

Wales

Nicky Deacon and Laura Rehman, participant and Young Onset Dementia Coordinator, Age Connects Torfaen.

Robert Visintainer, Project Manager, Men's Sheds Cymru.

Gwennan Mair, Head of Creative Engagement, Theatr Clywd.
'Arts from the Armchair'

Andrea Davies, Arts in Health and Wellbeing Coordinator and Strategic Lead, Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board.

Laura Rehman interviews Age Connects Torfaen participant, Nicky Deacon.

LAURA REHMAN is Young Onset Dementia Coordinator at Age Connects Torfaen at their dementia specialist centre located in Griffithstown in South Wales. Laura has been working with Age Connects Torfaen for the past four years within their dementia services and for the past three year has been working as part of the young onset dementia team Zest for Life. Zest for Life is a supportive group for people living with young onset dementia or cognitive impairment, offering specialist arts and crafts, music therapy, gentle exercise and community-based activities. Members do not need a diagnosis to attend the group, allowing them to access activities earlier in their journey.

NICKY DEACON, is in her mid-50's, following a stroke in 2016 she was left with short term memory loss and cognitive impairment. A former shop manager, Nicky was first introduced to the Zest for Life project at Age Connects Torfaen – Widdershins Centre in 2018. At this time Nicky was really struggling with her confidence and in need of support. Within a few months we could really see the change in Nicky's confidence and looking back now it is fantastic to see the personal growth in her. She has now become a volunteer within Age Connects Torfaen and enjoys teaching other members of the group new skills.

ND: I was quite low when I was diagnosed because I had to have a lot of tests, and things just took ages. I stayed at home because I was too frightened to go out. I was so poorly. I had lost all my confidence. I could not see a way of getting back to how I was. Everything affected me. I got really low, to the point where I had to have someone stay with me all the time. I had a social worker, and they were trying different things, different groups, different workshops, and I just could not do anything. They were not for me.

The last resort was Widdershins Centre. We tried it, and it was the best decision I have ever made. They are like a second family to me now. I have done loads of things I would never have dreamed I could do, because I basically thought that was it for me. It has completely saved my life and changed my life. I am doing things that I enjoy, that I'm good at. I can actually show other people how to do it. I am making things. If I have a bad day, I will just go to my craft room and it takes me to my own safe place, where I do not have to think about other things. I am doing a lot of making and crafting at home.

LR: How have you found the arts has helped with your mental health, Nicky?

ND: If you want to make something, you can! I usually knit, because that gives you a focus. If you are feeling a bit down or anxious, my crafting just gives me a focus. It is like taking a deep breath, with something you can make, or that you can do. For however long you do it, your head is clear of all the stuff that you do not want in your head. I find that its calming, it relaxes me, and I have made something or created something. I like to take photos, and that it is an instant thing. It is a positive thought that goes into my head, and I just concentrate on that. The other thoughts are gone for now, and I try to make them stay there as much as I can by doing my arts and my crafts.

LR: You first got ill in 2016 and came to us in 2018. How would have helped if you knew about the services that were available, immediately from diagnosis?

ND: It should be like you're prescribed medication - saying, 'Right, well we've got these things for you to try!' It took ages to get anywhere with any doctors, I had to go private to get told what was wrong, and even then, they were not 100%. I had to have every test. I was in hospital all the time. At least if I had of gone there at the beginning, I don't think I would have had the problems that I suffered from. I was not confident at all. I was anxious all the time, things terrified me. I would get really down. Had they said to try this, I think it would have been even better than it has been. It has been a medication without me actually having to take a tablet.

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Robert Visintainer, Project Manager, Men's Sheds Cymru and Swansea City Opera.

ROBERT VISITAINER has been Men's Sheds Cymru Project Manager since August 2019 - supporting the men's shed movement in Wales. Involved in the movement since 2009. Men's Sheds offer space, activity, and camaraderie to men, many of whom have found themselves with time on their hands, especially after retirement or through a change in their life circumstances. Men's Sheds like to think they offer a 'health by stealth' approach to overcome mental and physical health problems. Men talk shoulder to shoulder not face to face, so they will have a more honest conversation if they are working on something together. It is how they worked in the mines and factories and informs the title of The Men's Sheds Cymru Opera, [Shoulder to Shoulder](#).

