



Talent reborn
KingsCare League of Friends

ARTS & HEALTH SOUTH WEST PRIZE 2015 LONGLISTED CASE STUDY



Name of organisation:
KingsCare League of Friends

Title of project/programme:
Talent reborn

Dates of project/programme:
March - December 2014

Summary

A 64 year old man with early onset dementia came under the KingsCare radar in March 2014. He was part of a gardening group established by the local Older Persons Mental Health Team for people with memory problems. The idea was to test the theory that engagement with the process of growing and nurturing produce would lead to an improvement in mood gained through the good feeling of actually seeing something that you had planted grow and mature. As a patient support group we were brought in to provide some volunteers who would run the project. Nic was one of the participants. He was, at first, watchful and distrusting of us as strangers. Slowly we gained his trust; we matched him with a volunteer who could gently guide and support him; we learnt about his life and interests and built on those. Nic had a career as a film editor but had lost the ability to use a camera. By December, we'd enabled him to believe in himself once more and the importance he placed in the Arts so that we could re-awaken his ability to identify an attractive composition and capture it photographically.

Overview

Identifying need – Early onset dementia is a particularly cruel form of the disease. The victim bears no visible signs of illness yet gradually loses his ability to be himself and live the life he is used to and would, ideally, like to maintain. Once the feeling of self-worth has gone then the ability to fight further deterioration goes too. A downward

slide to a life in care, regulated by drugs to control anguish and behaviour becomes almost inevitable. Nic was too young to be on this downward path.

Aims and Objectives - Nic became our project. We wanted to do what we could to learn about the man and, by re-engaging him in an art form that once gave him a living, give him just the right amount of support, encouragement and help to make him believe in his abilities again thus slowing down the rate of deterioration in his condition and, therefore, his ability to maintain some form of independence.

What you did - Soon after we met Nic we found him one day in a bad place. His body language suggested that something major was troubling him but the volunteers were wary of approaching him to find out why. With nothing to lose, the co-ordinator bit the bullet. He was longing to offload and the problem was easily sorted. He then told us that he'd read somewhere that playing table tennis was good for the mind. We bought a table and encouraged him to come and try out the theory. "You mean someone has actually listened to something I've said?!" He was incredulous and started to come to our Monday morning board games session. In no time at all he was remembering to come without an escort.

Artforms and Artists - Nic's career was as a top rate film editor whose passion was roused by what could be captured by a camera. Once he'd become confident in the welcome he'd received by the Monday morning crew, it was not difficult to persuade him to join the craft group (run by the same crew) on a Tuesday morning. When we first met him he could barely hold a pen, let alone know what to do with it. By the Autumn our volunteers, who are retired teachers, had got him drawing. Nic cannot write words any more without a great deal of hard concentration yet he was drawing little scenes of the natural world. Later he was holding a camera. The volunteers sat with him as he held the camera in his hand for the first time. Thirty times they showed him what he had to do. Finally he got it and then got tremendous pleasure from pressing the right button to capture the image he wanted. "You've brought me alive again", he told them.

Intended health outcome - Our intention had been, from the outset, to give him back his belief in himself and enable him to continue to live independently but with support. We wanted to do this by re-engaging him with the art form he loved the most - photography. We knew now that he was ready for the final challenge. He knew and we knew that he was unlikely to remember how to use a complicated camera whose settings he would need to set manually. He was happy with the loan of a 'point and shoot'. By December we had achieved this. He spends hours with it now, his head down photographing aspects of the natural world that appeal to him. The results are outstanding.

Beneficiaries - We make no apologies for the fact that this project was about one individual who had stolen the hearts of all of us who worked with him from KingsCare. All of those involved feel like beneficiaries as well. We've shared Nic's pain and we've shared his triumphs.

Outputs - The joy of the digital camera is that there is no need to print out any images until a decision has been made about those that will best tell the tale required of the project. Nic has chosen the attached photos.

Partnerships - We worked closely with the local NHS Older Persons Mental Health Team and the Avenue Church in Newton Abbot

Location – The groups Nic attends are held courtesy of the Methodist Church in Newton Abbot. The photographs have been taken out and about around South Devon.

When the project happened - We first met Nic in March 2014 and had turned his life around to the tune of being able to hold a camera again and know what to do with it by December 2014

Innovation

KingsCare exists to improve the quality of life of those in need within our community. Mostly we work with the elderly helping them to maintain their independence and some degree of social life and interests outside of their developing health conditions. More and more we're being asked to support people with mental health conditions and, in particular, dementia. Often we simply encourage them to come to our singing or walking group or attend the Memory Café we run each month. Nic was different. He's not the sort of person who would appreciate being present at a Memory Café among other people with the same condition who would remind him that he has dementia. He wanted activities that took him out of himself and away from his memory problems. He has a very engaging personality and is not so proud that he won't ask for help when needed. We gave him the confidence to talk about what he really wanted to do, what would help him to feel better about himself. It is quite unusual nowadays to be able to work on such an individual basis and most satisfying to know what a difference such a real person centred approach can make.

