing I hadn't done for forty years, you know? Just someone says look at this photograph and imagine the character behind it. I do that all the time in my head anyway, but it's just nice to be in a position to do that and to be challenged like that and then to see what other people have made of different photographs, and it just suddenly reawakened all the — you know I was seriously thinking of giving it all up, but with that and then Hidden Spire, the play Sawdust that we did, where I got roped in as one of the cast members — it reawakened everything for me.

I said to them, genuinely, I don't know if I'll be able to learn the lines, and it was a problem, you know that part of my brain was probably out of — I hadn't done that for a while. I just spent every morning of the rehearsals — I would go outside, because I was staying at my daughters — go outside with a cup of coffee and a cigarette, I'd sing the song that I have to sing about three times, and then I'd go through all my lines best I could, and even then I'd still come into rehearsals and forget them!

We had some people who'd never acted before, some people who'd done it once or twice and then three or four professionals, and I kind of straddled the whole group really, and as I was playing the ringmaster it kind of felt right. So I was a little bit separate in that sense, but felt totally part of the company. It's that sense of inclusivity, nobody is written off, nobody is patronised, everybody's treated with the upmost respect, that is just a rule, you know? It's because of having somewhere to come to, that you know is a sympathetic space, that has largely sympathetic people within it.

First of all, I told myself that I was just one of the Crisis bunch and I should remember that at all times and not go in there and say that I was forty years in the theatre and therefore I can tell you all. And actually it was great because you could just occasionally, like if someone who'd never acted would say to me, how do I learn lines? You know this is while I'm having a quick cigarette outside, and I'd say well what I used to do was this, and then the next day they'd come in and say oh that worked!

It was little things like that you could —and little bits, tiny little bits of stage craft where there's a problem and you just think, actually I, without appearing to be a know it all, I do see how this could be solved quite easily. And that was a lovely moment when you kind of saw that all blossom.

We did four nights, four performances, four full houses, we did a Q and A on the Thursday night, virtually the entire audience stayed behind, I've never — usually you get seven perverts staying behind for things like that. People were asking real questions that you wanted to answer, and you thought, people do want this but they've been starved of it.

I came along to the first read through of the Christmas show and I thought oh I'd love to be working in this environment — it reminds you very much of the world that I joined. And a couple of days later the Old Fire Station contacted me and said, do you have any thoughts? And I thought, well yeah obviously I do, but I thought would be impertinent of me to offer them. So I just put down what my honest thoughts were about it and how I thought it could improve, but the fact that I did like it very much and I thought the two actors were really engaging. I thought the script overall worked very well and the whole idea worked very well, I could see how it was going to work in the theatre. And I got lovely emails back, just from everybody saying thank you so much you know it was a real help, and it's really nice to get another pair of eyes.

It's been a shot of adrenaline in lots of many different ways, just being around the place — it's a place where you like to come, where somebody like me fits in for god's sake! And it's a place where I can talk to the artistic director, I can talk to you, I can talk to the people working in the Café, I can talk to the people doing what, in any other environment would be regarded as 'the menial jobs' as equals and they treat me as an equal, and oh that's probably the thing that I've always loved most.

And I feel differently about this city now. I go down the street and you can guarantee I'm going to bump into at least one or two people that I know, either through here or people from the Council or whatever, or from other homeless charities and so on. And because of that, because I have to admit, I am just another homeless person being treated the same as other homeless people are, and that's pretty bloody awfully, and you feel this sort of solidarity. Whereas before I would have walked down the street feeling outraged and sympathy and all of that — but I was just an onlooker. Now the strongest feeling I have is one of solidarity and that's hugely important to me.

I've got about half a dozen, eight good friends all around the country, and I'm regularly in correspondence. And I wrote to one of them — this, that, you know — and I just got this email back, 'it sounds to me like you got your mojo back'. And I said, well that's how I feel. I mean I'm not saying it's not all going to collapse in a pile of ashes, it could have done that forty years ago, but it didn't. And the sort of enthusiasm that I've still got, it was always there, it wasn't here when I came here back in February — gone. I thought, there's nothing much left for me. And yet now I believe again — because I've been writing a play and I'm looking at it thinking by god this is going to turn everything —but you think that with everything you write.

I don't think I would have got round to writing it if I hadn't been coming here. I wouldn't have felt that I had the confidence because I'd lost contact with people, with places, with the sort of people that I like being surrounded by. My voice and the voice of many people like me has been if not extinguished, it has been crushed to the point of irrelevance. And we live in a world where there is, more than ever, important stuff to be explored and expressed. Some people are doing it in the theatre, more power to their elbow. Mostly they're doing it against all the odds.

## DRAWING OUT POTENTIAL

I've done three exhibitions at The Old Fire Station. I curated one in 2014, called Maker's Month (Painting Week) which was lovely because it was all about including artists who hadn't shown their work that much or might be vulnerable in some way. I included Isadora in that, who I work with. And then last year I did a show with her called Drawn Together. That show was particularly special to me because Isadora has severe autism and it was a chance for her to be acknowledged for her art work, rather than judged on the basis of her disability. Often when others see people like Isadora they don't think that they might have hidden talents – so to have this whole show which was a celebration of everything that she's achieved was just amazing.

I've been working with Isadora for about four years now. I teach her yoga and I also take her drawing in the museums in Oxford and so Drawn Together was an exhibition of all the work that we've done together. First of all we had to sift through hundreds of drawings that she had made – I did that with her Dad because when you work with a family you really have to take on board what they think as well. When we selected the work we had suitcases full of sketchbooks and laid everything out, I think it took us about three days!

What was great about it was that I had free reign to curate it and do whatever I wanted, which was fun for me because I'm an artist and I like to have a creative project — but the show also came with its own pressures because she's so vulnerable.

I put a lot of thought into how we presented it - I wanted it to look as cool and contemporary as possible, but then also quite quirky to reflect her work and the fact that all the drawings were done in the museums. So, I thought I could bring in some taxidermy and strange objects that would reference the museums. The Old Fire Station ok'd that which was fab. It was fantastic because I had this very clear vision for the show and everyone here helped me to realise it.

Then I spent a long time planning how we were going to hang it all, so that people would see the work as professional. I wanted it to be like, this is a talented artist and we're presenting her work in a way that we would any contemporary artist but she happens to have a disability. I also wrote the text that went with the exhibition. I wanted it to convey how people with disabilities, like Isadora, who might have speech and communication problems actually have a lot to say and they can communicate that through their art work. I didn't want visitors to come into the gallery and just think oh this is, you know, outsider or naïve art. I wanted the text to say, in fact, if you look at the work next to a Picasso or a Matisse, there are real similarities.

