

OUR PLACE

STORIES FROM THE OLD FIRE STATION

Collected after the
Our Place exhibition, 2018

Arts **OLD FIRE**
at the **STATION**

OUR PLACE

Stories from the Old Fire Station

We are always keen to understand what changes happen when people get involved in the work of Arts at the Old Fire Station and how that happens. In June 2018, with the help of external evaluators Anne Pirie and Liz Firth, we published stories collected from people who we work with at the Old Fire Station in Oxford¹ and a report analyzing the themes emerging from these stories².

In November 2018, we opened an exhibition in our gallery called Our Place. We then used the same storytelling methodology to help us understand what change happened for those involved in creating the exhibition. Supported by Anne Pirie, five story collectors were recruited and trained. They were AJ, Justine Malone, Hannah Eastwood, Maximillian Schramm, Sally Lovett and Simon Garood. The training was led by AJ and Simon who had been involved in the previous storytelling exercise.

They interviewed eight story tellers who had been involved in the project as professional mentors, Crisis members who were mentees or paid staff supporting the project.

The stories were recorded then transcribed by Katherine Tomlinson and then edited by Justine, Hannah and Harriet Peacock to create a short version which keeps the teller's 'voice' in the story – telling it in their own words – and reflects the teller's insights into impact and its significance for them.

This document presents the stories we collected.

A full explanation of the methodology, the project and what we learned can be found [here](#).

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¹ Anne Pirie and Liz Firth 2018 – Story telling at Arts at the Old Fire Station: <https://oldfirestation.org.uk/about/our-stories/>

² Anne Pirie and Liz Firth 2018 - Looking for Change: <https://oldfirestation.org.uk/about/our-stories/>

“I needed and it was wonderful...It made my day worthwhile, I would wake up in the morning with a good reason, hope and excitement, that I could go there, do my work, my painting. It brought a new light in my life.”

A New Light In My Life

I come from a religious and very traditional family. For boys, it's always much easier than girls, girls are far more under control and restricted everywhere, if you're a boy you can go and travel everywhere you want, you can have a girlfriend, you can stay up late but if you're a girl it's never an option. Ever since I was a child my mother was telling me about Islam and how girls are supposed to behave. It was always a question for me why woman should be restricted and ask for permissions from their husband? It's appalling, even the wages for women is half which is just not fair. So, that was when I started painting, it was a way of expressing myself and take away that suffering, to release suffering and paint for myself.

I wanted to ask the world – why does discrimination based on gender exist? Most suffering for Iranian women is simply because they are female. They are being looked upon for their gender as 'being a woman' rather than being human, this is the difficulty for Iranian woman, unfortunately they're all ruled by Islamic laws and religion. It's quite strange how this religion is tied up with the culture and traditions in Iranian culture. I always suffer with this, that even if I call myself Muslim why this religion should give such suffering to woman because of their gender.

My mother never could explain to me and come up with a satisfactory answer to why things are the way they are, she just said 'it's the rule of religion and we should follow it'. So, painting was that space where I could talk and I was allowed to talk about things that I wanted to say.

As an architect, I had always been dealing with art, it was always around me. I was an artist in high school but later I went to university. This discrimination against women, I felt more strong while at university.

I was part of a campaign when I was at university that was about promoting equality for women but because of that I was asked to leave for a couple of weeks, but the project continued. When I came here I realised a couple of my friends had been arrested due to their activities. My family had received a letter regarding a court order against me and that was the reason I couldn't go back to Iran. So, I ended up staying here but I had nothing to start my life with.

I was in a desperate situation, I was homeless and I was referred to Crisis by an organisation called Sanctuary. I needed help with some paperwork, but I was told there is a space for art and craft if I'm interested to come and join.

I found this was an amazing place where nobody would disturb me and I had access to everything I needed and it was wonderful. I found it amazing that there was this space I could come, I would keep coming for a year and a half, I loved it. In the Art Room, I could do things I like to do and it

was free, free and accessible. It made my day worthwhile, I would wake up in the morning with a good reason, hope and excitement, that I could go there, do my work, my painting. It brought a new light in my life.

So, after a while I got to know the people, they were kind with me and I guess I got good feedback from them. After a while they said they were going to do an exhibition and invited me to be a part of it. I felt very happy about it.

I've done nearly twenty pieces within this year and a half and they all been done in the Crisis Art Room. We chose a couple of them, a couple of them very old, a couple of them new and they felt that would be good idea to have them for exhibition.

When I came here I was in a very new space, I was almost like a traveller with no plan for the future but the space helped me to find my feet on the ground and kind of establish myself.

It probably was one of the best days of my life, when the painting that I drew just for myself for my own feelings, I realised it talked to other people, and other people understood it and that was one of the best moments.

I'm still excited, I'm full of joy for having my own exhibition for very first time, and I'm sure it would help me to go on enjoying it and I want to carry on doing my art.

When I came, my language wasn't that good. I was sitting in the corner and listening to my music and doing my paintings. I think it's that I haven't been ignored and they kept supporting me through the process that my confidence has grown.

