

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 the Galway Simon to work creatively with their clients as part of their winter initiative. Red Door Studio, an art therapy initiative recently set up in Galway, which facilitates lasting change in the lives of people experiencing mental health difficulties and social exclusion through creative engagement. We use the creative process within the boundary of trusted relationships and confidentiality to empower people to express themselves, explore new perspectives and bring about change.

Our plan was to build trusted relationships, co-engage and collaborate through the creative process and then to reflect on where that took us as a group. It involved developing new skills, risk taking, making choices, problem solving, reflective thinking, verbal and non verbal communication. The small steps taken each week meant that people's knowledge, technical expertise and creative experiences increased, paving the way for internal change. For what is creativity and art making for if not to change ourselves and those around us? This change led to the group talking about the possibility



of having an exhibition and although that wasn't the group's objective, it soon became apparent that this was to become an important part of the outcome.

A joint art piece created by the group evolved into the exhibition title "Open Heart - A Real Life Art Experience" (seen left). This image reflects what happened for people during three months of creating together - our hearts were opened, yet the experience was rooted in real life which is often very challenging.

Parallels between the creative process and real life can be challenging. We begin to see our true selves through our creations and it's a risk showing this to others. It is an experience in vulnerability - an emotion not unfamiliar to clients of Galway Simon. Yet creating can also bring comfort - the feel of the art materials, having choices, using colors which are pleasing to the eye, experiencing a sense of mastery as new skills are learnt, reconnecting with a sense of play and feeling freedom.

Once people's artwork was framed their sense of pride shone through and their confidence grew. 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, people's families and friends and even strangers 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 but it wasn't until one of the group participants stood up to welcome and thank people for coming, that the exhibition felt truly open.

When the exhibition was being taken down two weeks later, one of the women running the cafe said that people had taken the time look at the artwork and were surprised that it was created by homeless people. 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 more information about what they offer you can contact reddoorstudiogalway@gmail.com