

# Creative thinking

## painting and pruning for problem users

**“W**HEN my key worker suggested I did an art course I thought, what is the point? I couldn't see what I could possibly get out of it,” says Debbie Owen, 35, an ex-heroin user who has been on a methadone maintenance programme for 18 months. Despite her scepticism, Debbie decided to join the 16-week therapeutic arts course being offered by her local drug and alcohol team in Derby. For two hours a week Debbie and six other ex-drug and alcohol users drew, painted, played music, composed poetry, sculpted and wrote stories as part of Express and Explore, a course run by local group Arts in Action and funded by Derbyshire Learning Skills Council.

### DABBLING IN THE ARTS

“The first time I went there I was nervous. We were asked to draw round our hands and then use images and words to describe ourselves. Then a passage from a book about a ship sighting land was read out to us – we had to paint the images it evoked and then we had to carry the story on. I wrote a captain's log of the next day and what they found on the island,” says Debbie, who has three children. “I've started doing drawing at home now. I like going upstairs with some crayons and just drawing away. It's nice and relaxing. I'm not artistic and I've never done anything like this before but it's good.”

The drug and alcohol team decided to run the course, now being repeated, in addition to traditional counselling methods – despite the fact there is a very

small evidence base of using creative arts with substance users. Similar courses have, however, been used for many years to help individuals with mental health problems. Dabbling in the arts provides what is usually a rare opportunity to express emotions, relate to others in a group and fills the vacuum left when people are recovering from addiction.

### LIBERATING

The six people in the group found the course has allowed them to discuss private thoughts, “let themselves go” and to think about their hopes and dreams. Most found it “liberating”. Art, according to Arts in Action's Daniel King, allows people to express thoughts and feelings in a freer and more accessible way than they are able to verbally: “Art enables people to make sense of their experiences, new possibilities, self expression and self reflection.”

“When you are coming out of a habit where your whole existence is taken up by money or drugs, it is a release to do something normal around other people who are in the same situation as you,” says Debbie, who has turned up to all of the 11 sessions to date. “In the group we talked about how we felt, and it got a bit weepy, we got things out in the open – it was a great forum to talk. Because my habit was all about lies, it was good to speak honestly to people who understand what you are going through. To keep clean I need to keep busy, so at the very least it was two hours out of the week that's occupied.”

“I like going upstairs with some crayons and just drawing away”



LEFT AND ABOVE *Untitled* and *Bits n' Pieces*, paintings by recovering addicts on the arts course.

OPPOSITE A gardener from the St Mungo project. “It's not just the physical elements but the way you can lose yourself in gardening activities.”

## and **Lesley Don** explain how gardening and the creative arts can help with addiction

A small exhibition of the group's work will be held towards the end of the course, enabling them to gain teamwork, delegation, planning and organisational skills in preparing and holding a public event. They are then encouraged to use the creative skills they have developed through the course as a stepping-stone to progress on to opportunities of education, training and further personal development. *LD*

**D**RUG-addiction can be a time-consuming business. Those in recovery – used to an endless cycle of scoring and using – can suddenly find themselves with hours of unwanted spare time. Now thanks to an innovative scheme former users are taking up gardening as a way of helping them out of addiction.

The St Mungo's Putting Down Roots Project helps homeless and formerly homeless people transform ugly, unused public spaces into thriving green urban gardens. Participants work with trainer gardeners to design, plan and work on gardening projects which have rejuvenated around 11 local areas around London. Although the scheme was not specifically designed for people with drug problems, it has provided many former addicts with a therapeutic way of preventing cravings. The scheme provides on the job training and some participants have gone on to study horticulture or taken on full time gardening jobs.

### FILLING A HOLE

Volunteer gardener and former drug user Mark Astley admits he had no interest in gardening whatsoever, but joined the scheme as a way of filling the hole left in his life when he stopped taking drugs. "This gardening project has helped me to learn a skill to do something I would never have considered normally, he says, "And mostly it keeps me busy, it keeps me from taking drugs and just sitting indoors watching telly."

The project's elaborate garden in St John's Church yard, Waterloo needs constant year-round attention to keep them in shape. "Low maintenance is usually

the watchword for gardeners but we have designed our gardens to keep people as busy as possible," says trainer Lorin Caldwell. She says participants find that the physical activity helps them get back into a normal routine.

### LOSE YOURSELF

"In the early days of the project I was worried that volunteers would be unwilling to join in the heavier, hard landscaping, elements of creating gardens," says Martin Snowden, the project co-ordinator, "In fact these are always among our most popular activities.

"It is best summed up by one of our gardeners who said after a hard day's graft, 'I went back to the hostel, had my dinner, watched a bit of telly then went to bed. It was the first time in years that I had a proper night's sleep.' He was struck by how alien this normal way of living had become.

"Many of our gardeners highlight this as a benefit. It's not just the physical elements but the way you can lose yourself in gardening activities."

### POSITIVE LIGHT

Putting Down Roots also allows drug users to be seen in a positive light. Local residents are consulted about the design of the gardens and in some cases work alongside volunteers. The St John's Church yard garden was formerly a homeless tent community and a no-go area for many locals.

Although the park is still used by drug dealers and drug users – it's one of the only parks in London to have a sharps' bin – the improved environment means that local people are now starting to use the park again.

"Our working environment is in the public realm and we punch above our weight in our ability to regenerate those spaces," says Snowden. "Our gardeners are rewarded by passers-by engaging them in conversation and thanking them for their work. Of course anyone would be thrilled by this so imagine the reaction of that drug user for whom praise is a rare experience." *SH* ■

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