I was so broken when came from Iran, very broken and depressed. This project really helped me to get on my feet and find myself. Apart from being supportive in my art, staff here have also been looking after my emotions, how I feel and I had emotional support from them. Crisis even helped me to rent a place which was really amazing thing for me. Finding a new place was the biggest problem I had and that was solved so they help me just, you know, to start my life again. I look back to two years ago and if I didn't have the support from Crisis I don't know what would have happened to me.

I felt very supported in the project by my mentors. I felt a very strong connection with them and I hope to stay in touch with them for future work.

I had this dream that I can sit in safety, but also come forward and I can do my own art work and that was always my dream, and I feel like now, I am going towards it.

“That idea of the space and the place and you not necessarily knowing what it is or where it was even from, but the beauty in that, discovering beauty in the unseen. I think that’s a lovely representation of the people that are in the building. It’s those sorts of deeper ideas about looking a bit deeper, looking a bit harder and not dismissing something because of its label.”

Discovering Beauty In The Unseen

I came on board as the lead artist for the Our Place project as it really appealed to me. I was invited for an interview. Crisis members were on the panel as well which was interesting, and actually the hardest part of the interviewing process. I think, by involving them it gave an opportunity to ask the questions that mattered to them and they could find out what it was that they felt they would gain themselves by employing the person. It felt like a really crucial part of that process, that they’d put something into the process too, and made it part of their decision not just that of the management.

The project title was ‘Our Place’ and it was about an exploration of what this building means to people. Quite a lot of people showed interest to begin with and in the classes, we just started going through ideas and thinking through possibilities. As it went on it became clear who was really engaged.

Crisis needed someone to cover for two of the other art classes, so I started coming in for those too and that meant that I could continue to have those conversations whilst doing the project. I’m still here doing two classes so it’s been really good for that, learning and meeting people while being part of the Art Room. Doing that has been a significant part in adding to the process of the project, and I think if I’d just been coming in for Our Place I think I wouldn’t have seen such a broad story.

Being part of the Art Room as well as coming in and doing the teaching has opened my mind to homelessness and what that broad term means. I think before I thought it was probably just simply being on the street which is part of it but it’s by no means the whole story.

One of the difficulties for somebody coming in suddenly to do an art project like this is that I think it takes a little time for certain people to get used to new people and new ways of working. It was probably the hardest part for me in the project, coming into the Art Room from not having worked in this sort of environment before.

I had a passionate want to be in this kind of environment from my past experiences, I had two alcoholic parents and had a pretty hard time with all of that, and I think having that sort of experience meant that I was coming at it from a certain level of understanding.

My own art work very much explores the underrepresented person. Including themes exploring mass atrocity and war, genocide and mass graves and that sort of thing. It's underrepresentation, that unknown person, the overall personal story that I think has always interested me. The bigger stories that condense into something visual and not just a sort of representation of something. I think that's what one member certainly picked up on in my work, and that led to them exploring conceptual ideas in their own work.

I started off with researching ideas, I looked through historical newspaper archives and printed off things like that just as a starting point for discussion between people. It was those sorts of conversations that started discussions about the building and then that led us to look at my own use of unusual materials in my work. I never really use materials in the way they were meant to be used, so I think it was that sort of thinking that led to one artist to use the dirt in the corners of the room as the basic material in their work.

Another artist was doing her own painting in one of the workshops, and just happened to be watching the paint that'd run down the sink, when she was cleaning off brushes or a palette. She got her phone and took some photographs of the paint running down the sink, and then printed it on the Crisis printers but sent it to a wrong printer so it wasn't in colour, it was a black and white picture of paint running down a sink, but it dawned on us it didn't look like paint running down a sink, it could have been anything, it could have been an aerial photograph of a desert, it could be a landscape from space or it could be microscopic – you know there was no way of finding out – because there was no plughole, no edge, it was just dollops of paint.

That idea of the space and the place and you not necessarily knowing what it is or where it was even from, but the beauty in that, discovering beauty in the unseen. I think that's a lovely representation of the people that are in the building. It's those sorts of deeper ideas about looking a bit deeper, looking a bit harder and not dismissing something because of its label.

I can totally see how vital this space is for so many people. I think the Art Room and being in the Old Fire Station is a really wonderful place to be because you see such a broad spectrum of people and have amazing conversations with people that you know you wouldn't get together in any other context. To be a safe place to just come, do whatever you want to do, explore, and walk out of your head for just two hours and to use the room without being given any kind of labels.

It's been a great experience for me, it's something that I would certainly look at doing again for sure. There's something very special in installing the work members did, more special even than doing your own exhibitions. Seeing the exhibition up, and just how proud the artists are of their work is so rewarding and the panel discussion on the opening night was really special, because that was when everybody said how they felt and you realise just how much it meant to everybody.

It really was powerful seeing how important art is, I think art on any level can be really vital, and at a time when people are cutting the arts, it becomes more powerful still.

I'm over the moon and I think the artists are all completely over the moon too. I think it was a great opportunity for both myself and for them and I think the more people or more businesses like Crisis and The Old Fire Station recognise the benefits of these sorts of activities the better the world would be.

“The shape and form of the Our Place project and the people involved really reflects the bigger picture of the whole building. I would say it’s the value that’s placed on every individual and the respect that every individual gives and receives.”