The opening was absolutely rammed, it was so nice. It was really heartwarming - a lot of people said that they were quite moved. Isadora loved it. All the staff were so calm, and it all went smoothly. But I don't think it would have gone as well anywhere else, to be honest, it was just that everyone at the Old Fire Station was so kind to her, so she felt safe enough to be in a packed environment [which ordinarily might have panicked her].

Later, when we were setting up my own show there was a Crisis trainee helping. She told me that because of volunteering at the Old Fire Station and working on shows like mine she was then thinking of doing an Art History degree. I felt proud to be part of that because I realised how those sorts of opportunities can really change people's lives. The gallery staff treated Isadora with a lot of respect and sensitivity and I think that comes from their experience of working with the Crisis members.

My solo exhibition here in the summer was also great because I've been in a lot of group shows but never had a solo show. It felt like quite a big deal because when you're in a group show you can kind of hide behind people — so to have this opportunity to just exhibit my own work was exciting, but also a bit daunting. But with both of the shows Sarah Mossop who works here and Becki the technician would always send me positive emails saying “oh how's it going?... and if you have any concerns or problems that are arising, just get in touch”. On the last day a friend of mine from university came down to see it and said “this is absolutely amazing! I'm so proud of you!” She also said how so many people from art school had given up painting. It was because of that kind of comment right as the show was about to come down, that I then looked back on it and thought yeah that was a real achievement!

Which one of the exhibitions has been the most transformative for me? Well, you think it would be the solo one that I had, because it went well and I sold some of the work too. But Isadora's show meant the most to me - it was really important and it made me think a lot about how much people with disabilities are ignored and aren't often given the chance to shine. We're thinking of doing a children's book now, because her exhibition was so well received.

And working on the Drawn Together exhibition definitely helped with the next show I did here, it made me think, oh! I really enjoy the whole curating process, maybe I might want to do more of this.

My own show was a validation of my art and my practice. I'm a real painter, but I'm not very good at putting myself in the spotlight. So to be able to do that, with the support of the Old Fire Station, was wonderful. Everyone here has been constantly so supportive, it's sort of like a mentoring thing. There's not much of an art scene in Oxford and there are so many cuts to the arts, so it can be quite hard being a painter, and it's a solitary activity. You really do need that art network, mentors and people encouraging you – and something like a solo show then gives you the impetus to do another body of work. During the show being able to talk to members of the public and other artists about my work helped me to clarify what my work's about. It consolidated my ideas, but also made me think about things for the future.

It's kind of changed this whole year for me actually. I thought, ok, this went really well, that's it, I'm just going to paint a lot this year, and enter more art competitions. I think that if I hadn't have had that, that summer, I don't know if I would be feeling as confident about my art work now.

**COMMUNITY IS EVERYTHING**

Well I have a Chip Shop on Iffley Road and my friend Jeremy, who is in Old Fire Station, he's my customer, I'm on his way home. So he often stops and buys fish and chips, that's how we met. And then I always talk to my customers, you know, because I cook fresh food for them. As they're waiting so we have — always chats as well, so I found out he works here. Anyway, I always do projects for myself, and I was doing this project, taking photographs, portraits of the people coming to my shop, and people living around that area, because I wanted to keep like a 'friends' album. Because I get attached to people, we become friends, and when they leave, or pass away, God bless them, I feel sad, and the only way I can keep them for myself in any way, preserve them, I know it sounds funny, is to take a picture of them, have a memory of them. So that's how it started.

So I started collecting these pictures, and then I asked my friend to make a little sort of blurb book for me, because I'm old fashioned. So I asked a friend, you want to make a book for me, of ninety nine of the pictures, of the portraits I've taken? Anyway, so when I made this book I showed people and they said, what do you want to do? I said, this is what I'm trying to make, an album for myself just — it was, just for myself.

Anyway, Jeremy liked the pictures and said that he wants to do a show here, that's how I came into partnership with them. I have a friend, who had [already] told the curator in Modern Art, Emma Ridgway. So I told Jeremy that I'd like to but we have already approached Modern Art Oxford. So he said well let me see what we can do. And they were so kind, both places, and they collaborated, they thought ok they'd do it together, so that's really fantastic.

I got the good fortune of working with both sites, so it's really great, and yeah so I had a really good time, because they are very friendly, they are helpful and they really looked after me. It's like family, and I found so many friends. It's fantastic, in both places.

They were so nice to me here - for instance Jeremy applied to Arts Council for me. I didn't know how to do those things. They spent a lot of time and effort to get the grant for me. Exhibitions are expensive to put on — the grant paid for printing, the framing, posters, all sorts of things - otherwise we couldn't have done it. And they gave me support - both Old Fire Station and Modern Art — the curators Sarah Mossop from the Old Fire Station and Stephanie Straine from Modern Art, they both came with me. And my friend James Atlee, he was all the way with me as well. They all supported me, when we were going to choose the frames and the non-reflective glass, they all came to the framers with me and they were guiding me and helping me and we were discussing things, because they have experience in exhibitions, so their opinions was invaluable. If they hadn't helped me this exhibition wouldn't have happened, no way.

What has changed for me? Well what I like to do always is bring people together, show the good side of people, so it came to the people's attention. And people got that message and I think it has made the community a bit closer, you know. They appreciate each other more, they are more aware of each other and I think that's good, I think we achieved that goal, thank God.

I did my portraits with love - to keep my friend's pictures for myself, like a family album. Where I come from in Iran, the family album is the most important thing in your house. If your house got robbed and its burning, you leave everything, take the family albums out first

I did it for love and people got that – and they gave love back, and that’s fantastic. And that love hopefully, will spread between them, and then it will spread to other communities. That’s what we have to do.

Look, there is only one race and that’s the human race. And that’s tonight’s story – that’s what I wanted to show. You know these days, wherever you look, they keep talking about the differences between people, which are very minor, very minor. But the similarities are, massive, many more numerous, than differences. But togetherness and love brings happiness.

The best part of this project for me is that I found friends in both places, in Modern Art Oxford and in the Old Fire Station and its real — you know they’re good friends, and it’s really nice to feel that you are wanted and you are loved back, so that’s the best part.

My life is still the same, I haven’t changed, I’m the same, I’m doing the same thing as well. But, as I said, I found lots of friends, new friends and also I would say shop is more busy, business is better. It has worked that people came to see, who is it? What’s going on here? And then they ate our food and they realise oh mmmm, that’s not too bad either, so they stuck with us, they stayed with us, yeah

You see, my shop is like a centre point, because I don’t care whether you are buying or not buying, I’m happy to see you anyway. So people come and talk to me anyway, they know that so they are welcome, and I try to give as much time to people. You know if I’m busy I say ok sir I must go do the potatoes or something, but when I have time I make as much effort to talk to people, because I enjoy it. I don’t do it because I have to but I just love it.