I work for Men's Sheds Cymru. We were approached by Swansea City Opera back before lockdown who showed an interest in finding out what Men's Sheds were. They recognised that the sheds were doing good work, and they wanted to help us in fact promote that good work and the Men's Sheds movement in Wales. I met Bridget and Brendan from Swansea City Opera, and they explained to me how they wanted to write an opera about Men's Sheds, and to do so they wanted to visit Men's Shed in Wales and interview the participants. They knew, like us, that there were lots of life stories of the people who attend Men's Sheds, and they thought that would make a good topic for an opera. I have never been involved with music before this point really, so I was quite excited and curious as to what we're going to do.

Back in early 2020 I visited a few sheds with Brendan, and they interviewed participants and heard their stories, and they went away. After a few months Brendan had produced a piece, which included a chorus and a scene for an opera based on Men's Sheds. The first scene is about a daughter and her father just before he joins the Men's Shed, and then the chorus is about three men in the shed singing, and it is shed related. The goal for both us and Swansea City Opera was to create an accessible opera, which involved an amateur chorus including some of the men from the sheds. Along with professional singers and musicians.

The idea, if we get funding, is that this will be toured around Wales, in village halls and community centres with the local sheds appearing, whether as part of the chorus or audience. Then the audience can talk to actual Men's Sheds members and hear about the work that is going on in the community. It has been a really good and interesting collaboration. Unfortunately, COVID19 and lockdown restrictions delayed it quite a bit. But we're hopeful now to start in June and visit a few more sheds so Brendan can gather a few more stories, and put those

to music. You can find out more on our website, and hopefully you can ask any questions you may have.

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Gwennan Mair, Head of Creative Engagement, Theatr Clywd.

GWENNAN MAIR is a drama facilitator and theatre director dedicated to make cross discipline work within communities. Her passions lie in hidden stories and giving people a voice through the arts. Her work mainly focuses on health and wellbeing and creating pathways for community to be able to engage with any art form. Gwennan is the Director of Creative Engagement at Theatr Clwyd leading a core team of seven and as well as numerous freelancers from across North Wales and beyond. She also sits on the board for the Arts Council of Wales – the youngest member ever to do so.

‘Arts from the Armchair.’

It is a real privilege to be here to talk specifically about one of our programmes called [Arts from the Armchair](#). A little bit about our programme, it has now been running for around four years, and it is about creating new memories within our building. We are a producing house, we make theatre here, from the costume design to the props and the wigs, and one of the massive important things about this programme is that it introduces those skills of theatre making for people with early onset memory loss. Arts from the Armchair runs for two sections of the year, for 16-week terms. We now have two groups with an additional Arts Cafe which runs alongside it.

This programme is in partnership with Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board (UHB), and they have funded this programme with us for the last four years, so it is a longstanding relationship. We get referrals through the memory clinic here in Mold, and we have continued these two groups through lockdown, I think we had a two-week break, running all of them on Zoom. This has only been possible with the delicacy of those relationships that we already had with existing participants. Our incredible facilitator has been working so beautifully with the participants, using individual phone calls to really bring the theatre back to people’s homes. We have still engaged with professional singers and set designers, costume makers and stage managers to come to the session still, and to still engage in different art activities. Obviously, it’s not the same as being in a different space, and being at the theatre, but we have really tried to continue a little bit of that magic through this time.

On top of this we also have two elders companies as well, we have [Company65 and CompanyZ](#), and they have just done an intergenerational film with our youth theatre over Christmas, and they are now working towards staging some professional production short

scenes in the summer. I am mentioning this because it fits in with early onset, and how all of our programmes can bleed into one. You don't have to just be part of Arts from the Armchair. You can also be part of our elders company. It is an interesting conversation at the moment because theatre is in that shift and in that transition, but I wonder what the future is for arts and health work within theatres? Even more so, because we are asking the question, what is the purpose of theatres, and asking should they be more of a civic centre?