Everyone Gives And Receives

I ended up as one of the member artists taking part in Our Place. I began going to the art classes regularly and got a lot out of them. The lead artist for the project started coming into the classes and doing a little bit with us and overseeing, you know I think, getting a general feel for what our classes are like and what we were up to. I know that she was particularly interested in the unseen and things that we would take for granted, just everyday things or objects or you know the dirt in the classroom and stuff like that. So that got me quite excited because it meant that I could explore less conventional ways of doing things and it allowed me to free myself from feeling restrained. You know, just the act of like painting and trying to get a picture perfect, and actually saying what else is beautiful?

I was really inspired by just a few small conversations that we had about the unseen. The project gave me a bit more freedom for ways of looking at the world and just looking a bit further and a bit more deeply and being more present. It’s like when we walk down the street sometimes we’ve got our blinkers on and we’re just thinking about our destination, but actually we might miss lots of subtle, well sometimes not even subtle, but beautiful things. With the images of the sink, it was the washing away of the things that you don’t need but then leaving that trace. I really liked that there was a kind of collective element to that as well. I just thought it looked really beautiful, like when the white spirit mixed with the water it would leave really intricate, quite incredible patterns. It was kind of unconsciously collaborative and for me it reflected my experience of the therapeutic nature and the joy of just being around other people creating things. It wasn’t just mine, it was everybody’s.

It was nice that we had the rags and the images to work with because in some ways the rags talked – well for me they were about healing in lot of ways, which is what Crisis and Arts at the Old Fire Station really help with. A lot of the healing, from different things in that room, and about stitching and doing something very simple but therapeutic, meditative and repetitive. Seeing the subtle changes like seeing how an improvement to a little craft like sewing, even the stitches for me represented a likeness to stitching human skin together.

At the opening, people there were interested in and wanted to talk to me about my work. There was just a buzz about the place and I kind of took a step back and looked at it and went ‘oh that’s... I did that’ – that’s a great feeling. To have had that project during a time when I was very stressed and finding things difficult was actually – it helped me a lot more because I was still feeling a sense of achievement somewhere. It was a really nurturing and positive experience for us all, together with the artist mentors on a really special occasion and everybody’s work together in that room was wonderful. I wasn’t there for the work coming off the walls, but we get to take that

work away with us now and it's a reminder. My partner has a piece of mine and that's really nice in itself, that somebody wanted it.

This project has given me more self-worth and self-confidence. I've realised I'm better at reminding myself to be in the moment and be more present, that really helps in life in general. It makes your life more enriching when you appreciate the small details or the things that sometimes we take for granted or throw away. There's a bit of self-knowledge and resilience that comes with that as well. I read some of the comments in the exhibition comments book and most of them were of course positive, but there were some that were quite kind of like, 'this is so simplistic, this is amateur' and it was like well, that was ok, and I actually quite liked that there were negatives, because that's the reality of it and I don't want it to be all just lots of fluffy responses either. That was quite interesting for me because it kind of almost made me smile! That was evidence to me that there's been a shift over the year since I was going to the Crisis classes and with all the different projects and training schemes and things like that that I've been involved with, there's been a shift in that.

This project has allowed me to take risks and go for things and forgive myself if things don't necessarily work out the first time or even, ever. I think that will be a lasting effect. When I started the classes I was already of that mindset that I knew I needed to work on those aspects of my life and my self-esteem, but I didn't quite know how much just the act of creativity in a space like that would help with that kind of thing. I don't think that's going to go away, especially if I keep practicing these things or seeking out things that are fulfilling for me, which I will.

I think that was really noticeable in the kind of nurturing and positive environment that was created, especially when it was the member artists and their mentors, working with professional artists, who were just so respectful of what the project was about and so interested in our ideas, thoughts and nobody was leading at that point, it didn't feel like it, although the lead artist was leading it was definitely, a collaborative, nurturing and supportive environment, with everybody supporting each other in some way.

And the fact that for me obviously coming in first and foremost as a member, you're not treated as a 'problem' or a 'patient' or someone who needs 'help' in that way, it's more about inviting people to do as much or as little as you feel like you can or an invitation to do things you might have thought you couldn't before, to grow I guess. But that you take responsibility for how much or as little or how quickly you want that to happen, so in that sense as well you're kind of like, very much the designer of your own progress or programme here. It was really, really important for me to have somewhere like this in Oxford, because Oxford is a very transient city. I found I was closed off to a lot of things and I would have found it very hard to find a sense of community, and just somewhere to come every day if I wanted to and to see familiar faces. I suppose it made the city a lot easier to live in, in that respect.

The shape and form of the Our Place project and the people involved really reflects the bigger picture of the whole building. I would say it's the value that's placed on every individual and the respect that every individual gives and receives. The relationships between people, and nobody's experience is any less – everybody can learn something from each other, it doesn't matter what your experience is in a certain area, and that's always something that still surprises me because you don't often get it, it's a very unique set up.

“It enabled me to work in a building that I love; with people and an ethos that I love, but then actually still do the visual arts part of my passion that I’d lost otherwise. I’m hoping to be able to carry that on and continue doing it, it’s enabled me to get my label back, get my passion back.”