Community is everything isn’t it? The whole world starts with a home, family, and community.

## WITNESSING TRANSFORMATION

I'm a theatre maker, which generally comprises directing plays, either as part of my own company Under Construction, or for other companies, largely based in Oxfordshire these days. And as well as directing shows I've done a fair bit of community arts based practice. So that's anything from teaching art and design and drama and multi-arts kind of things.

I graduated ten years ago and the first three years after graduating I was of no fixed abode; working for a number of different productions wherever I could. The one thing that had been preventing me from coming back to Oxford was the thought, I'm not sure if there's enough here, all I knew of theatre that was in Oxford at the time was quite traditional, quite university based and I wasn't sure how much experimental theatre and new writing there was. I heard that the Old Fire Station was going to be reopened soon, and I thought right I'm going to find out what's happening. So, I emailed Jeremy - I had never met him and didn't know anything about him previously, and said, I make theatre, can we have a coffee? This must have been some time in 2010, and I just asked him what the plans were. And he told me all about it and I was immediately intrigued. I was still in that floating between London and other places quandary of where am I meant to be—and it was definitely that coffee with Jeremy that made me think, that I could stay here, there's something that could happen. And off the back of that coffee, he invited me to create a performance for the opening, which was in November 2011.

I think the next thing was starting the scratch nights. I launched those in July 2012. It was fairly early days of me being here and getting to know the arts community in Oxford. And one of the things I used to love doing elsewhere was going to see scratch performances and feeling like you were part of the early creation of something and having that buzz of being able to meet the artists and give your feedback to them. It was really simple, I literally just said to Jeremy look I want to start a scratch night, can we do it here? And he said yes, and we started doing it. For me one of the great things about the scratch night has been getting to know so many artists through it, just feeling like that was my introduction to people here. And several years later, I co-founded Oxfordshire Theatre Makers as a network - a place where artists could come together, socialise, talk about projects they wanted to do together, collaborate, maybe as a result of meeting at the scratch night. I think what has been unique for me about OFS is that I've always felt I can come here and pitch an idea, and be listened to and – as long as it was a good idea – be offered space and support. All the staff here have been fantastic, but I can really sort of attribute that generosity to Jeremy, and his willingness to take a risk with people and try things.

Less than a year after starting the scratch night, I was lucky enough to be selected to direct the first Hidden Spire project. The aim of it has always stayed the same, which is this three-fold thing of creating a professional level public art experience with professional artists and Crisis members. So it was always equal value in process and product. It would involve professional artists and Crisis artists working together on every aspect of the project, and showing something to the public. We were given an incredible amount of trust really, to just create something. And I couldn't have done that one without a beautiful little tiny team of artists – only four of us – around me. We did it in the evenings, at the weekends, you know around other jobs and somehow we created something in about six weeks. I feel very fond of what we did and what we explored that time, you know? And when I think back to the people that were in that I just have an incredibly tender feeling, and I always wonder what they're doing now? I wonder where they are now? and the relationships

between everyone. Because, even though it was the first time we'd done Hidden Spire and we really were working it out as we went along, what was so profound about it is that I really do think that we worked as equals, us four artists working with anyone we could get into the Loft to devise, and we created some incredibly strong bonds in that six weeks; I can still remember the people who were involved in that one so clearly.

Crisis staff were definitely there to support us, but again because we didn't have that structure in place that year — like now on Hidden Spire we have daily check-ins, members get one to one meetings, the team get a lot of support. That year we just sort of got on with it. And there were some incredibly fragile people in that group and also some of us were going through certain things as well and I think — I remember that first one so fondly even though the piece didn't have the finesse the more recent ones did, I remember it so fondly, because I do think that we looked after each other so well.

I've directed three Hidden Spire projects here since then, going from the team of 4 artists to twenty-something on the most recent project. That development has — I mean I can talk to you about the sort of very practical aspects, like each time we've done the project, you know the team has got bigger or more refined, and I've learnt a hell of a lot about managing people, each time I'm learning more about how to negotiate people's roles, how to be clear about who's doing what, how to set up a creative process so things happen in the right way, in the right order. It's been like a really in-depth managerial kind of degree in a way, and it's so hard to learn those things without actually doing it.

But it's a lot harder to talk to you about what it's done personally and emotionally because it is that thing of relationships with people—it's such an intense project and the experiences you have with people are quite profound, the things that you observe. A lot of time for me it's about witnessing transformation in people through the spectrum of putting on a show and all the highs and lows involved in that, little moments of transformation in people. I think shows with some kind of participatory element i.e. working with the community — there is a bigger potential for transformation, and I definitely think that is what fuels me — and transformation sounds grand doesn't it? But just this excitement about the impact it's had, even if that's just, 'that was so much fun', 'I've never done anything like that before', or 'I want to do this for the rest of my life, that was so amazing', that kind of transformation.

Whenever I cycle into OFS, there's always a sense of, ooh I'm cycling to my second home, and then I'll lock my bike and I'll walk into the Reception and there'll always be someone on Reception that I know. Then within five minutes there's guaranteed to be a Crisis member that walks past me that's been involved in a Hidden Spire, and then there's a staff member whether they're from AOFS or from Crisis who I have worked with at some point. So there's that lovely feeling of this is somewhere I know well and feel at home. I might be coming here to talk about Hidden Spire, I might be coming here to plan the scratch night, I might be coming here for an Oxfordshire Theatre Makers steering committee meeting. Those three things are major parts of my life and take up a big chunk of my week. So even if I'm not actually here, I'm working on something that's based at OFS. I definitely would say now it feels like a home.

It's enabled me to exist and live as a professional artist; it has enabled me to direct some really important pieces of work and helped me be acknowledged as a director — you know it's really hard to get your name out there and get that level of experience. The Old Fire Station has enabled me to keep practicing as an artist, keep evolving, keep developing my approach, and it's given me security because of that. It's enabled me to become a director, I suppose.

## A PLACE OF GROWTH

I am one of the 6 studio artists that rents a space in the artists' studios. I am a painter, mixed media work; sort of semi abstract work, but usually involving an element of the human form. What I want the viewer to find in my work is a sort of emotional response, and that is using colour and texture and maybe a loose theme exploring the human condition. I have a real interest in mental health and how people behave or experience differently depending what environment they are put. I also like doing small scale sculptural 3D work which is coming into play more and more.

I also work part-time as a visual arts tutor as for Crisis. So, in part of the building I wear one hat and in the other part I do my own practice. And I suppose my other involvement is that in the studio space the Artist in Residence has a studio next door to me, and I also sort of facilitate them in the Crisis part of their work, too. It is almost like enabling her to learn the skills to be an art tutor in this environment. And since I have been in the studios, I have taken a bit of a lead in organising the studio, in like Open Door, trying to get artists together to critique each other's works.

