

Street Level Photoworks

Knitting doesn't sound like the most obvious creative route to community cohesion and integration, but with Street Level Photoworks' Multi-Story Project in Glasgow it has proved a powerful way of engaging refugee women and building their confidence and engagement.

Multi-Story is a suite of community outreach projects by the Glasgow-based photography workshop and gallery, which is working with refugee and host communities on the Red Road Housing Estate north of the city – a 1960s industrial housing development which is now undergoing demolition, and has been used in recent years for the government's refugee dispersal programme.

Working in partnership with the YMCA, which has a community resource centre and 31-story housing block on the estate, Street Level has been organising a diverse range of arts activities for women, their children and refugee teenagers from the local after-school club. Events have ranged from carnival, photography, digital imaging, film editing and podcasting, to Japanese Haiku poetry and knitting.

Funding from the Baring Foundation and other trusts has led to a range of new activities as a result of having a full-time community artist and project coordinator. This new team has set up local initiatives with the YMCA, a local church after school club, and the Scottish Refugee Council.

An arts residency in the YMCA housing block with 15 women has resulted in them setting up a knitting group, Mothers of Purl, developing knitted art works, crafts and other objects – incongruous knitted flowers have been 'planted' around the estate, and the women staged an exhibition of their works in Street Level's gallery in central Glasgow to celebrate Refugee Week 2008.

"Knitting was the process that brings people together. It's something that people are already skilled at. We wanted to find a way of working with their context, which involves having limited English and no grasp of arts practice. Knitting was the thing they wanted to do," says Project Coordinator, Iseult Timmermans.

"Knitting introduces people to team work, they have gained enthusiasm and confidence, and then they started knitting flowers to make a statement. Through this process we are hoping to achieve something that personally benefits them and contributes on a broader platform to racial attitudes. They are starting to knit random objects now and drop them around the estate with a simple message 'Found me?' and the website for the project. Through that we are hoping to encourage more people to get involved."

Informal feedback from the local clergy indicated that Street Level had already started to achieve their ambitions for personal growth. "They have seen a transformation in these women's confidence, enthusiasm and just by being happier. They now get together to knit in each other's homes and so this has strengthened their own personal networks of support," says Timmermans.

As well as Mothers of Purl, the Multi-Story project has also started branching out to other areas, working with a group of eight women in the Tory Glen estate in South Glasgow – a smaller area that has fewer refugees who consequently feel more isolated. They have started building links and enabling joint work with the Mothers of Purl women’s group on the other side of the city.

The project is also working with a young people’s photographic group of eight young teenage girls from a variety of countries including Iran, Zimbabwe and Turkey. They have been using digital cameras to take images of their local area, doing podcasting and remixing films from their country of origin with classic Scottish films. Photographs from their project features in a series of posters funded by the Scottish Refugee Council on the underground during Refugee Week in 2008.

Street Level have established a carnival group working with youngsters from eight to 13 years– mainly the children of their women’s group - which participated in Glasgow’s West End carnival and was invited to perform at the Scottish Parliament for Refugee Week. Its regular activities with the local church include a weekly arts residency with a club of 60 youngsters, both refugees and indigenous Scots.

Looking ahead, Timmermans acknowledges the difficulties of their female project workers operating in a cross-cultural environment, and for this reason plans to recruit a male project worker to build links and similar initiatives with male refugees in future.

Street Level also have plans to enable their refugee groups to spend more time using their gallery and workshop facilities in central Glasgow when they open in 2009. “We are definitely achieving things by offering emotional support, and increasing visibility of refugees and reducing isolation. It’s also creating some fabulous art work. Through the events we feel we are achieving our targets for integration,” said Timmermans. “But there is a wider civic life which they need to be able to access and to be integrated into. We hope to be able to establish our role in the community, build their confidence and then offer groups the opportunity to work with us in the gallery.”

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