

Pan Centre for Intercultural Arts

Pan Centre for Intercultural Arts is dealing with some of the most traumatised young refugees to arrive in Britain. Given space, time and the opportunity to develop during Pan's weekly programme of arts workshops, these young people are beginning to recover and make some remarkable steps forward.

One child, an elective mute when she arrived, is now helping with drama workshops and directing others. "She's a new person," comments Pan Director, John Martin. An Afghan teenager, having been tortured by the Taliban, escaped to Russia and then via France to Britain under a lorry. After two years he has learned English, developed his social skills and started to look objectively at his experiences. Another participant, arriving from a war-torn region of Southern Africa just three years before, has gone on to achieve straight A grades in his A levels.

Pan has been working in partnership with the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture for more than four years to develop the programme. They offer two groups: Future, for young people aged from 8 to 12 years, and Fortune for youngsters from aged 17 to 25.

With such high levels of need, groups are kept relatively small and intensive with around 15 participants in each group. Activities focus on building teamwork, social skills, relationships and interactivity and are helping the young people to explore their own experiences, develop their confidence, self-awareness and communication skills. Such activities can make an important difference, for example in giving them added confidence for immigration hearings. Clinicians at the Medical Foundation have also noted their impact.

Initially the workshops were drama-based, but new partnerships with organisations like The October Gallery and centres like Coram's Fields, is enabling Pan to branch out into the visual arts and ceramics. Work with London-based refugee community centres is broadening their reach: An extra group for 13 to 17-year-olds is starting up and Pan is planning to initiate a project with pre-school refugee children and their parents and carers, with the support of the Baring Foundation.

Pan has found working with the late teens has proved critical to providing stability at a time of great change in their lives, serving, as Martin describes it, "As a stepping stone to getting them out into the community." Older members of the group have begun working independently on research projects around the slave trade and exploring the history of refugees and asylum in the UK. They also serve as mentors to the younger

members – there is a Buddy Scheme in place between the Fortune and Future groups.

“Its an odd relationship – it's rather like having a family. There is great ownership and a sense of aspiration which given, what these young people have been through, is a great achievement,” says Martin. “It is an important foundation for their social life and it gives them the skills and confidence to move on. We are possibly one of the most regular and stable aspects of their life outside schools and college.”

Among the most exciting of Pan's success stories is a 21-year-old former refugee from Eritrea whose home and father were destroyed in a military raid. While simultaneously supporting her mother and sick sister, she has managed to learn English and study business management, and is now working part-time at Pan as a trainee arts administrator. “To achieve all she has achieved while coping with such difficult circumstances is amazing. She's extremely competent and is developing a great sense of empowerment,” says Martin.

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