Getting My Label Back

I started as a zero-hour Front of House Assistant, so I was initially just front of house kind of working behind the bar, did some shop shifts, at the same time was working other places. And then I went to Front of House Coordinator. And then the Front of House Manager at the time moved on, and then I went for that job and got that, so I just worked my way further into the team.

It’s interesting, because like when I left uni I never thought ‘oh I’m going to go work for an organisation like this’, because I don’t think you really know organisations like this exist. I started in such a casual way, doing front of house, using bar skills I learnt and customer services skills and then the building being the way it is, and the team being so small and open is that they kind of recognise in you skills you can bring in other roles and then they give you that opportunity. They allow people to grow into the roles, even if they might be under qualified, which I think I probably was at the time of getting the Front of House Manager job. So the journey itself into that Front of House Manager role was awesome and really well supported and I learnt loads, like I learnt how to manage people who were older than me, that I’d literally never done before, I learnt how to manage people coming in drunk, and how to deal with that and how to resolve a situation.

Before I worked at The Old Fire Station and a little bit of overlap, I always worked in visual arts so I did a visual arts degree, worked for a couple galleries and then worked for two local Councils in public arts. So visual arts has always been a really big part of me and my interests. Then I came and worked here a more front of house role, which I also really enjoy and uses other skills I had from other work, but visual arts are still within me, they’re a thing I’ve always wanted to do more of. When I took on the Front of House Manager job here, I was aware I might lose some of that.

The first thing I did for Our Place was I helped the member interview panel for the Lead Artist. Because of front of house I do a shed load of interviews, I’m always recruiting new staff. So after the interview, I didn’t have that much involvement in the initial planning, it wasn’t until later, when the workshops – the specific Our Place workshops were in the timetable, and it started getting busier, then I got involved in providing admin support – basically exactly around that point they realised, who’s going to be doing all the travel reimbursing and the material ordering.

The director of AOFS and I have always talked about wanting to do more visual arts stuff because he’s always known what my background is and he’s mentioned a few times about doing more stuff for Christmas Light Festival and some other ideas, but it’s that difficult thing of juggling it. But the visual arts department had reduced their hours between them for various reasons, and so there was a bit of a gap in terms of admin support for a project that’s the size of Our Place. So Jeremy

offered me the chance to do some Our Place admin and I was like 'visual arts hell yeah!'

My role was admin support, so checking over the budget, authorising payments, email logistics, setting up meetings, room hires – basically everything and anything that the Visual Arts Manager needed help with, I was there to help her. I did bits and pieces around the public opening, just making sure that all the artists had food and some drinks, their travel reimbursed and had a space to all meet together before walking into the public opening. I was in the meetings taking notes, so I got to be involved in the creative conversations, which was awesome; being there in an admin role gave me the opportunity to also be there in a creative role.

The projection was a really nice part of it as well, it happened very late in the process, and I think something we really learnt was to do it early next time, so we're going to plan further ahead. We got an external artist who needed time to understand what the project was, who the people were that had engaged and what we needed as an organisation. We learnt to make more space for that process next time, which was a good learning experience. I had done stuff like that before but in a very different context, I had experience in terms of putting on outdoor site-specific art and the logistics and the legal stuff you have to think of, but it's quite different when you're working for a building and for a venue because there's a lot more ownership over making sure that it fits, and it's ok and it's approved by people involved. So I learnt a lot from that, things I developed most was just staying calm – for example, the public opening night not only was it the light projection going up, plus supporting Our Place, but also there was front of house, because I still have a Front of House Manager hat to wear, and there was a lot on for front of house that night. So, I definitely learnt how to juggle multiple roles whilst staying calm, even just on the surface.

I was like a duck where I was like 'I'm gliding' but my feet were like 'argh'. But I did it, and the thing I love most about this building is the people we work with, whether it's colleagues or the public or members or whatever, people can make your day so easily and I think this project, really enabled me to meet and work with more people in that sense. I just really like people, so to be able to get to know more people and understand why they're here, hearing people's stories and backgrounds and interests and working with them in different ways, I think that's the thing I got most from it, was being able to just meet and work with even more people than I usually do.

I think what this project really enabled me to do is find a role in this building which I love so much, that then engages with a part of me that I otherwise couldn't have, that visual arts part of my day was back again. I mean I loved, loved what I was doing anyway, but now I get to do both, so it's like, win-win. It's also really varied which I like as well, one minute I can be in a meeting creatively thinking about how an exhibition's going to happen, and the next minute I'm training volunteers in how to usher a show and chatting with the company about what merchandise they need selling. It's such different things, but uses similar skills and keeps my day really varied.

It enabled me to work in a building that I love; with people and an ethos that I love, but then actually still do the visual arts part of my passion that I'd lost otherwise. I'm hoping to be able to carry that on and continue doing it, it's enabled me to get my label back, get my passion back.

“Funnily enough, when it comes to it, you don’t get a lot of failure because it just encourages people to give their best and be totally committed to things and see things through.”