I have been in Oxford for 7 years. I came to Oxford when I was pregnant. And I noticed this space was going to be renovated, so I kept an eye on it and an eye on it, and when it was up and running, I came and visited it and found out a lot about it, saw the job. So, I have really been keeping an eye on this building right from the start. And then I got the job with Crisis about four years ago, and I applied for and got a place in the studios for about a year, maybe more?

It has been completely liberating to have my own space, because painting at home with small children is not the same. So it has kind of reignited my...I suppose my enthusiasm for making my own work and thinking far more professionally about it again, having space to think more deeply about what my own work is about, starting to exhibit, starting to get commissions again. It feels like I am back in the art world, because I felt a little bit on the outskirts in far as my own practice goes

I came to Oxford and felt quite alone really, so getting the studio I feel like I have gone back 10 years - it has been amazing. It's just been so liberating, to be away and have thinking space in such a lovely space, where it is warm, good light, most studios I have had were freezing cold ...but also to be in a shared studio space is amazing. I think it helps you have that drive to keep making it work. If you are working on your own it can be quite a lonely experience. There is no feedback. No element of, what is the word - drive, or competitiveness. It helps you when you see other people exhibiting, getting commissions, you think - I want that, I want to keep making work. So competitive in a positive way. And being able to critique each other's work, just have conversations about different art forms, different media, exchange ideas, or get different opinions, or where do I get a Perspex box made? It's not all about making the art, it's what you do with it, how do you present it etc. So if you have a room full of people with different experiences that's a really sort of rich place to be.

So it has been life changing for me in Oxford, in the sense that I feel part of something. I have made friends, I feel like I am an artist again rather than an art tutor. I... it has brought me into the city, I suppose. Me being able to locate myself in the city.

And it has been liberating in the way that, if you are not making your own art work and you are looking after everyone else, a part of you sort of dies in a way... this is about what I think and what I see and what I want to express about the world.

I am in the lucky position that I see both sides of the building work, the privilege of working with Crisis and with members, and knowing their stories. And that affects my work as well, so I also find that a really interesting relationship. I have a big interest in mental health and how peoples' psychological landscape pans out, or changes, or transforms, and I suppose that is a lot about how this building works.

Arts buildings can feel elite or for a certain type of person. And that's why I like this building because it feels like it is for everyone, which especially in Oxford – so high brow! It drove me nuts when I came down from Scotland, all this about intellect, and academia. I don't feel that! I like to feel there is a real mixture of people. Theatre and art galleries shouldn't be just for posh people, but in Oxford I sometimes get that feeling. Some of the people I teach [through Crisis], you see getting involved or exhibiting their work and that is a heart-warming experience - it feels fair, or something.

The idea of what this building is trying to do is political. It is bringing two sets of people together to work independently and collaboratively and that is a political statement I think. And any art work is political, or most of it is. I think in the sense that you are trying to reflect what is going on in the city, or the world, or make people to think about things in a certain way, a different way.

It is all different types of people involved here, volunteers, professionals, people on a big learning curve, people investing their trust as well in using this building. It is an interesting balance. It is it is amazing that you have dance studios, a theatre, art studio, professional studios. Now I come for Pilates here! You start getting more and more involved, discover oh that is happening.

I feel part of the building as well, that also creates lots of opportunities to meet other artists. For example, artists that have exhibitions in the space, at openings, you meet other artists, have lots of conversations. It is a hub, you know.

For example, working with Sarah and Becki, who work for The Old Fire Station, our cross over has been quite significant. We have worked together to exhibit work here, in the last show here with One Size Fits All, but also with members - we have had three exhibitions in the gallery space where we have been in partnership with the Ashmolean and with other artists. And then I have exhibited with Studio artists, too.

I think the reason it works is that it is well organised. It is super-complex, everything that goes on here. And for that to work, and the three organisations to work in parallel and intertwine themselves, I think there are lot of good people who work here, and good team work. Staff are open – everyone from receptionists, people in café, shop, everyone. And there is a dignity to what happens in this building, and integrity. I just think that is the kind of people who are attracted to working here. There is a common belief that something like this can work.

And people here can question things. You think it should be done like this, or I think it should be done like this, getting to the core reason of why something has or hasn't worked. Not making it a bad thing, but a positive thing – learning. Not shutting the door on things. You are encouraged to say what you think, and that can only be a good thing.

It is a place of change, it is a place of growth, whether it is artistically, personally, economically.

**ON STAGE I FEEL FREE**

The very first thing [I did here] was October 2013, I got accepted as a member and then I did this evening class in drama. I did 2 Hidden Spire [plays] – starting with the Shakespeare prequel. It seems like a long time ago, although it is not really. That was the first acting I did. I found it therapeutic, cathartic, just putting your emotions out on the stage. I have a mercurial personality. I change like the sea. On the stage, it is a good thing to just be able to project your emotions out to the audience. It gives you a certain kudos to stand in front of the audience. Some sort of self-identity. I may come across as shy – but on stage, I feel free, yeah.

Once you have done something like this once or twice it becomes easier and you can see it as a possible avenue you can take yourself down.

I am not good at forming relationships with people. But the social side of [acting in Hidden Spire] is really good as well. Backstage, we all become very chummy, make lots of friends, it feels good. That is the main thing about this place! To be sociable! Yeah. That's why I come here - to make friends, be sociable.

My creativity is maybe my strongest point. Writing *and* acting. I have written several pieces. I've kept all the things I have done here over the years. The very first thing I wrote for Sawdust [this year] - I started off with the idea of a travelling group of comedians. And the stand-up thing I did last summer - I put a mop on my head - it was a stupid thing but people laughed. I wrote a Christmas piece last year, based on Rudolph the Reindeer, performed it just for the drama group. And the idea for a little Italian comedy thing, Harlequin...an idea for a comedy, I wrote it out long hand.

It's like everything, once you start practicing writing you get better at it. They like to be entertained most people don't they? So you look deep inside yourself and see what you can find, right in the corners and dark dark alleys of your personality.

I haven't done much, I want to do more, I am always dissatisfied with myself, really I go to bed and I say what on earth are you doing with your life and why can't you do more.

## YOU'RE LOOKING AT ME – WHAT MY TALENTS ARE

I've mainly been an usher at The Old Fire Station. I started in - it must have been in August — I've done three so far. I like the music side of things - all sorts, from opera to ordinary music. I don't see much live music because like I am, it's a bit difficult to get to venues.

I'm living in bungalows with all elderly people and I wanted to get away and try to make my own new friends and meet younger people. I mean I am about sixty but I wanted to meet new people of my own, you know? And broaden my outlook on life - thought it would help me as well.

