

# OPENING HEARTS

*A reflection on how working creatively alongside people using the services of Galway Simon Community brought about change.*

Red Door Studio was invited by Galway Simon to work with their clients as part of their winter initiative. Red Door Studio, an art therapy initiative recently set up in Galway, facilitates opportunities for lasting change in the lives of people experiencing mental health challenges and social exclusion. We use the creative process, with clear therapeutic boundaries, to create trusted relationships in which people empower themselves to express, explore and bring about change.

Our plan was to build trusting relationships, co-create and collaborate and then reflect on where that took us as a group. It involved developing new skills in expressing ourselves, taking risks, making choices, solving problems and thinking with reflexivity. The small steps taken by participants each week paved a way for internal change: self confidence, self awareness, improved connections and understanding of each other.



For what is creativity and art making for if not to change ourselves, others and our environment?

This change led to the group talking about the possibility of having an exhibition. Although that wasn't the original objective, it became apparent that this was to become an important part of the outcome.

In honour of this decision a joint art piece was created by the group (seen left). This gave us our title: "Open Heart - A Real Life Art Experience". This image reflects the effects of three months of creating together - our hearts were opened, yet the experience was rooted in real life with all its' challenges.

Parallels between the creative process and real life can be challenging as we

begin to see part of our true selves and risk showing this to others. It is an experience in vulnerability - an emotion not unfamiliar to people using the services of Galway Simon. Yet creating can also bring comfort - the feel of the art materials, the use of colours, experiencing a sense of mastery, reconnecting to a sense of play or a feeling of freedom to express ourselves without the use of words. Perhaps most importantly, there is comfort in feeling connected with others as we create alongside one another.

Once the artwork was framed people's sense of pride shone through. We reflected on each stage of the process with participants so that their experiences were acknowledged and integrated. We also discussed what the group wanted to communicate to the general public with this exhibition and one of the participants suggested the following

“People with disabilities can do as well as anyone else, given the opportunity and space. We thought we couldn't do it but with time and patience we realised we could do it. It can take us more time, but we can do it!”.

This message was embraced by the group and the exhibition was hung in the Secret Garden Café in Galway. Galway Simon staff, participants' families and friends and the general public arrived in a show of support and appreciation on the night of the opening. James Harold, the Arts Officer from Galway City Council, Karen Golden, the CEO of Galway Simon Community and Ursula Murry from Red Door Studio all said a few words. It wasn't until one of the group participants stood up to welcome and thank people for coming, that the exhibition felt like 'a real life experience'. When the exhibition was being taken down two weeks later, one of the women running the cafe said that people had taken the time to look at the artwork and were surprised that it was created by people using homeless services. One member of the public said that they felt the exhibition gave out a strong message of hope - further evidence of creativity's ability to change lives.

This article was written by Ursula Murry, art therapist and co-founder of Red Door Studio. For information on what Red Door Studio offers, please contact us at [reddoorstudiogalway@gmail.com](mailto:reddoorstudiogalway@gmail.com)