

# An annual offer of creative 'here and now' moments

**David Reid** recounts the labour, learning and pleasure of coordinating an annual dementia creative arts exhibition in Sheffield – now into its sixth year



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**Y**ou do not need to know anything about art to coordinate a successful dementia creative arts exhibition. In fact, it might even be an advantage. However, there are certainly things I have learned in five years of running an annual event in South Yorkshire that I wish I had known in 2009.

Let's be clear, I haven't developed a 'blueprint' and I do not now approach coordination of the exhibition in a beautifully efficient manner. I remember that when the first exhibition loomed I was extremely worried and anxious. With the sixth exhibition approaching fast (May 31 to June 6) I can report little has changed: it is still impossible to know until the very day of the exhibition what visitors will encounter when they come along. To be honest, the angst and anticipation seem to merge into a wired sense of excitement about the event.

## **A brief history**

The South Yorkshire Dementia Creative Arts Exhibition originated in decisions taken in late 2008 when thinking of a way to consolidate contacts I was making then within Sheffield's dementia community. I was new in post, writing a new course in relationship-centred dementia care, and meeting inspiring dementia practitioners every which way I turned. I had nothing to offer them in return for their insights and so I set about devising an annual public event to provide a focus for dementia in the city.

Since my interest in dementia developed in the early 1990s I have been convinced by a relationship-centred approach to dementia care, where something different and important is learned about dementia from people with dementia, from their families or supporters and from care practitioners. Affinity with this approach led me to consider creative art as an activity that all could participate in as equals, and it felt absolutely the right thing to do. Albeit a secondary consideration, I also realised an exhibition would help raise the profile of my new course.

The first exhibition was held on a single day in April 2009 in an atrium room at the School of Nursing and Midwifery at the Northern General Hospital, Sheffield. Art work was sent in by staff and residents of five local care homes, nurses and domestic staff, people with dementia attending Alzheimer's Society and 'Dementia Welcome!' services, and Barnsley PCT lent us some paintings. A collage from LEAF (a local allotment initiative) was submitted along with a striking painting

undertaken as part of a person's art therapy sessions. A request on the online forum for DASNI (Dementia Advocacy and Support Network International) yielded photographs of a huge quilt made by people in the USA. I felt particularly giddy about this international contribution.

On this first occasion (and not repeated since) a creative workshop for people with dementia was organised prior to the exhibition. Its aim was to ensure we actually had some creative art for the exhibition and two consultants were paid to resource and facilitate this session. By photographing these paintings and enlarging them to display board size, these colourful, intriguing, images came to life and became a focal point of the exhibition. The modest budget was (and continues to be) supplied by the School of Nursing and Midwifery.

On the day of the exhibition the atrium was busy as residents of care homes came to view their work. They mingled with university staff, students and other visitors. For me, the highlight of the day was meeting Gladys, a resident of Northfield House. Gladys's visual biography, created with Caroline Twist (activities coordinator), included pictures of her during her nursing career, a career that had begun 60 years ago at the 'old' hospital across the road from the exhibition.

The theme in 2009 was 'Relationships' and since then we have focused on 'Love', 'Dreams', 'Humour' and 'Friendship'. Since 2010 the exhibition has been shown in a purpose-built Exhibition Space in the centre of Sheffield that we are able to use rent-free. It now runs for a week in the summer, including a weekend, and has expanded on other fronts too. In 2013, 26 dementia care services were involved in contributing art work to the exhibition, and over 250 people visited the exhibition.

## **The exhibition team**

Coordination of the annual exhibition is primarily my responsibility. For this I am indebted to the support given to me by Professor Anne Peat, my head of department. Thankfully each year, in a very informal fashion, an exhibition 'team' coalesces from among those who show an interest in taking on some form of responsibility. Care home stalwarts such as Jane and Lorraine (Balmoral) and Barbara (Alexander Court) spread word of the exhibition and guarantee there is always a sizeable creative art contribution as a result of tailored activities offered to residents. In

## **Acknowledgement**

Special thanks to Barbara Bennett for all of her invaluable support from 2009 to 2013. Have a lovely retirement.

recent years Julie and Geoff (Norbury Court) have volunteered time at weekends to support the extension of opening hours. Claire (Grenoside Hospital) can also be relied on each year to initiate an innovative project with her colleagues and the people with dementia they support.