Giving Ourselves Bigger Challenges

‘Our Place’ was an open title to begin with – we wanted Crisis members to have an opportunity to change it if they preferred something different. Increasingly, we are trying to involve members in the whole process in the development of projects, such as the selection processes and other decision making – the voice of Crisis members we work with is a very important part of how we develop what we do: we listen. It was a risk to set something up without knowing if we’d have participants, so I think there was quite a lot of learning around that as well. As the Visual Arts Manager, I remember feeling quite anxious, there was a point when I was thinking, are there going to be enough people for this project to go ahead? You have to trust that it is going to happen. You just need to take a deep breath and go with your conviction in the integrity of the project... you’ve got to be true to yourself and to what you believe in. And then it did all fall in to place and several people signed up to take part in the project.

We decided, as with previous projects, that there would be a model of having a lead artist/artist in residence then bringing in other artists specifically suited to mentoring individual Crisis members. We also had in mind that the sort of artist we wanted to work with needed to be someone who would be very good at being a mentor to other artists. We developed what I feel was more of an art school format, looking at a few individuals having a very intense and very tailored experience, rather than it being a group working towards a similar outcome. Sometimes art work can deal with tough issues and indeed with Our Place, some of the concepts that came out of it were subtle and conceptually very interesting, and not necessarily that obvious, and I think that’s through the nature of having more in depth conversations and developing good relationships between the mentors and mentees. So it narrowed down and there were only three artists who ended up following the whole project through from beginning to end. But I think there is a massive value in the depth of experience gained through this approach. If three people have a really intense in-depth experience, where there’s a lot of learning happening, sometimes it is better to be supporting that, rather than maybe fifteen people having a relatively superficial experience. I think we need to be quite courageous with that way of working. I felt with this it was important to give the members an opportunity to really develop their own thinking and art practice, refining the conceptual aspects of it, and we were being more ambitious by giving ourselves bigger challenges in the process. It demonstrates that there is the same level of rigour in terms of our expectations and the standards of the presentation of work for mentees as there is for any other artist who creates or exhibits with us.

For one member, being encouraged to consider ‘Our Place’ not in a very literal sense, led him to looking at the little bits of dust and the residue that we leave around the place. There’s something very profound to what he was doing and what he chose to investigate, putting this detritus under the microscope and seeing the beauty in it. I found it very moving that somebody who’s been homeless, vulnerably housed, really rock bottom in their life, feeling like they are that bit of rubbish on the floor that’s been discarded, being able to pick that up and see that that has potential and

beauty in it and use it as a metaphor in their artwork. I thought that was an interesting, thoughtful process and he's a fantastic example of someone who has really embraced the opportunities, put huge amounts of commitment into it and has made a massive journey from when I first met him. He's wanting to pursue his future as an artist, he's at art college now. Hopefully this was a useful stepping stone within that process, so I think it was seeing just one person make such a big journey, and the quality of work he produced – that makes it all incredibly worthwhile.

One of the key people from one of the organisations that put funding into the project came to an art session to observe and meet some of the artists, and he had quite in-depth conversations with some of the artists, staying much longer than he had intended and afterwards he said how much he enjoyed it, and appreciated being able to call in on the project in progress. I think he gained an insight into the way we work and the impact it was having and how important that was. If people from outside the OFS pick up how much of a difference it does make to people's lives and their confidence then that's very important, because I think it also contributes to raising Crisis members' self-esteem and confidence. Here, people can feel they are in a safe place, and feel supported in what might initially seem to them like slightly bizarre ideas, so with one member and the little bits of dust off the floor to another member with the used rags and paint residue in the sink, I think it made for really interesting work which was coming from the heart.

This is the first time in my career that I've worked in an arts organisation that works across art forms. I've tended to always work more in a gallery context and I'm finding it really fascinating just seeing how things work in performing arts – theatre and music etc there are a lot of differences in the approach and the way people talk about what they are doing, so I'm learning from that, and my way of working is shifting. There's not only an 'outwardly inclusive' approach, inclusion is built into how the two organisations collaborate within the building. I feel as an organisation there's a real openness and an enthusiasm for embracing a sound way of working, which has an ethical base and is very inclusive, and it's what I feel passionate about in terms of who I am, and the way I want to work. You pick up on the conversations that are going on around you and learn a lot from that.

I've been conscious in the time that I've been here that there is a constant discussion in the background about how the two organisations (AOFS and Crisis) work together, it's a fairly unique model, and it's constantly evolving. I'm really enjoying being part of that journey, it's informing my professional practice. I like this way of collaborative working and I like the way there's the possibility to weave in what we're doing as an organisation, such as support for artists, and for there to be ongoing training and development happening across the teams –it's embedded in how we work. It's really good for artists who are supporting other artists to feel like they have been supported by the AOFS team as well.

I do feel very committed to this organisation, I feel it is a very supportive environment to work in. For example I think there's a sense of people being supportive even if things don't go to plan, I know there's a lot of things said about being able to learn from failure, but I do feel this is the kind of environment where that can happen. Funnily enough, when it comes to it, you don't get a lot of failure because it just encourages people to give their best and be totally committed to things and see things through. It's partly feeling that you can really trust each person is doing their own bit, and doing it well.

Our Place has been very informative for me in terms of understanding what seems to work particularly well here, and what we can build on for the future. I think my expectation of what we can do has become more refined as a result of the project. Part of it has been developing a sense of the community of Arts at the Old Fire Station, because what I've noticed is that lots of people are very loyal to the place and return to be involved over and over again. When artists come to us with interesting proposals this is a 'can do' organisation. I think that is how we build good relationships. Even now I feel a huge sense of achievement. I feel really inspired for all the different ways that we could work in the future as well.

