

## **B Arts**

North Staffordshire arts organisation, B Arts, is focusing not just on developing the skills and confidence of refugees and asylum seekers through arts and cultural activities, but also enabling them to build bridges into the local community through the aptly named Crossing Frontiers programme.

B Arts' work with newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers – mostly young men and unaccompanied minors – has developed since 2000, when Stoke-On-Trent became a dispersal zone for people fleeing conflict in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq. Noting rising tension in the local community, where far right political influences were stoking discontent, B Arts started developing theatre projects on the theme of leaving home and seeking asylum.

Since those early years B Arts has developed partnerships with Citizens Advice Bureau, North Staffordshire Racial Equality Council, social services, hostels and housing providers, who refer clients onto their arts projects.

The core of the activities is The Bridge: a weekly youth club attracting young exiles from aged 14 to 25, offering a wide variety of arts activities including drama, visual arts, mask making, music, crafts and photography. Launched in 2002, The Bridge attracts around 112 young people each year, of which around 52 are young men and 60 unaccompanied minors. Unlike statutory services, B Arts goes out of its way to help its participants out of hours and as a result there is a strong family feel within the group, with participants staying connected for many years.

Significantly the work has extended its reach to include refugees and asylum seekers in B Arts' other community-based projects, so helping refugees to build links within the wider community. None of this integration work is done with a great deal of fanfare. "We are not making distinctions about where people are from and who they are. We are just involving everyone," says B Arts Director, Hilary Hughes. "After a while people begin to understand and accept that everybody and anybody is involved. We are making important links for community cohesion without talking about it in those terms."

Projects have included joint activities with communities in Newcastle Under Lyme for the annual town carnival, multicultural celebrations for civic events and Refugee Week. There has been a joint project with English and exiled musicians. Some of this work has led to outstanding new fusions of cultures and artistic traditions – a partnership with Keele Concert Society

resulted in a Gypsy Tango Quartet accompanied by Afghan and Kurdish drumming.

On a social front the work has also started having an impact on community relations and the confidence “We have seen people saying hello at the bus stop who might not usually have known each other. We have seen our refugee project worker treated as a person for a change,” notes Hughes.

There have been individual stories of change like one young man from Iran, whose college tutor has witnessed a transformation from a shy and quiet boy three years ago, to a confident young man. He has blossomed through participating in The Bridge and moving on to perform in B Arts’ educational drama productions for local schools addressing the theme of human rights. Now 20, he has become a volunteer for B Arts and a mentor for other young people participating in The Bridge.

Funding from the Baring Foundation is now enabling B Arts to start building new partnerships with harder-to-reach groups of refugees and asylum seekers and other communities. They are developing new work with the local Zimbabwean Association, in an effort to try and get greater participation from African communities in the projects. They are also exploring opportunities to work with Kurdish women and families who, as local research has found, are quite isolated from community life.

For the company, developing work with refugees and asylum seekers has been part of an organic process of growth: B Arts was running arts projects internationally and simply started “bringing its international programme home”. Three of its current staff team – including one project manager and two outreach and youth workers – are refugees. “It’s been a challenge, especially working with second languages, but its been really enriching for the company and we feel as if our team is something of a flagship for others,” says Hughes.

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