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Andrea Davies, Arts in Health Wellbeing Coordinator, Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board.

ANDREA DAVIES is Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board's (UHB), Arts in Health and Wellbeing Coordinator and Strategic Lead. She has designed and commissioned several award-winning projects improving patient experience and collaborative working. She is also instrumental in the establishment of the North Wales Arts in Health and Wellbeing Concordat. Delivering training and lectures throughout the UK and a member of the Welsh Assembly for Wales Cross Party Group: Arts in health and Wellbeing. She is proactive in developing strategies, sharing good practise, leading, and advising initiatives and also sits within many Arts in Health steering groups. Andrea's ambition focuses on the powerful benefits of creative therapeutic interventions, developing and embedding arts into mainstream service provision.

I am Arts in Health Wellbeing Coordinator for Betsi Cadwaladr UHB, which is North Wales' Health Board. [Creative Well](#) is our arts, health and wellbeing programme, and it aims to facilitate multi-arts interventions which enhance the lives of patients, staff and the communities we serve. We deliver these arts projects within local communities, cultural venues, hospital wards, whether that is acute or community. Our projects all have a clear focus on outcomes. Much of our work focuses on mental health provision and prevention. Although our ambition is to embed arts for health and wellbeing as internally funded health board services, many of our projects are still funded through the Arts Council of Wales.

During the pandemic therapeutic activity slowed down or even paused, and we had to find new ways of working. By being able to creatively support our allied therapy services, the interventions have been able to continue, even within the constraints of lock down and uncertainty. Our Creative therapies project is a multi-arts intervention, which has been co-produced with speech and language therapies and occupational therapy services. It has been designed for people with early-onset dementia, those who have maybe had a stroke or have MCI. Patients who, due to the pandemic, would not have necessarily been able to access these important services had it not been for the arts.

[Arts from the Armchair](#) is a fantastic example of what can be achieved through collaborative working, and that is with Theatr Clywd, who are our partners and have been for several years now. It is a theatre project, and again it is for patients with early-onset dementia and their carers. It provides them with the opportunity to learn something new, it provides meaningful activity, it improves mood and wellbeing, reduces loneliness

and isolation, and supports care closer to home. It is innovative and exciting, and a creative way of delivering our therapeutic interventions. It has also managed to adapt to the current crisis with the provision of online workshops, which have been well attended and very much enjoyed. Moving forward with the ambition to be secure in our funding for the arts - through arts on prescription, SP, or health and social care services - service level funding is vital. To do this I believe that we need to demonstrate best practice. Although our programme is primarily funded externally, I am passionate that by leading the way and demonstrating it as best practice, relevantly evaluating projects, and building positive partnerships with the therapy and mental health teams, it stands us in a much better position for developing and presenting business cases to service improvement within mainstream health board activity.

In order to embed these therapeutic arts interventions into health board service provision, we need to be able to demonstrate the clinical and wellbeing effectiveness of the arts within the current treatments. What do the services we currently provide deliver? What health indexes do they focus on improving? Whether that's reducing decline, maintaining function, or improving patient health and wellbeing. Linking projects to strategy is so important. Finding how the project fits within the strategy for loneliness and isolation, or aging well, older person's mental health, or the [Living Healthier Staying Well](#) strategy. Arts in health can significantly support the prevention agendas, and these can also be identified and demonstrated within the four levels of prevention which have been identified by the [Welsh Government](#). All health boards in Wales have been told they must accelerate their prevention provision.

So, what makes a good project? What does a well-designed project look like? I think it is about co-production, it is about working with the expertise from teams and patients alike. I would say that it has been tailor made for the health priority, it has been designed in collaboration with specialist clinical teams and delivered by professional arts facilitators. The work is not just a nice additional extra if money was no object, but money is, and so if we are going to redirect funding from one service to another, then we need to know it can deliver what we need it to in terms of our health and wellbeing, but also have the ability to enhance that.

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