The exhibition has grown year by year, but so has my academic workload. I have been lucky to receive support each time from a number of additional volunteers. In 2013, in partnership with Kay (AgeUK Sheffield), social work students Ellie and Eilidh staffed the exhibition, both able later to draw upon their experiences in course-related assessment. The exhibition has also been supported consistently by the helpfulness of University of Sheffield's Portering Service (Neil and Martin) and the diligence of Cleaning Services personnel (Linda, Peter and Sue) who always ensure the Exhibition Space is spotless. In short, an exhibition team is vital and can be built best by forging relationships with members of the local dementia community with whom one has contact. The 2014 exhibition is supported by an informal grouping of 'regulars' who indicated after last year's event an interest in being involved this time. We keep in contact by email and they cascade reminders and news to their contacts. Finally, our wider team includes the legion of local activities coordinators in community residential settings who initiate activities on the exhibition theme.

### Contacts and publicity material

To maximise the likelihood of receiving enough original material and to drum up public interest a good poster is required for circulation among members of the local dementia community. The image chosen can make a huge difference in raising awareness of the event, but it was only in 2012 that I realised how important this 'image' was. I believed that everyone would be automatically interested in an exhibition of creative art by people with dementia. It was when I was struggling to choose the colour of the 'standard exhibition poster' that a perplexed colleague (Mac) suggested an image might be more attractive. I mentioned this story in passing to a student/artist (Jesamine) who immediately offered to create an image about 'Friendship'. The result was an iconic image projecting a distinctive identity for the event.

Knowing to whom the publicity material should be sent is crucial and this requires research. Most care homes have at least one activities coordinator – and many of these are passionate about their work. Discovering these individuals' names can be significant in determining whether or not an organisation gets involved. In my experience, a letter addressed to 'the manager' risks finding only the bin. I have spent considerable time phoning all listed South Yorkshire care homes for people with dementia (via online information) to establish who coordinates activities, and it's a moving target. Staff turnover means these details change and, sadly, not everyone is interested, but I have found that most are. I send an initial postal invitation to 100-plus care homes six months before the exhibition.



A postal reminder is then sent two months later to those who have not responded – and this is usually most care homes. The tone of the reminder is usually a little more angst than anticipation and the request to get in touch more urgent. This is an increasingly expensive method and where possible email is used to seek the same results. I follow up all confirmed contacts with encouragement by email as the exhibition approaches.

There are many people living in the local community who can be invited to participate. In previous years I have sent copies of the poster to local voluntary organisations with a dementia interest for them to publicise. Copies of the poster can be sent out easily to contacts in the local dementia community by email. I ask my contacts to circulate the poster to their contacts and the news of the exhibition soon travels.

### Choose an interesting theme

We chose 'Friendship' as our exhibition theme in 2013 to coincide with the publicity surrounding Dementia Friends and dementia-friendly initiatives. This was a first attempt to link the theme to wider discussions in the dementia care field. More people are now involved in deciding the theme than they were in 2009, when it was just me. The theme for 2014 is 'Our World' and this ►



**Above: Visitors to our Friendship Tree, 'Friendship', 2013. Below: Tony Bainbridge visits "Relationships", 2009**

Bec, Hilda Thompson and Michelle from Dearne Vally Care Centre at 'Humour', 2012.



➤ was the result of a vote between ideas suggested by the 'regulars'. Whichever theme is chosen it must bear in mind the fact that activity coordinators will have to communicate the theme to diverse groups of people with dementia. The theme should have wider relevance too – so as to capture the imagination of members of the public. A simple way to do this is to select a theme that alludes to a common experience. This type of theme conveys an important message about similarity over difference in dementia.