I'm a bit limited because of a wheelchair but I still can contribute a lot. I help people get to their seats, programmes, talk to people generally as they come into the theatre. I give tickets, sometimes I am just in the theatre guiding people and that. And I have to also look to see that they're behaving themselves and if anything unusual occurs. What I like is, you haven't looked at me in a wheelchair, you've looked at **me** — what my talents are — because there's not many places that do that.

Getting to the Fire Station - well it's all part of the — it's all part of getting out and about and that sort of thing. I do enjoy that part of it because I think, ooh I'm off out to the theatre today and I've got to get myself into gear, you know what I mean? I can go into town do a few jobs or whatever, and also it gets me out of my shell, you know? If you're in your own shell in your own bungalow you tend to be only in your little shell, and that's bad for you as well.

I sometimes leave a bit early, and I like to get here earlier than I'm meant to so I can just calm myself down and relax and get a cup of tea or whatever I want to do, so I'm geared up for ushering.

Just in the time I've been here, I've met a few people that have got to know me slightly, know who I am now so I'm not just a stranger coming through the door. The lady manager says hello how are you getting on? And in the street sometimes I see the people that work here and I say, hello so and so how are you? yeah, I'm part of the theatre now, and people are speaking to me outside the theatre, not just when I'm at the theatre.

And I meet people from different backgrounds, one chap, when we had the volunteer party, he was talking about his life a bit you know? That was interesting. He was saying he was on drugs for a while, he managed to get off it and he was alright. You know there's no negatives, it's done me a lot of good, there's no negatives.

It gives you a sense of pride having to be responsible, not just somebody in the audience, you've got to be responsible for everybody in the audience. One lady came up to me - she sounded very nervous and said when's the concert starting? And I said they'll be in in a minute, you'll be alright just wait in the theatre. But she didn't stay there the full time, she went at half time. I think she was a nervous person, so you have to be ready for that kind of thing as well you know. That was interesting because I wasn't sure how to handle it at first, I thought oh dear are we going to have a problem — I think I handled it in a nice manner.

I don't feel out of it here, obviously some jobs I won't be able to do but — there are talents that I can give, you know, there's other ways of helping. My communication skills are good and I've got a lot of knowledge I can pass on. People here look at what I can offer rather than looking at oh dear is he going to be able to — you know? That's the thing I like. There's other times I've tried to volunteer and they look at the — it's getting better in this country but at one time in a wheelchair they used to

talk to the person pushing and not take any notice. But here, I haven't had any barriers here, you know?

There is sometimes a little bit of a barrier because people are not really expecting somebody in a wheelchair to give them a hand or ask for their tickets or whatever, do you know what I mean? Like if I said, there's a fire, we're going to go to this exit, they might think oh blimey somebody in a wheelchair telling us to go to the exit! You know what I mean? Sometimes I've had to say to an audience member, I'm here to help you if you need any help.

I feel different - I feel a bit more important and contributing to something rather than just sitting indoors - because I'm now feeling I'm contributing to something, I've got to get my act together because I got something to go to and something to deal with.

It's helped me with my speech, I'm not so afraid to speak, you know with cerebral palsy you get speech problems — but with this thing it helps me to keep my voice going so you don't stammer too much.

Everybody's said to me — I hope you come back and do some more, so that was good, that was good feedback.

## EVERYBODY'S LEARNING SOMETHING

My main thing with Arts at the Old Fire Station was to do with the admin side, going up into the office and working with the accountants and the admin staff, after going to college and doing accountancy in college. I came in for a few hours a week and worked with staff, the accountants, seeing how that accountants side worked, the bookings side, the basic paperwork of billing and stuff like that.

I was inputting data, counting takings and making sure they were put into the system – that sort of stuff really. But there was so much to it that it was hard to remember it all. Like putting in –it wasn't just putting data for the shows into the listings, it was making sure the information was right for that as well – it was very much centred around accuracy. But after the first couple of times I knew what I was doing so I could get through it quite quickly and accurately.

I was able to spend some time in the shop and working alongside the box office so that I could see how that was working as well. I was able to help the staff in the shop because their system was a bit untidy and I was trying to sort of like say, can you do it like this because it would make my life so much easier. I don't think anyone had actually told them, so I just butted in and said can you please do it like this and make my life easier please. They found it quite useful - it was nice the next time all their information came back how I wanted and I could just like pick it up and say, ah yes I know what that is. They'd put it in in the right way, so I didn't have to go rummaging and taking everything out and it got me more time to do it and do other things as well. Hopefully it stuck!

At college you've got it all on paper, and you got a little bit on the computer but there's nothing really in-depth - it's flat. Whereas coming in here for twelve weeks, it gave me, well it gave me a purpose. I had to get up and go out and do something and I liked doing it, I was enjoying doing it. It put a bit of texture to what I was doing at college, made it a two-dimensional thing. It made it real.

It was good for me - it gave me the confidence that I could actually do it. I did struggle with the coursework itself [in my accountancy studies], but this gave me the confidence that I could actually do it – it's a lot easier when you're actually doing it. I think it helped me —because there were some exams that I failed on and its helped me to go back and recover it and redo it and say yeah I understand that now, I see how that worked and fit it in to what I was doing.

And a friend of mine has asked me to look after his books for a while and help him because he's no good with it. He gets to about a few weeks before his end of year and then he's going mental because he doesn't know if he's put everything in, so I can like help him with that. He's on QuickBooks and I know how to do it quite easily so I can do whatever needs doing.

He's an old school friend that I just hooked up with after a long time – well, when we first hooked up we were just catching up sort of thing, and keeping in touch - and its only recently he said can you give me a hand with this because I'm useless at it.

One thing that is nice— both here and anywhere else – having access to a company's accounts is a very privileged thing, and they have to have a lot of trust in you. They trust me here [at AOFS] to look at their accounts. The accountant even let me do some of his work as well. Before I did the training at AOFS, I wasn't very confident at all. I mean I'd struggled with the college work so I think it was just the fear factor of could I actually go and work for a company and do this stuff? I think if anything I probably would have shied away from it and probably done myself down, and not been able to say yeah, I can do it, I can.

Now I think yeah I can, I can go in and I can pick up a company's way of working. Once I start going for interviews, I can say yeah I can do it, I've proved it. I've got a reference to show I can do it, and I'm ready to learn more.