“Because the work itself it is a complete reflection of me, you know I’ve had quite a dark past emotionally, internally and externally as well and it’s been a bit of a grimy journey, and I’ve been able to build my confidence, work towards an education, and start doing some more positive stuff for myself as well as for other people. ”

It’s A Real Community

I think back to when I first started coming to Crisis like, anxiety crippled me, really did cripple me. I would sit in the corner on my own not speaking to anyone, literally just telling everyone to please stay out of my bubble. At the time I’d just come out of treatment, and you know I kind of didn’t know who I was, kind of like an empty shell.

I was just trying to kill time, to fill my days up. I liked coming to the art classes because it was all about really getting some structure in my life. If I was ever at a loose end I could always just pop in, and join an art class. I never did art when I was at school – well, I never really went to school, got kicked out in Year 9.

I only started drawing when I was in treatment, doodling like little tattoo designs and stuff. I just started doing that every day, and it started developing I started coming here, and now I’m hopefully going to university, because of my art – I mean, it’s weird!

I’ve been involved from the beginning of the Our Place project really. It started off eight, nine months ago when I was asked if I wanted to be included in the selection process of the artist. I didn’t know what was going to come of it, but I put my name down to say that I’d like to be a part of the project, whatever it was. No one knew what we had, or what it was going to be at the time, because all we had was the ‘Our Place’ name.

We started off bouncing ideas off each other, we were all helping each other out, getting involved, and it was really nice to kind of have friends. Everyone’s got their past, everyone’s got their issues but we’re all here for a similar reason, and I like being one of them people that goes around trying to help other people, you know? This is what it’s all about, and for me it was a big thing about integrating back into society as well, here is a safe environment to practice and see what works and what doesn't.

My mentor helped me to look at myself as an artist and what kind of work I want to portray. My work involved putting dust from the building in little Petri dishes under a microscope and shone different lights through so you can see the beautiful art that comes out of stuff that just gets cleaned away, left behind, skin cells, all that kind of stuff. As soon as we put the first Petri dish under the microscope, that was it, we were like this is what we’re doing.

It’s nice to think that I’ve been able to create something that’s so unique, completely different and organic. Because the work itself it is a complete reflection of me, you know I’ve had quite a dark

past emotionally, internally and externally as well and it's been a bit of a grimy journey, and I've been able to build my confidence, work towards an education, and start doing some more positive stuff for myself as well as for other people. So something really nice and beautiful and pure has kind of come out of that, and that is the ethos of the work itself.

At the public opening of Our Place, quite a few people then stayed afterwards to listen to how the work was made and speak to us, and that feeling was so awe-inspiring and motivational for me. It really helped to kind of solidify the fact that I'm supposed to be here, you know it's alright for me to be here, and to keep on going. In terms of confidence I can sit and have a conversation with someone that I don't know, like on the night these people I'd never met, never seen and I was able to talk to them about my work. Looking back at some of the videos people took, it was just mad to think how nervous and anxious I was but I didn't portray that at all, I came across as quite confident and so it was really good to see that I could kind of do that in the outside world.

I did the Arts Training Scheme, before Our Place, as well. We looked at so many different areas, from the management side of things, how to book the calendars, to the paperwork and the insurances that go with selecting artists, and actually running these shows all the way to the practical stuff like putting up the exhibitions themselves and taking them down as well, the Arts Training Scheme was letting me look into the practical side a lot deeper.

I had an absolutely amazing opportunity to meet so many different artists, get conversations with them, start thinking about what work they're doing and like how that can relate back to me, whether they can help me or I can help them. Through meeting all these different people, it really threw me out of my comfort zones of coming into the lessons, sitting in the corner on my own and not talking to many people. Pretty much everyone that I've been in contact with via that, I'm still in contact with now, we all talk about our art and we do little events here there and everywhere, and we do all that together. It's a real community.

I'm now working towards getting an education, which is a massive thing for me because I didn't get one first time round, and ultimately working towards giving back as well. That is why I wanted to get into art, because I know that it's really helped me. Through some of the work that I've done I've figured out different kind of traumas that I've been through. It's just mad to think that I wouldn't have known about that if I didn't start throwing paint all over the place.

I thought I was going to be an addict for the rest of my life, I thought I was going to be homeless for the rest of my life, but I'm applying for university, clean, determined and ultimately I want to then hopefully either come back to teach here maybe one day, and my end goal is to take art therapy into the treatment centres.

I had a chat with my mum yesterday and she was telling me that she's proud of where I've been and my recovery and getting out of the situations that I've been in, and the fact that I'm looking at going to university. That college course will help in my recovery, help keep me clean, help keep me motivated, you know, can't go wrong.

So it's just nice to see that through this project, through coming to Crisis, the Arts Training Scheme, I've just been able to develop myself as a person and yeah – the whole journey has been growth, healthy growth.

“I’ve got teenagers myself... Mine are fortunate they’re not in so many difficulties, but it could be any of them. It made me think about how complex it is for them navigating trying to find somewhere to live. I found it hard, because you’re a bit helpless, aren’t you?”

