

## Hounslow Arts Trust

Hounslow Arts Trust, best known for running Watermans in Brentford, West London, has been developing a programme of work with new arrivals at nearby Heathrow airport and surrounding communities since the early 1990s.

Working in partnership with the Refugee Arrivals Project at Heathrow and other groups providing hostel accommodation, short term welfare support and English language training, Watermans' has found itself dealing with urgent and very particular needs. Its early projects were with asylum seekers lodged in emergency hostels, often traumatised, with no money, unable to work or go to college, and bewildered by the culture in which they had landed. Frequently the need was immediate and very specific to people's first few months in the country.

"There is a great need to get in there quickly and offer activities through which people can meet others, have something to do and start to engage with their new community," points out Director of Hounslow Arts Trust, Jan Lennox. "People are more likely to become disillusioned and depressed if they are not involved in activities soon after arrival and some will be less likely to engage subsequently."

Watermans has continually expanded its programme through working with local refugee community groups and other agencies. In partnership with West Thames College in Isleworth, supporting delivery of its English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses, it has found using creative activities a very productive route to engaging refugee communities, developing creative skills as well as supporting language learning, and enabling refugees and asylum seekers to look forward and talk about their ambitions.

One project to emerge from work with ESOL students was *Hopes and Dreams*, enabling 80 refugee students to express their aspirations for the future in their new host community through the medium of photography. The project produced an exhibition of photographs which students themselves helped to set up, enabling them to build confidence and work with students of very different cultural backgrounds.

An inspiring example of the impact this work achieved was Javad, a young Iranian asylum seeker who took part in the *Hopes and Dreams* project. Rekindling a passion for art and design which he had left, together with all his materials, in Iran, Javad was able to develop his skills and a portfolio of work. He was supported by Watermans to stage his own exhibition of work, for which he subsequently won an Asylum Aid art competition. He went on to study Arts and Design at college and has since been invited to mount further exhibitions in other galleries.

Watermans' has used its grant from The Baring Foundation to employ a full-time Community Arts Facilitator, Katie Moritz, to deliver creative workshops with new and recent arrivals. 'To work effectively with people who have newly arrived in the country, we have to be responsive. If a group wants to start an

arts project, its important to do that quickly. It wouldn't work to go off and try to raise funds for the project and then go back to the group four months later – the moment would have passed! The real value of having Baring Foundation funding for a full-time community arts worker has been that if there is a need, she can work with a group and set up a project in a few days," says Jan Lennox.

The work with refugees and asylum seekers has had an impact on the programme at Watermans' and is increasingly being integrated as a strand into all its mainstream work. It is encouraging its refugee participants to develop confidence to attend other arts activities and new projects, such as its community dance programme, have a high percentage of refugee and asylum seeker participants.

Watermans has established a Refugee Arts Forum focused on west London, and bringing together refugee community organisations, refugee artists and other local partners to enable these groups to work together more strategically and consistently. The Forum has resulted in a number of joint initiatives, including an Urban Arts Showcase, featuring performances and films by young refugees and supporting their integration into local communities. Through the Refugee Arts Forum it has also been able to run seminars and strategic events to help improve support and recognition for arts work with refugees and asylum seekers.

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