Participation

Nic was the focus of this project. When people volunteer with us they volunteer because they have a need within themselves to fulfil. That might be that they are lacking in confidence. It might be that they have taken retirement and need something to do. It might be that they have been widowed and are lonely. Whatever the reason, as with any job - and volunteering is seen as a job by many - they need to feel that what they're doing is worthwhile, that they are part of a team that can make a difference to someone's life. Nic's predicament touches everyone who comes in contact with him. It is the volunteers who have worked with him through the gardening, the games and now the art. It is their participation that has made the difference.

Outcomes

The intention behind the project was to see if we could slow down the rate of deterioration in Nic's ability to live at home, to see if we could develop a relationship of trust between him and the individuals in our organisation that work with him. We wanted to listen to him and, through listening, find a path through to the man he used to be. He will never be entirely that man he used to be but there are vestiges of him still and we wanted to see if we could build those up before it was too late. The outcome is that his rate of deterioration has slowed and his ability to live at home (supported) is as at the same level, if not better, than it was when we first met him a year ago now. His main befriender has encouraged him to have some systems to deal with the post and any problems he may encounter. He is more confident when out and about. He remembers where he needs to go on Mondays and Tuesdays to be part of our groups. He doesn't need to be escorted any more or reminded of where to go to.

The impact on Nic has been tremendous. He is generally a much happier man than he was, enjoying his new friends and activities and loving knowing that he can capture an image that appeals to him. He is very positive and thoroughly enjoying rediscovering his art. He laughs and jokes in a way neither he nor any of us would have imagined he could a year ago. He can even laugh at himself when he realises that he cannot work something out without help. A year ago he would have been distraught and frustrated when faced by a similar problem. This project has facilitated that difference and given him opportunities to enjoy his life and look to the future with excitement instead of dread.

We have not undergone any formal evaluation. It's not something we would think about for a project that is simply about one individual. However there have been some tremendous moments in the life of the project. Nic had developed a good relationship with a participant in her 70s who was drawing one day and drew him in. They became close. One day instead of her directing him, he got her to close her eyes and fed her various watercolour pencils encouraging her to free her mind and draw from the heart. All the people present were really touched by such a turn-a-round and shared their enjoyment of the moment, feeling incredibly proud. For him to be able to lead and not to follow and enjoy the moment was great for all to see.

Learning

The main challenge was to find a way to break through one man's wariness of what people who connected with him wanted from him. Having demonstrated that all we wanted was to help then we had the challenge of whether we could actually discourage his own gloomy forecast of his future and build a better future, at least for a while. We learnt that we could because Nic can still be quite a fun character, one with a smile and an ability to laugh that is most engaging. We learnt that the power to create a drawing or capture an image photographically of which you are justly proud is as important in producing a feeling of wellbeing as any pill can be. If the art is added to the pill in a situation such as Nic's it becomes a win win situation all round

We would not make any changes to our delivery of the project because it was always guided by Nic and his interests and engagement. We would not have pushed or worked on any aspect if he had not engaged. If another person with similar problems were to ask for our help we would tailor our response to his interests rather than do what we did with Nic and assume that that would work with someone else.

Critical success factors

The main achievement of the project was to help Nic to remain living reasonably independently with a better quality of life. We have helped to give him back his feeling of self-worth and recognise that he is still able to engage with the Arts and record that engagement through drawing and photography. It would be untrue to say that we actually planned the progress of this project. If Nic mentioned that he would like to do something we have done our best to ensure that he gets the opportunity to do so if whatever it is is within our power to do anything about. This project has not independently led to further work but has helped to build up our portfolio of support well given and enhanced our reputation as an organisation whose focus is on the individual rather than gathering numbers.

Funding and Resources

We have to raise all the money we need to survive and grow. We did not have any particular funding to resource this project. The Avenue Church in Newton Abbot allows us to use their hall at no cost to us and Comic Relief have put some money in to support our work in the town but not specifically for the work we have done with Nic. As a result it would be impossible to disentangle any costs incurred in supporting Nic from our other costs.

Images L-R

- **Title:** Laura was Here
Copyright/credit: Nicolas Thompson
- **Title:** Sky Reflected
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- **Title:** Standing Ice
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