

Carys

Sewing, Mending and Teaching Adults with Learning Disabilities

I began sewing at nursery, that simple sewing you do when you are very young, but it was not something that I was conscious of, or something I continued, as I thought "I can't do that". Sewing and textiles were not around as a child. I wished they were. . I remember my grandmother mending things but she was not great – she did not have a sewing machine. Sewing was something that I discovered as an adult. If I had children I would want them brought up with textiles and that world. I don't think I could thread a needle or fix a button; it was not taught at our primary school It was not something I was immersed in – I wished I had been, I think we under-appreciate textiles for children; if children learnt when they were young it would be a much more positive thing. When I was young it was the consumer age of fast fashion. It was not cool or in-trend to mend something you already had – it never crossed my mind. Now I am constantly mending things, or darning. During lockdown I have done a lot of mending. It is frustrating when friends say "There is a hole in it - it needs to be thrown away". I think it needs to be taught in schools. I really enjoy mending now.

Joining ELTA made me change. I am not as good as many of the women on the project. I learnt I could fix something and make it last by doing a simple thing, which was better environmentally, economically - and it was empowering. My Dad is an eco-warrior, and I realised he was right and that I could mend, and fix things, and you feel very good if you can fix things. People don't realise how easy mending is. I am not the greatest or neatest person but I can still do it and create amazing work. I started off terribly; I could not thread a needle or do basic things. My stitches were so messy and I could not put an embroidery hoop round a bit of cloth. But with ELTA you can work at your own time and you can get better, you don't have to be amazing straight away. When I finished my first bit of work there was the good feeling that I had created *that* and yes it had taken me a long time. It was an elephant; it is the progression you can see, and you might have your own style. There is something about the length of time and not being rushed, and going at your pace.

I first came to Sonia's group and then went on to the Coffee Morning that Sophia and Sandra were running for adults with learning disabilities. It changed my life. I realised the importance of craft and art in people's lives and I realised that I wanted to work with adults with learning disabilities. It was amazing. Craft teaching really does benefit them. We have some, who are very productive like Halima who make things quite easily and quickly, and others like Brian, who take two years to finish a piece. But they all get the same satisfaction from their work. I loved doing that group. Because they were a small group – i think there were eight people - I got to know everyone and their work. There is something about merging crafts with Adults with LD which was very powerful for me. I thought "This is a job you can do". You make a relationship with the people, and with their crafts, and seeing them at exhibitions and seeing how proud they are of their work when it is shown. Some people say exhibitions are vanity projects, but this is not true. Showing casing their work, enables the public to see what adults with LD can do with the right support.

People underestimate of the power of textiles and the power of craft. It was amazing to see the transformation from one week to another – sometimes very fast, sometimes slow. Everyone works at different paces, and people's ability within the learning disability group varied greatly. You can see each week, each month and each year what they created. Some people are aware "Oh I am really

good at this” and some are really just happy to be around people, and to be doing something. I do not understand why there are not huge art studios full of adult with learning disabilities like “Creative Growth” in California. We need more of that, though you can’t generalise – not everyone with learning disabilities enjoys craft. It would be amazing if there could be institutions which could invest in this teaching on a massive scale. It shows it is worth investing in adults with learning disabilities and craft though I do not know how much their lives were better though this work as we did not do a survey. It definitely changed my life. We created something that was WORTH something.

I remember Yemesi helping me put the embroidery hoop on and helping me thread the needle and laughing at me as she helped me. Like many people with learning disabilities she had the patience to help me and I gave that patience back. Yemesi was always trying to help me. We did not rush people -no “Oh come on, come on”– it was very much at each person’s pace. It was not panicky - the standards with ELTA are so high and this was so important, not “Oh this will do” that happens in other groups. I enjoy the high artistic standard we expect of people though it might take people awhile. I’m sad not to be part of it any more – yes it was hard work but I have such fond memories of them. I miss all the people. It was such a great experience. Halima never taught me, she was not patient. It was amazing to watch her work. I was always interested in the techniques that the adults with learning disabilities had, which were not traditional, and this influenced my sewing. There was a lady in the dementia group who had very poor vision who showed me a quicker way to thread a needle. Threading needles used to be a huge problem for me but now I can do it very quickly. Watching Ramdas, who’s work was abstract, in good colours, with very thick thread, I’d think: “That is an interesting way of doing something – why have I never seen that before”. This experience of watching them, meant I could take aspects of their way of working for my own work. I was interested in their techniques, so different from what is traditional or normally done. I picked things up from them.

We did a trip to Epping Forest which was great. We had a mini bus and took a lunch and we walked around the forest and the visitor centre had set up a trail for them to follow. We also went to Wanstead Park and pointed out “an oak tree and this is an acorn.” I don’t know if any of them had been to Wanstead Park though they lived nearby. I wish we had done more trips. They were good experiences and I think they engaged in nature. In the shop they looked at the nature books.