



Wolverhampton Women's Wellbeing Centre & Navjaveen

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PRIMARY OUTCOME FOR WWWC & NAVJAVEEN:

**Engage and involve
participants in ongoing
activity**

OTHER OUTCOMES FOR THE PROJECT:

Access communities in
the Black Country

Develop confidence
among participants

Develop health and arts
sector awareness of the
value of using the arts to
engage with communities

The Wolverhampton Women's Wellbeing Centre is located at the Boot Factory and is open to women aged 18-65 living in the Wolverhampton area, with all forms of mental health needs, including depression, anxiety or severe and enduring. The centre offers a safe, supportive environment for women. It aims to help members to improve the quality of their lives by offering education and leisure opportunities and facilities for women to attend with children.

The women's ages ranged from 25 to 60+. People in the group classed themselves as 'White British'; 'Black or Black British – Caribbean'; 'Asian or Asian British – Sikh'; 'Asian or Asian British-Indian'. The *What is Happiness?* workshops were held at the Wellbeing Centre between 16th June and 4th August 2009, with a break of two separate weeks due to prior commitments of the group. They met for two hours each time.

What is Happiness?

Attendance and Initial Response

Women attending the arts workshops were very enthusiastic about the experience and at the launch of the exhibition at The Public they described their experiences of the project. They said that initially they didn't know what to expect but were curious, especially when the artists asked them to choose an object to help them think about what happiness

meant to them. One woman described selecting a party popper which made her think about family celebrations. Another person said the exercise reminded her of time she spent at the seaside. A third woman talked about her memories of sewing and how she used sari fabric to decorate her 'happiness home':

"..... It really helped me think about positive things and do something new".

After the first session the support workers commented on this exercise:

“A chest of objects with which the women identified their happiness, enabled some of the women with learning disabilities and mental health needs to really express themselves in a visual way.”

The Process

The support workers commented on the effect of the workshop on the group:

“Drawing or writing what made them happy helped bond the group together. The women, who may not have seemed like they had anything in common on the surface, realised that they did.”

Having been inspired and left with materials meant that the women continued to decorate their houses in between workshops. One woman described how members of her family helped with her house. Another person pointed out it would have been good if she had known this at the beginning of the project. She couldn't attend every session and this flexibility might have encouraged her to have a go and join in.

Challenges

The women attending the launch were asked what they would change. They responded by saying their support workers took lots of photos of them at work, which they were very happy about. The artists also took photos of them and their houses and some of these were used in the final exhibition without their permission. This was very upsetting for the women concerned and the photographs were removed. It was a reminder of the importance of checking if everyone in a photograph has given their permission to the photographer at the time the image was taken and checking again if it is still appropriate to use the image in a public exhibition.

Being part of a Black Country project was important for some of the women. A participant described how she went along to the Sandwell Show and saw that a 'What is Happiness?' workshop was happening in a marquee. Her grandchildren were with her and they joined in. She talked about how it was strange to see the houses at first but that she felt “proud” of being linked to the project.

A group of the women used public transport to attend the opening of the exhibition at The Public. Doing this with their support workers was clearly an important event for many of them. They were very excited, talking about each other's houses. One person said although she regretted not creating a house, she would now love to participate in another arts project.



Benefits

A number of women attending the launch of the exhibition talked about how the workshops took their minds off their problems. One person described the process as *“therapeutic”*. Others talked about how focusing on happiness was a good thing and how concentrating on designing their ‘home’ took their *“mind off their problems”*.

An important factor for some of the women was how the project enabled them to get to know other members of the group. One person attending the launch said that although she didn’t create a house of her own she helped other people to decorate their houses:



“I got to know people helping them. It was good team work”.

This point was confirmed by one of the artists working with the group. Writing in her diary, she commented:

“...the women passed on the skills which they had learnt (from the last session) to the people who were working on the ‘wedding house’ and were not familiar with the technique. This group completed the wedding house by working together and all seemed really pleased with the results.”



Conclusion

Reflecting on the project, one of the support workers commented:

“Many of the women felt that they had learnt new skills and had increased their confidence in taking part in art projects in the future.”

“We have noticed an unusually high uptake on art classes offered at the local college, which we attribute to this project, so thank you very much!”

The women attending the launch were asked what advice they would give another group who may be thinking about participating in an arts and health workshop. “Go for it!” was the overwhelming response. One woman said:

“Just see what happens and let your imagination run riot.”

Following the exhibition, the Wolverhampton and Sandwell houses were displayed in eight community spaces throughout December 2009. During this time a total of 27,990 people passed through the venues, directly by the houses.