### Storage and collection

Effective storage sounds dull but involves ensuring that art work delivered prior to the exhibition is kept and transported in pristine condition. When this is poetry, typed on A4 sheets of paper, safe storage and transportation to the exhibition poses few problems. When this work is an intricate collage then it can be problematic to ensure pristine safekeeping and delivery. Without dedicated storage space there is a danger that art work will be damaged.

The storage of creative art is one of the real challenges of organising our exhibition. I have no formal capacity to store art before or after the exhibition and so contributors' cooperation is essential and communication with them about expectations for delivery and collection of their work needs to be clear, firm and repeated. In 2013, for the first time, I asked explicitly for all art work to be delivered to the exhibition venue the day before the exhibition opened and collected on the final day. Previously, I have enlisted colleagues' help to transport unclaimed art back to the office and there it stayed. Last year, when I finally disposed of unclaimed art work, it was with a mixture of sadness and relief that I reflected that no one would again ask me, "Is that your art stuff in the spare office?"

Asking contributors to bring their creative art to the exhibition location last year was largely

successful. To facilitate this, when booking the exhibition space I included a day before the exhibition opened, set aside for taking delivery of art work and setting up the exhibition. The new arrangement in place last year for picking up creative art at the end of the exhibition was almost entirely successful. As lunchtime came and went, it dawned on me that some contributors had forgotten the arrangements and so a couple of 'phone calls were required. One contributor came in his car in response to my call and seemed a bit puzzled by the challenge now facing him, to transport a rather tall object in a very small car. In these musings he asked me if I could make use of a CD stacking tower, a component of the art work.

### Public access

For the past three years the exhibition has been held exclusively at the purpose-built Exhibition Space in central Sheffield, after the shortcomings of the atrium venue became clear. These were, firstly, the absence of straightforward parking arrangements outside the building. This created inconvenience for visitors, particularly those coming by minibus. Secondly, it was predominantly contributors (people with dementia) and dementia practitioners who attended. An objective of the exhibition was that it would be a public event – and the reality dawned late that the Northern General Hospital campus was never likely to attract people who would 'drop in' while doing other things, a problem compounded by the lack of parking.

A third issue was altogether more serious and intractable. It was only after the first 2010 exhibition (a second event was held later that year at the Exhibition Space) at the atrium that I realised some unacceptable risks were being taken. On reflection, it seemed utterly irresponsible to have invited large numbers of people using wheelchairs or with mobility problems to an event on the first floor of a building. In future exhibitions, the safety of visitors would be paramount in the arrangements made.

### Personal access to the exhibition

The first exhibition was the most convenient for me, as the atrium is located on the floor below my old office. No formal booking of the space was required and I was able to put up and take down everything and tidy up without leaving the building. Access to the Exhibition Space requires more detailed arrangements. Firstly, the space has to be booked centrally and, as there are competing demands for this space, this has to be done 9-12 months in advance. Booking your venue in advance is essential to ensure you get the optimum date, for example, if you intend to coincide it with Dementia Awareness Week.

A challenge in using a bookable shared space is the pressure to set up and take down the exhibition. As noted, booking an extra day prior to the exhibition start can be helpful in lessening this pressure. Before 2013 I did not have this arrangement and consequently spent the first half

of the first day setting-up, reducing the time the exhibition is fully accessible. An extra day for taking down exhibits and reuniting these with contributors after the exhibition would be ideal. However, a major limitation is the time I have to be available to spend at the exhibition. An additional benefit of the Exhibition Space is that it can be used over the weekends. During the first four years of the exhibition a frequent complaint was "Why don't you open at weekends?" In 2013 the exhibition did open over a weekend, however it was very poorly attended.

