

Dying Matters

Creativity through voluntary work.

‘When I die I want everyone to wear really bright colours at my funeral so that they all have fun and remember me being happy’

Eleanor Monoukas.

A brief outline

As Head of Art here at Haberdashers’ Aske’s Hatcham College, I strive to create the most inspirational environment possible for our students, but sometimes the school environment just does not give them all they need. For this reason I am an avid organiser of trips and visits and often invite artists in to deliver workshops, although this is a fabulous opportunity it is a very obvious and well practised catalyst for development of ideas and work. To this end I am always looking for opportunities to be involved with projects and activities that are initially seen as non creative and challenging the pupils to make them so.

One of the most interesting and enriching organisations we have linked with as a school has been the National Council for Palliative Care. This is an umbrella charity that works closely with the government to change policy regarding palliative care. The NCPC has links to hospices, care homes, hospitals and universities all over the country dealing with death and dying, and their main aim is to establish and to implement how to make dying better for those involved: patients, families and the organisations.

I became involved with the NCPC and the Dying Matters Coalition, of which the school is now a member, when Samantha Turner, Associate Director of Public Engagement and Head of Bids, approached me with an idea to link the school and Greenwich and Bexley Hospice in Abby Wood. Samantha left the suggestion open and after meeting with Kate Heaps from the hospice we began to piece a plan together. The idea was very simple and essentially has not changed over the years, even though we are in the 3rd cycle. Basically, a group of year 12 pupils meet a group of day patients from the hospice, visit them in a voluntary capacity and get to know them. They then create a piece of artwork for them which is first exhibited in central London and then donated to the patient and their family.

The idea was simple enough, but the implications of taking year 12 pupils to a hospice and meeting patients who could die during the process of the project was a daunting thought, as well as the idea that the patients might discuss matters too tricky for 16 year olds to cope with. Also the idea of the students pulling out of the

project and letting the patients down in their few remaining months of life was a terrible pressure; this was not just an everyday trip to a gallery or a local artist workshop, this was about very ill people wanting help, support, friendship and a commitment, as well as young adults who were unsure as to what they were getting into, unclear as to how they would feel and undecided if after the first meeting they were strong enough to cope with the issues that were being discussed.

It took several meetings with a very sensible, handpicked group of students from within the Art Department before we finally made the decision to go ahead with the project. A representative from the NCPC and the Hospice came in to discuss the issues that might arise with the pupils and they were offered counselling and individual discussions with these representatives before the final selection was made and the project was ready to go.

Once this initial anxious time was over, however, we have never looked back; it is such a rewarding project for all involved.

The pupils' point of view

Walking into the hospice, I really didn't know what to expect. The hospice experience was unlike anything I'd done before and I was so nervous about meeting the patients. But as soon as we were introduced to our partners and I met Derek, my nerves disappeared. Before I knew it we were chatting away and he couldn't have made me feel more comfortable. We didn't really talk about Derek's cancer but more about his life, family interests and it was just really nice and relaxing.

[The] piece I eventually came up with [is] very different from my other work in that it's a kind of mix between a drawing and painting. What I was really interested in was reflecting Derek's calm and friendly presence.

I am really proud to be taking part in Dying Matters Week and I think Greenwich and Bexley Hospice are doing a fantastic job. Even without getting to do a piece of art for Derek, just meeting him and getting to know him was an insightful and rewarding experience.

Jack Boutwood

In September, the college's Art Department offered us a unique experience of visiting Greenwich and Bexley Hospice to meet the patients and create a piece of artwork based on our relationship, understanding and the request of the patient. The art students, specifically myself, understood the hospice visits to be more than a muse for a piece of artwork or something impressive one could possibly put on our UCAS forms, but a chance to understand or experience the type of environment a Hospice is.

Andrea Faith Baptiste

Working with Graham was a joy because, while he didn't have a formed idea about how exactly he wanted us to make a piece of art for him, he handed us the subject matter almost immediately. He gave us a photo, taken in a photo booth in Hastings, of him as a young man with his cousin. Over the course of the project we got to know Graham better and learnt more about him. He became less of a patient and more of a person. We learnt about his love of cameras and his passion for history and we tried to include both of these aspects in our piece. We can only hope that, in some small way, we have improved his journey and that his family will have something that may remind them of his loving funny spirit.

Georgina Penner and Hannah Heaf

Visiting the Hospice was nowhere as emotionally draining as I expected it to be. Although there were a few awkward moments at the beginning, Richard was very easy to talk to and had plenty of stories to share. He was always smiling, animated and well dressed, which is what I tried to convey in my etching.

Martha Paziienti-Caidan

Jim, the guy with the bright blue eyes. His Motor-Neurone Disease affects his movement and speech. We found a connection through Japanese culture and it was Jim's passion for Japan which inspired me to create the painting. Even though Jim's speech was impaired, most of his emotions were portrayed through his eyes, and not once did he lose his patience when I didn't understand his speech, he was smiling and positive through all the visits.

Phuong Diep

Working with Michael was difficult but after a few visits we talked about when he lived in Footscray, around the Five Arches Bridge. It was clear that he had a lot of happy memories around there and I wanted to capture it in a way he would like to remember it.

Rebecca Cart

Let's talk about it

While working with the NCPC and attending Dying Matters Coalition meetings as an educational advisor, I have become increasingly aware of the importance of children and young adults discussing death and dying. All the 6th form pupils over the years who have been involved with hospice project have emerged from the process talking

a great deal more openly about death, dying, funerals, illnesses and bereavement. I honestly think that as we get older and close to death our ability to discuss it diminishes, either through fear or taboo. Giving young people the opportunity to openly discuss dying and be creative in the process frees them to open up about their feelings and attitudes. Picasso once said: 'Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up.'

I believe this is the same with the issues of dying and discussing end of life. Linking both this open thinking and artistic creativity within young people aids their development into adulthood.

Day of the dead

In Mexico the population celebrate the death in the same way the Western population celebrate birth. The Mexican Day of the Dead is a bigger celebration than Christmas in Central America. The streets are lined with people as processions dance their way along the busy roads. Families create edible sugary skulls and comical selections depicting the dead in their family, they create altars to their dead and party into the night, celebrating the lives of those they love.

The most recent project we have undertaken with the NCPC and Dying Matters was a celebration of Mexican Day of the Dead at Senate house in London. 125 KS3 pupils were involved in the project, creating skulls, skeletons and artefacts to adorn the altars of the dead at the conference. The pupils were encouraged to create their skull or skeleton to celebrate someone they knew who had died. In doing so, this project enabled pupils to discuss death of family members, pets, celebrities and friends in a safe and welcoming environment. Pupils were encouraged to think about their own lives and own deaths, answering questions such as 'What would you like to have achieved before you die' and 'what would you like to be remembered for?' Pupils also discussed funerals they had been to and were encouraged to think about their own funerals. These questions posed in the creative environment of the art room enabled pupils to be creative in their answers.

What happens next?

As a school, we aim to continue the hospice project, working in future directly with the hospice rather than through the NCPC. The project has become so popular that non-art students have requested to participate as simply volunteers. We aim to also continue with the Day of the Dead projects and every year on the 1st of November aim to hold a celebration enabling pupils of all years to celebrate their dead.

'To die will be an awfully big adventure.'

J.M. BARRIE, *Peter Pan*