Outside of the work context, it's given me confidence there, too. I can hold conversations about things now. I mean my sister, and some of my cousins, and friends even, they're in accounting and stuff. And I can actually have a solid conversation about it, and not sit there and wonder what the hell they're talking about. It's not just a workplace thing, it's holding my own, anywhere. If someone asks what I do, I can hold a conversation and say this is what I do. If you think about it, one of the first conversations on meeting someone, most people talk about their jobs. And if you can't talk about your job, it's really difficult - you just struggle and sit there listening to everything. You haven't got a clue what they're talking about, so you're just sitting there giving it, yeah ok, yeah, yeah, yeah. And that's a really horrible thing to happen, when you want to be able to join in a conversation without sort of feeling a complete and total berk.

Or when I could explain what I was doing in my college work to my sister or a friend – when someone else has told me and explained it to me, and now I can pass it on to her. Yeah, it's nice, you feel a bit smart and not a bit of a dumb waiter.

The thing that made the difference was just *doing* stuff, being able to actually do it hands on, rather than just looking at it. And having someone like explain it to me. When you're doing it hands on you can ask why it's done that way — so you're learning something, but you're not feeling stupid. It's a different way of learning, and it's a good way of learning.

I've enjoyed working with people as well, they've been really good. Sometimes you feel like well, if I get them to explain this do you think they'll start huffing and puffing. But here, the more I asked them, the more they like it, the happier they were. If it needed explaining two or three times, they didn't mind. And they were not far away if I needed some help – there was always someone close by. And sometimes people who've done it for years and years can get something out of explaining it to me - because they have to slow themselves down as well, and they realise they've been doing something that they haven't realised they've been doing. So it's not always just me learning something—everybody's learning something.

And if they need someone extra and there's no one around they can phone me and say look Paula we need someone for a day, can you come in and help us? And I can quite happily say, yep, it's not a problem – it's that sort of two-way thing. I can say yeah, I can help if you need it.

## TRYING ON NEW LABELS

When I was a student, I came to The Old Fire Station for the first time to a few events, and then a job came up to be Front of House Coordinator. And I applied whilst still being a full-time student at Ruskin College and I got that job in 2015, so I was looking after the front of house and the bar side of things and particularly enjoying working with the members and volunteers. And then I applied for the Front of House Manager job and I got that, which was great, so then I was managing that team. And then a job with Crisis, the Arts Coordinator job that I've got currently, came up. But in between the Front of House Manager and the Arts Coordinator, I was asked to be the writer for the Hidden Spire project, and I accepted that— so I'm still a volunteer as well with the Arts, I was the writer for Hidden Spire, I was the Arts Coordinator for Crisis, and I ended up in the show, as well, as an actor.

I think on a feeling, emotional level, I think being asked to be the writer for the show was probably the biggest personal impact because I was a relatively new graduate, in writing, and it is my love. To be commissioned to write a play in a building that you love and work in is a very special thing, and I think to have other people's faith in your ability to do that, felt very important.

The project really got going in the end of August of that year. I think all of that time developing [Hidden Spire] was very important, and for me being so excited about the work that we were doing in the building, that joined up both sides of my life. I was pretty new in post as the Arts Coordinator, and there hadn't been anyone in that post before me for quite a while, so it felt like we were starting to do something that was new and real, I suppose, in the building, and quite visible at the same time. For someone either not having ever worked with Crisis members much or for a Crisis colleague who hasn't worked in the Arts, I think those moments where we do things that cross over some of those lines and blur them a bit are often the most exciting. I think we can do more of that deliberate label changing here, offer that to people who work here. I think it's a real sadness within the building that we haven't found enough ways yet of helping people to really enjoy what it has to offer in as many various ways as possible. We haven't yet and there's no getting away from that. But I think that Hidden Spire, and my new role, made it a bit more visible in the building. And because my face was known from being on the Arts, I can remember feeling there was a change in terms of just starting to open that up for people a little bit. And I felt very excited about that.

As a writer I suppose I'm really interested in characters, I'm really interested in people's stories, and I find the people that I work with, the members that I work with, I find them very inspiring in their bravery, and their honesty, and their openness with me and the things they're prepared to share and to discuss and to talk about, but one of the really striking things is just the kind of positivity and helpfulness with each other and I find that really exciting and really pleasing.

When I was working on Hidden Spire writing it, in the second term, I was working with some people who barely could write, through to people who couldn't follow instruction at all, through to a published playwright who's had work in all the major theatres in England, whose books I have on my shelf. That is a very exciting group of people to have in a room, and the fact that they're homeless is why I get to work with them. And you can have people from all over the world, you know and just people from every social sphere and all of that, and that makes for a really interesting — so there's never an easy dynamic, never straightforward. Maybe that's why the building works for me because with all the planning and the structure that we do put in, often the exciting things happen where you haven't considered that possibility or someone else walks into the group and changes everything — that's what makes my work exciting and I guess I try and look for that in my writing as well.

The way that I put (the script for Sawdust) together structurally was very different, to how I would normally work, I don't really plan. I tend to start writing and see where the characters take me. The way that I worked with members was to get them to create characters and then those characters kind of came alive. So, I had a very strong base to work from, but you know they weren't mine, and I had to think about structure a lot more and the actual story, which is unusual for me. I really tried to be true to what members had written, and what they felt and what they thought. I would like to do other work that was using other people's words, in some way like that, and I guess it's made me think about structure and about my writing process in kind of new ways, and made me realise that I can do things in a different way.

I know that I get overly worried about what people think, how they will judge me on my creative work. And I think I was so stressed by the time the show was happening that I really struggled to enjoy feedback – because that level of I think just multiple hat wearing, started to hurt my head, is the easiest way I can describe it!

I'm not sure where it leaves me in terms of what's next. Because writing's such a solitary thing, unless someone gives you a deadline or commissions you, it's quite hard to know exactly where you're going. What I have done is got onto the Oxford Playmakers scheme, so I'm on that now for this year. That's a real change and kind of advancement for me.

Another big impact for me has been having this progression within the building. Getting the first job, then on to two more. I haven't had a very linear career trajectory, I've been a single parent, brought up kids and so on – and I've been an Arts Worker on all different kinds of short term contracts. So this was a massive change for me; having a sense of, you know, having a title for your job or having a desk that you can work at or you know having a team, I hadn't had in any kind of consistent way, I hadn't had a salaried position that did that, so yeah I think that's very important in terms of who you are and how you see yourself. And for that to be in a building that means so much and that you kind of identify with as a life changing place for the people, including myself, that use the building.

I've often felt to be a bit of an outsider within the jobs that I'm doing. But I'm not an outsider here, because everybody that I'm working with is also an outsider in some ways you know? Staff and members consider themselves 'other' but when you're working together in a room, you're all together. You know you're working, like as a circus or whatever. You're working as a family, you've got this range of different experience in a room, but you've got a commonality in some way.