### Meeting and greeting

For me the best thing about the exhibition is the opportunity it provides to meet people who have contributed their art work. For all contributors, not just people with dementia, it seems entirely appropriate to offer a warm welcome and show them where their work is displayed. For people with dementia this meeting and greeting is particularly important and knowing in advance who intends to visit when can really help ensure things go smoothly. Communication with contacts prior to the exhibition can include discussions of any planned group visits from care homes. When contributors visit the exhibition venue we try to offer a few 'bespoke' moments, too. For example, we have the technology to select and play contributors' favourite music. We also use mobile phone technology to take pictures of visitors and relay these onto the numerous monitors around the Exhibition Space. With permission, we also post these images to the exhibition blog. Our volunteers take a lead role in making visitors feel very welcome and a quick look at the blog will indicate many appreciate this. Lastly, and probably of most importance to contributors, we always do our best to provide some hot refreshments.

### Events and activities

In planning the 2013 exhibition the 'regulars' suggested we include a weekend event specifically aimed at young people and their families. The Mental Health Foundation kindly supplied us with free copies of their booklet 'The Milk is in the oven' and invitations were emailed to over 100 schools in Sheffield with what we felt was a 'youth-friendly' poster to advertise the event. As has been noted, this event was poorly attended. However, the prospect of doing something new inspired us look afresh at the exhibition's potential functions. In response we came up with other new events. John Killick agreed to read a new poem 'live', Gill Ayling (from the Department of Health) agreed to chair a half-day practitioner conference for South Yorkshire Dementia Champions and we also arranged for a Dementia Friends information session to be hosted at the venue. Others innovated too. For example, Maria Nightingale, a local nurse, painted her first picture for the exhibition. Afterwards Maria had prints made of her painting which she has since sold raising over £1500 for improving dementia care in her clinical area. The lesson here for us was that an event like an exhibition can become a focal point for all things



dementia and that as long as there are facilities to use, the only limitation is one's imagination.

### Sharing the exhibition online

An online version of the exhibition was created in 2009 to increase the reach of the exhibition, principally, to give those unable to attend a chance to see it. As the years have passed the online version has changed to capitalise on the potential value it offers. In the first years of the online exhibition the emphasis was simply on presenting photos of the creative art featuring in the exhibition. In recent years the exhibition blog has provided advance information about events, copies of the exhibition poster, photos of those who have attended and visitors' comments. The most recent statistics suggest that the 2013 exhibition blog ([www.syorks dementia exhibition2013.blogspot.co.uk/](http://www.syorks dementia exhibition2013.blogspot.co.uk/)) attracted over 5000 page views from the UK and around the world.

### Conclusion

The coordination of a dementia creative art exhibition simply involves ensuring there is art work to display in a suitable place. However, the success of an event like this relies on the talents and commitment of everyone else involved, and some of these people are named above. Many more people go unnamed in this article, and these are the artists, writers and personalities of the South Yorkshire dementia community whose engagement makes the exhibition meaningful.

I hope the ideas in this article will prove useful to those interested in doing something similar. Go for it! Create your own, unique, dementia-friendly spaces. In my view, dementia creative arts exhibitions are much less about the aesthetic than they are about a series of positive 'here and now's' for members of the dementia community, from the moments of creativity to the moments of shared pride and a nice day out to boot. Exhibitions are fun and positive so let's all enjoy ourselves and celebrate our talents together. ■



Above: 'Dreams', by artists at G1, Grenoside Grange, 2011.

Left: 'Friendship' painting by Maria Nightingale, staff nurse and dementia link nurse, Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, 2013.

### 6th South Yorkshire Dementia Creative Arts Exhibition

There is a dedicated Facebook page for this year's exhibition, which will run from May 31 to June 6. It can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/SouthYorkshireDementiaCreativeArtsExhibition>

So far, 20 care homes have confirmed their involvement in this year's event. The week will include a second South Yorkshire Dementia Champions half-day conference on Wednesday 4 June, and a family day on Saturday 31 May with special events for all ages.