

Hamaad Khan, neuroscience student at King's College London, interviews Ron Bennet, fellow participants in A4D drama programme, led by David Workman at Southwark Playhouse.

HAMAAD KHAN is a final year neuroscience undergraduate student at King's College London. His interest in biopsychosocial approaches led him to the Arts 4 Dementia (A4D) workshops in Southwark, where he volunteered for three months. As a prospective medical student, he is an advocate for social prescribing and its wider application in our healthcare system.

RON BENNETT, French polisher, singer, joined A4D's drama programme while awaiting memory assessment in February 2020. He still has no diagnosis but continues the drama with Southwark Playhouse.

Hamaad Khan: Ron, I met you over a year ago at these very A4D workshops, and I remember you said you were just taking it all in, you had no experience of it before, participating in these drama workshops. So, I wanted to ask, how did you come across A4D and these drama workshops?

Ron Bennett: I was referred through from my doctor. I went to the mental health doctor upstairs; and she invited me to come here. I have had past trauma and I forget a lot of things. She said it might be useful for me, so that is why I came.

HK: Did you have any preconceived notions? What were your first expectations around being asked to join a drama class?

RB: I had no idea. I did not know what I was letting myself in for! I just came along, I was quite shy at the time, I stayed at the back. But I got really involved in it. They invited me to join in and do exercises, get in little groups. It was so funny and so good. Whereas I was afraid of it at first, I usually keep myself at distance from people. But I enjoyed it and kept coming back.

HK: That is so brilliant to hear. We attended these sessions for over three months, so over this period, did you notice any change in yourself?

RB: Yes, I go out quite a lot now. I talk to my neighbours now! I never used to talk to them, I have been there five years, and I did not know the woman next doors name, she was 80. I have started talking to her about her flowers. I look forward to going there on a Friday now, on Zoom, and I can't wait to get back into the Playhouse, because it's better when you're together.

HK: I agree. It was such a wonderful atmosphere, and it was a joy to work together. What was the best thing about these workshops?

Hamaad Khan interviews Ron Bennett

RB: The best thing was being part of the community, the Playhouse itself, joining in. I think that is the best part, because I managed to join in and mix with people, that shyness went away a little bit after a couple of sessions. I look forward to coming to see the ladies and men who are here on a Friday, get chatting to them, and I look forward to meeting everyone again, getting back to doing our plays. Whatever we are doing that day, it is fun. It keeps your mind open because you have to remember what they said. It is good! It goes too quickly sometimes; you enjoy yourself and then it is time to go home. That is because I'm enjoying myself, I'm not just sitting down looking with my mind going somewhere else. I've been part of it, I've done most of the plays. I was Elvis Presley in the last session we did. That was fun.

It bought me out of my shyness, and not getting involved. Even coming here, I would never have done this! If someone asked me to do this I would have said no, but when Veronica asked me to do it, I thought I should do this. I remember seeing you and the lovely Veronica. It is just great to get you out on the Friday morning, meet a lot of good friends and enjoy yourself for that hour and a half.

HK: I completely agree. It was such a pleasure to see your experience as an outsider, to see how every participant had a similar positive experience. Thank you for sharing that with us Ron.

VFG: Thank you both of you. Ron you were the life and soul! The way you interacted with another of the students across Zoom was incredibly funny. I just want to ask, Hamaad, how was it for you as a student learning, as well as having the glory of interacting together? You wrote terribly articulately about the joy of experiencing it, you joined for a whole term with other university students, medical and neuroscience students working with arts students! How was it?

HK: I was just so surprised by how little, as neuroscience students, we are afforded to understand dementia. We are just understanding the cytology of it. It was incredible to get an insight into the personal stories, and then to actually see social prescription have a tangible, positive impact. I was right there when I saw Ron become more sociable and interactive, and it was just beautiful to see. It is something that I will forever take away with me, and the importance of social prescription is locked away.

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