I think the whole 'label' thing is important – about how people here can try on new labels in their lives. You know people don't have one label, they have multiple labels on them, and I think that we are in a position of swapping those labels around and moving them – for me as well as for members. It's the sort of flexibility of what we offer – and, for myself, knowing that when I'm working with people I'm able to offer something but there's not a penalty zone. So, if that's not the right thing or they don't enjoy it they can leave, there's nothing to keep them here for that, or they can come again next week when they're feeling better or whatever. I'm trying to take that on more myself in my own practice – this great thing about failing is a good thing.

I still volunteer for the Arts company as an usher sometimes. I think there's something really exciting about being in a very different role within the building and seeing how that feels. When you put on a black t-shirt you're not invisible but you're just part of the workforce and you're in a different role and it gives you an insight. You can't ever be in someone else's shoes entirely, but I think again the building allows people to try out different positions and seeing what it feels like to be in that role.

## COMING OUT OF MY SHELL

I did the set-building for 'Sawdust', and done a little bit of ushering as well and going to the shows. First of all I was going to classes, then I got a set design traineeship on Sawdust.

On the traineeship, I was working with Nomi. We were doing the backboard, and platform at the top. And stairs at the back, which was hard with all the angles. Nomi showed me how to do power tools and that. Once I finished one thing, Nomi put me straight onto the next thing! I put in 216 screws I think!

The part I most enjoyed was making the 6 little apple crates, for the model box. I make things for my model railway – level crossings, little crossing gates, all just made out of pieces of plastic and recycled stuff. I made small apple crates for my model railway too – which were even smaller.

So I made the apple crates for Sawdust at home. It took about 2 and a half weeks to do. They were very very very small! I made them out of hardboard and little strips of card to make them look like they were made of planks. That was the hardest bit, trying to stick them on there. Then I painted them. I felt real satisfaction when they were finished. I don't like stopping and starting, stopping and starting – I like it when it's complete.

I did the questions and answers session [after one of the performances of the play]. It was the first time I stood out in front of an audience, you know, and I enjoyed it. And spoke about what things I have done. I was a little bit nervous at first, but then I got into it and the nerves was just gone.

I felt it was really helpful for me as well. For my self-esteem. More confidence. It changed me a lot; coming out of my shell a bit more. I always felt shy, go to the back, you know. Back into my shell.

I felt part of a family, as they say. Even though I was doing set-design and that, all the other actors and that were all friendly and every time I came in in the morning they all said "good morning Tony how are you?" and some of them hugged me and said "hello Tony", you know, cos they were all pleased to see me. On my last day I broke down in tears, me more than anyone else...It was my last day. And I wanted to stay on and do more with the team.

After Sawdust, I started doing carpentry and went on and started making my own bird tables and bird boxes – I put them on the outside of my wall, or the flat where I am now.

And now, I want to get into acting. I've done acting before. I feel ready now definitely. I just sort of, love doing it. You can act as someone else not yourself. I thought I would have a go.

And I started the creative writing classes. I didn't used to like writing until I started - I used to just throw things together. Next term I hope to do a bit more. I wrote up a script for the Gatehouse people; I have done script 1 so far. I am in middle of script 2. I will act in that sometime next year.

The Arts team and Crisis team have helped me through my bad times and I thought well they given me something, so I want to give them something back. So I do ushering too. When you have got a play on in the theatre, you usher people in, make sure they sit in the right place and remember the fire exits. I have done 1 shift but would like to do more. You get to know members of the public, welcome them into the theatre. It is something I haven't done before – I felt really excited! I like making sure the audience is enjoying the show. When they come out, I say "did you enjoy the show". I chat with them when they don't know where to get the tickets, or get confused. I felt I cheered them up, and what made them more happy is I had my Christmas jumper on and it flashes!

I felt more confident because I was ushering. I felt very proud, very proud doing ushering for the first time. Next term I want to do more.

Coming here has changed me from how I was to how I am now. I have become more sort of helpful and...I was really down and depressed, but once I started coming to Crisis and doing things for the Arts it has picked me up...a lot! I have met new friends, I have met new friends in this building. And I have changed things for other people too – especially in some of the classes I do. Before I started going into the classes the people looked a bit bored you know. Now I am there it sort of picked up, they see me and... and as they say I have a nice smiling face.

## BEING A PERSON

For the last four years, I've been a volunteer usher, which has involved not only looking after people in the theatre, but helping out on the bar, the box office and checking the tickets, helping out and supporting artists, making sure they've got, drinks or whatever. And that they're made welcome when they arrive, that everybody knows exactly where they're going to be in the building, and showing people up there to their necessary rooms, making sure that after the performance that everybody's happy, and that everybody then leaves the area, clearing up the area, just to make it presentable. But the best thing is you get to come and see the shows. I would come and see shows that perhaps I wouldn't normally go and see. You know there are such a wide range of activities go on here - that's the thing I love about The Old Fire Station.

You know it would be nice to think that if even one person turns up for a show and buys a ticket that had a lasting impact - that is a really important thing. Because it does offer a different theatre experience than perhaps some other theatres. The types of show they put on here are very different, from the mainstream shows. I think it's also an awful lot more affordable. We're quite happy for people to take glasses and things into the theatre, so it's more relaxed and sociable. Whereas I think people get intimidated by going to theatres and thinking, you know I've got to sit right here and don't rustle sweet papers. And so I think it's more open to the community, makes it much more open to performers and affordable for them. I know a lot of people who have had the opportunity to put on things, here, that perhaps they wouldn't have necessarily. I think that's really a good thing, it makes art open to everybody.

Before I was involved as a volunteer, as a Crisis member I'd come and taken advantage of the free tickets. I would admit that I was a theatre groupie, any tickets that were going — because it gave me a sense of being a person, of having more — something else to think about than my personal situation at the time. And it allowed me escape for a few hours, gave me something to go and do in the evening, gave me a chance to go and be a human being, instead of being a case or a situation.

I think when you are in a situation when you're in the, for want of a better word, 'supported housing' sector, it is quite daunting at times. I mean you're not at your best anyway, you are at a personal low, to be in that position — they can be quite noisy, quite stressful. I was very fortunate I was in quite nice accommodation, but you're not necessarily an individual, you're a case, you're a client. I was very much told, you can't possibly work, you can't possibly get a job right now. A lot of workers, they find that very difficult to accept, that I want to be involved in doing things. I'm not prepared to just sit here in a room or whatever, I want to be out and involved in things. And by coming here you got involved in things. Then I liked the fact that they're less here dealing with your particular circumstances at the time but offering you opportunities that you can actually add new skills, you can do new activities, I mean I started doing drama, and woodwork, I discovered that I could actually use a band saw and I could do things and I could make things, and I quite enjoyed that. So, it was adding to your — it's not just your skill set, but your wellbeing. It's the most important thing.