It’s More About Nurturing

I worked as an artist mentor on Our Place. You rarely work in one to ones. There were other ideas and exchanges going on between the artists and the other member artists, but being able to work one to one really is a huge benefit.

It was new territory for my mentee. I wanted to be sure that I didn’t push too hard, but at the same time you’re there to help them and to hopefully push their ideas creatively, and I think that is quite difficult, especially for people who don’t have a lot of confidence in themselves. You’re not pushing someone to reach a grade, you’re pushing them to self-express. It’s a more open environment, whereas this isn’t about critique – it’s more about nurture.

My mentee became interested in the marks and the left behind and the overlooked and the unnoticed and – not the ‘dirty’ – but the things that you often treat as rubbish. She’d had these weeds growing near the back of her mum’s house, in the yard, and that she kept being drawn back to the growth and plants and new life at the beginning.

She then chose to collect the rags from the Art Room that had been used to wipe up the paint – I think the reality of then having them in a bag was almost a bit overwhelming, because it was pushing her in her self-confidence and belief. If you haven’t got that experience it’s quite difficult when you see a pile of fabric to imagine it evolving into some sort of installation art piece. I wanted to try and understand what she wanted to express about herself in her work – why she’d chosen the rags, what they meant to her.

I really encouraged my mentee to be more open. She could do some of the techniques quite easily, so I brought in some wire and just some different coloured thread and showed her ways that she could manipulate the wire and really simply create three-dimensional form. I didn’t want her to feel overwhelmed by technical difficulties to prevent her from producing what she wanted to say, and so we just did really simple techniques. Then we just talked about all sorts of different themes, whether it was a plant, not a plant, a spiral. We then talked a lot about using the stitching as a diary and as a metaphor – if you ask her now to look at the leaves she can remember you know ‘that was a bad day’ or ‘that was the day when I really struggled’.

These weeds that she’d seen at home were still surviving, coming through a wall. In the end she came back to one of the sort of things she had right at the beginning about growth, and not being so self-critical, and overcoming and realising that you can do things. So throughout the journey we came back in a nice circle.

The professional artists were asked about half way through the process if we wanted to create a response. I wanted to do something in the background – that receded, I suppose, because to me the important thing was that everybody saw the members' work. My mentee talked about homeless people and how it's not always obvious because you're sofa surfing or staying with friends. There are lots of them and you don't really see them, and I really wanted to pick up on that. I'm quite interested in challenging myself. It might encourage me to use a really awkward space again.

I've got teenagers myself and to think that, you know, people not much older than them or the same age as them are facing these difficulties, and how complicated their lives are. Mine are fortunate they're not in so many difficulties, but it could be any of them. It made me think about how complex it is for them navigating trying to find somewhere to live. I found it hard, because you're a bit helpless, aren't you?

But seeing in action the benefits of creative endeavour for people's wellbeing, it's always really good to see it in a more direct situation. I think it's important for all of us. I always say to my boys, 'be kind'. I think it's really important that we are all more empathetic in our world and to remind ourselves how fortunate we are and that we should help others. I was a bit nervous at the beginning because I was a bit sort of worried whether I'd be good enough to fulfil that role, and I think it gave me more confidence to feel that actually I've got something to give as well.

I think that was a great thing to do to tie up the exhibition with the Light Festival. I was so pleased so many people came, and to see some of the images on the outside of the building. I thought that was really effective. I think they've done an amazing job, they've all come up with some fantastic ideas, it looks great. The team here has been fantastic at supporting the members and the mentors to produce a really good quality exhibition. It was really nice to see the benefits of creative art for the members' own development and their own wellbeing.

This Place as a Sanctuary

It is extraordinary that my working life has gone full circle. Its mentoring artist's practice but the thing about me is that I trained in art therapy and mental health social work and I do feel that helps inform aspects of what I did even though that my role is very different. I became involved in the building to begin with as an artist and I think I really didn't understand what the relationship with Crisis was about. I was asked very early on if I would mind working with the intern from Crisis and I was very pleased to do that, but I didn't really know very much. I never could really understand the concept, I said this to Jeremy quite recently – I think until you get very close to what's going on, you don't really understand...

Sarah contacted me by email and explained that one of the Crisis member artists who'd been involved as an intern during my exhibition in the past was using the Art Room and had shown interest in being involved in Our Place. We'd developed a good relationship during the time doing my install and she'd also visited my artist studio. She was involved in my artist talk, which was a good way in to a pre-existing relationship. I was asked 'would you be interested if we floated it to the Crisis member?' and I said 'absolutely yes', because I had obviously formed a bit of a bond really. I was interested in her artwork anyway and I'd expressed an interest in seeing her practice, so it felt like that was a coincidence, a 'happy coming together'.

It was quite a memorable first meeting. I'd thought ahead of time and I'd brought some materials in which I thought she might like to look at. I'd thought about the fact that her practice was probably going to be about exile which is where we overlap in our work. I'd been to see an exhibition in London, a massive retrospective at the Tate which just totally blew me away. I brought in the catalogue which we had a look through together, and there was an extraordinary coincidence that as the Crisis member was showing me her paintings on her iPhone, and I was showing her paintings from the catalogue, there were two images which completely overlapped in terms of content – it was in fact one of the paintings that ended up in her exhibition. So there was this kind of like 'oh my god' moment – extraordinary that these two kind of metaphors, visual metaphors, had been used. It was at that point that I realised that this artist wasn't going to be using the project in quite the same way as the other artists.