Because of my involvement here, my commitment I was making to doing different things, it gave me an anchor, and I knew I'd got that. And I'd come in and I'd say, oh it's not been a good day and somebody would say, well, have you thought about doing this? Have you tried doing that? Have you thought of such and such an area? They would say ah you do such good things here, it made me feel good about myself, and that's a wonderful experience for anybody.

It made me realise there's a world outside my own small sphere — there is a wider world out there, even just going to see plays or whatever that perhaps touch on other social, or mental health issues, or different things like that, that make you more aware. You realise, oh yes maybe life's not so bad.

The reason why I first got involved here as a volunteer, was that I was involved four years ago in a Hidden Spire production, when I was a member of Crisis. And literally I spent five months on doing acting workshops, music workshops, writing workshops, to then actually performing in the show and that was — I mean I had done drama before, but just to be part of a professional theatre company was out of this world. And it did so much for my confidence at the time— because you know I was at the time unemployed, and kind of on the edge. It just gave me something to focus on and that confidence then carried through - I was very, very fortunate that within a month of finishing that production, I was back in full time employment.

Hidden Spire certainly gave me self-confidence which I know I was really lacking and so I had that boost to go out and sell myself. Even silly things like, as part of performing, I'd had sort of training skills on voice and I think that helped then in the interviews to control my voice, handle nerves so that I'm giving a positive impression. And yes, you know they didn't care at all that I could act or whatever. They were more interested in my professional qualifications - but it gave me that impetus to go and do it. And because I'd been involved five days a week with Hidden Spire for about three months, again you'd got into that routine of going out every day and doing things.

And because I was made to feel part of the whole production, from day one, I got involved in writing workshops here. Then, I went on to study script writing through the Continuing Education at Oxford University, so I've done some of that; and I still write to this day. And I got involved in another drama group, and play reading group. I've done more acting through them. I've appeared in a couple of things in Oxford and in a very short play in London. I would not have done that without having the confidence, and the knowledge about what being part of a theatre group can bring.

I wanted to give something back to The Old Fire Station, and by becoming a volunteer, that really helps. It allows you to get to know people, from all walks of life. And there is nothing better for handling a bad day at work, or maybe difficult situations or whatever, that you come in here, you don your black t-shirt, you take your tickets, smile, you welcome people in, you sit down, you enjoy a show and your mind is totally off what is going on outside. It gives you that breathing space — and then you come out and things look in a different perspective at times, and the stresses of the day dissipate into those lights, as it were. It helps to avoid a temptation to go into depression or whatever.

I think the nice thing of the volunteer programme here, is that you can do as much or as little as you want. Nobody questions who you are, what you do, they're just very welcoming, that you're prepared to give the time to come and help. They invite you in and make you part of the team. Everybody's so friendly, they will never expect you to do something that you're uncomfortable doing. And everybody you meet welcomes you, it's good. It doesn't matter whether it's Jeremy the director, you know everybody will have a cheery word and say hello, and it makes you feel part of the community.

I'm currently relocating, tonight will be my very last shift at The Old Fire Station, I'm moving to Lancashire. But one of the first things I found out in the town that I'm going to be living, I found a community theatre. For me that was important because I thought, right, I know the kind of things they're going to want, they're going to need a volunteer. Brilliant that's immediately getting me involved in that town, so that I can meet people there.

## A BIG SMILE NEVER HURT ANYBODY

I do ushering - we're fire marshals, which is really good because we always get a nice seat at the back, I help clear up afterwards, dry up all the dishes, one or twice I've helped serve drinks and stuff behind the counter.

It was a sheer fluke when I saw the advert, I came in with a friend to use the toilets actually, I saw a little advert on the wall, that said about volunteering, and I said to my friend that would suit me and immediately asked. I've been here nearly two years now!

I'd never done anything like it so I just expected to be taking the tickets, and that would be it. But I didn't expect to be doing quite as many little things, like clearing up, helping with the drinks and helping with all the different things, so — but I was quite happy, you know. I do prefer matinees, but I do do the evenings as well, yes. Coming into town on the bus then sort of wading through all the people, especially when it's dark, I'm not too happy. But the matinees are great. I like the fact that there's no pressure, I can do it when I want to - you know if you wanted to do every Saturday night you could, but if you didn't want to you don't have to.

I'm very much a people's person. I like welcoming people in - a big smile never hurt anybody; and when they leave I'm always saying did you enjoy that? And it's nice to hear the feedback from people you know? When people ask me, any questions and that, and I feel I can help them so I'm quite happy doing that - on the whole I think it's made life more enjoyable for me because I'm meeting new people.

All the different patrons that come here, they seem so friendly. It's great to have a conversation with them, during my time sitting at the back. And every single usher I've met has been so random and diverse and I love talking to people and I can quickly find out their life's history within a — you know? So that's been really good. I've just got a way with words and I'm not frightened to go direct for the mark. I don't shilly shally, just, that's it — go for the directness.

It's got me out at night. Because I live by myself, I thought it's a really good opportunity of making sure that I have to go out, and see plays, music, whatever productions are coming, something that I wouldn't normally do so. It's got me out of slumping in the sofa and watching crap on the telly basically. My life is enhanced by the fact that I can get out, and it's pushed me to do that.

When the new programme comes out, I look down there and think ooh that looks good yeah, I'm around for that, I'll do that. And that's what's good because — well let's face it, I'm retired and your days need filling up. I like variety in my life, so it's something that I hadn't done before, I like theatre and stuff, and I do like the fact that it's a little alternative and intimate theatre. I've been to the other big ones and it's not quite the same as here

And I like the fact that it might not be a hundred percent professional, but on the whole it is. And it's so darn clever and these are up and coming stars that all need — you know they need — they all got to start somewhere, and this is what really attracted me.

Some of the music's been good. I mean it's actually opened my ears to a lot of different types of music as well, and I now know what I like and what I don't like, which is good. I'm very much into Spanish classical, country and western for my sins. And some of these alternative people, that have written their own stuff, especially — folk type based. I like the - what do you call it? - the banter, of

the artists with the audience, I think that's really good. And some of the singers they've got some really good one liners and stuff, you know.

Once I actually helped one of the artists with his gramophone – I had to keep changing records, just for a few minutes at the beginning, which was quite hairy, because it was one of those old wind up things, you know? It was a bit hairy at once because it did stick, but I managed to get up and pick up the needle and put it back in the right point!

Being an usher here, it's brought my confidence out I must admit. Dealing with the public more, I find that I can be quite confident. Because obviously I know the answers so that brings out confidence. It's a really friendly place and you feel part of the Old Fire Station – you feel happy to do it. I wouldn't have been volunteering for two years if I wasn't happy to keep coming here, and it's very enjoyable.