When I said to her 'what do you feel that you would like to bring to this?' it was all about the struggle of women in Iran. The issue of exile she explores in her work is very live for her, she is living this as a reality and I didn't feel that she would want to do more conceptual work which was about the building or in the way that the other artists were exploring the space. This has been the extraordinary thing about working on this project in that the Crisis member involved only really disclosed her status as an exile when she spoke to me at my install, so nobody at Crisis knew that background and the reason for her homelessness. We had this thread that went back to Our Place because this happened at Arts at the Old Fire Station in the Gallery because of an art practice. Because my art practice is about exile, she just went 'oh, I recognise this' when she saw the work and learnt what the themes were, so for me that was very very powerful.

What she and I discussed on that first day was this place as a sanctuary and what holds this need to express this as part of the project together. It was a very powerful, all-encompassing reason and concept. I felt my role at times was holding that and trying to keep it within the project but realising that this was actually something quite exceptional in a sense, not saying that it's any greater or lesser than the other artists on the project and the struggles, just that this is a different cultural experience. When I first started working with her I went off and I did some research, mainly on Iran and I'm very conscious that you know, I don't have sufficient knowledge to comment on that particular sort of scenario, but none the less just a very quick look enabled me to see that there are parallels, really interesting parallels about how women are treated under dictatorships. It really triggered something in me the piece that Firooze and I ended up doing together was really my way of showing solidarity for their struggle. The lovely thing about that was that my mentee got involved in it and brought her own pieces in too.

There is such a sense of a bond and a similarity in terms of themes and the fact that Firooze jumped so readily into many of the forms of expression that I was offering. It can feel like sometimes you've discovered something for yourself, but then if you stand back and introduce what you do to somebody else you can begin to see that actually this is what practice is for many people, like it's not just me that's obsessed with trying different things and gets a kick out of that, other people do too. A lot of the people that I work with, in mentoring may have one form and perhaps Firooze's unusual in her enthusiasm and appetite for trying different things but it kind of made me think 'yeah this is not just me'. My method was to show her examples of what could be done and then she would say 'I really like that' or 'I really want to do that' so we'd hone in on it and try it.

There are overlaps in our lives. What she and I do and in our work and what she and I have experienced is what's called 'post-memory'. I grew up with my father in political exile not knowing what had happened and most of my work is about uncovering this history which affected us greatly as a family but nonetheless is second-hand experience. Firooze is going through this as a first-hand trauma so I see her experience as being more akin to his which is very interesting and valuable. The first thing she said to me was how amazed she was to see in my paintings was that they were very peaceful, she said this was a new idea for her that you could paint and express trauma as something that wasn't dark and terrible and that really, really struck me. She repeated it in the artist's talk, I think I specifically asked her because I thought people would find that interesting.

Here, you're working across organisations and even though you're all in the same building, you're working together very closely. I think people worked very hard to explain to you what's happening and who they are and I felt very held throughout the process and very looked after, certainly in comparison with other projects in organisations I've worked with, it was superb. All kind of things can go wrong and be confusing with organisations that bring creative people in – but they don't seem to have this ethos which I think is really wonderful. It seems to be that the same care that's taken with Crisis members is taken with people who are brought in on projects. I felt I experienced that. This is the first experience I've had of mentoring somebody who is actually in the state of political exile and I think this just happened organically as part of my practice.

I would say I'm far more interested in thinking about working with exile as a genre, whereas before I would have probably just been thinking very much in my own practice, but I'm thinking of it more in more general terms. I hadn't really had time to step back from my own work and think about that and I probably would look for more information and examples of people working in this area of practice. I'd say there was a lovely atmosphere that was generated by this project and it felt like that was across all artists. The mentor artists did not feel like they were 'the professionals' and the Crisis members weren't 'not the professionals' – there was a real sense of equality in the room. Some of the relationships that developed, it was almost as though mentors – mentor artists were mentoring each other at certain points, I think there was a lot of interesting dynamics and interactions going on between the artists.

When my mentee came into the Art Room, I think second or third session she arrived with all this body of work that she'd created, and there was just a gasp in the room, and I just remember thinking 'oh my god, she's an artist'. And from that moment onwards, I never thought of her as anything other than somebody who was exceptionally good at her craft, who was using incredibly powerful expression and who deserved total respect in terms of her artistic practice. There was no sense of hierarchy whatsoever, only a sense that I had more privilege and advantage in my life, at this particular moment in time. I suppose what I'm picking up from this is that really my understanding of my own practices is actually about displacement and homeless isn't it? And that is so universal, the problem is that a lot of us don't realise how close we could be to that state and there's nothing really between us.

To read the report on what we learned from this project, click here.

Thanks to the following for supporting Our Place:



St Michael's and All Saints' Charitable Trust, and Patricia Williams

We are grateful to our core funders for supporting us to reflect and learn:

