

To take part in arts – it's a person's right. It's a human right, I think.' So says musician Tony Willé, one of the ten artists employed by Sandwell Third Age Arts (STAA) to work with its elderly clients. STAA, founded in 1997 under the aegis of the local mental health trust and an independent charity since 2001, takes arts activities to older people with dementia and other mental and physical health problems wherever they are and whatever their level of support needs. The artists work both with small groups and with individuals, in people's own homes, in day centres, residential and nursing care homes and in hospitals. The work they do with clients (and their carers in many cases) ranges from music-making to dance to mosaics to metalwork to collage to watercolours to

You're never too old or too ill
to have fun

Happy days



story work and writing, to hat making to batik, pottery and beyond – whatever the client wants to do and the artist can help them achieve. The aim, in the words of coordinator Sharon Baker, who works part-time with the project and the rest of the week is herself a practising artist, is quite simply to bring creativity, fun and pleasure into the lives of people who are often isolated, confused, lonely and depressed. 'Everyone has some kind of interest in the arts. It doesn't have to be formal art – people may have enjoyed embroidery, even cake decorating when they were younger. Some of our clients are incredibly skilled,' she says.

STAA, winner of the 2005 NIMHE positive practice award for older people and mental health, is funded half by Sandwell Social Inclusion and Health (Sandwell's social services department) and half from fundraising and donations. It works with, on average, 130-170 older people and their carers over the course of a year. Referrals come from a wide range of sources: community psychiatric nurses, occupational therapists, nurses, senior care staff in care homes, carers and some self-referrals. Clients are initially offered ten sessions, weekly, bi-monthly, monthly or at any interval that suits them. The service is entirely free to the participants. 'A lot of people have more,' Sharon says. 'Some people could do with having sessions every week of the year.' STAA will meet with the person and their carer(s), discuss their likes and dislikes and attempt to find a form of artwork that

will appeal to them. Specific aims are agreed for the client, such as sensory stimulation, relaxation, developing self-confidence, or encouraging self-expression and communication. Groups are sometimes just two people and never more than six.

The one source of referrals they haven't yet tapped is GPs. Sharon would very much like STAA to do more preventive and early intervention work with people in the early stages of dementia and people with depression and anxiety: 'All our referrals are for people who are already in the system. Some are people who have been in the mental health system all their lives. It is how we were set up initially and at the moment we don't have the resources to expand. Nor do we work as much as we'd like with older people from ethnic minority groups, partly because we know from research that awareness of dementia and mental health problems among older people in these communities is often still quite poor; they are often seen as just a normal part of the ageing process.'

Sadly the statutory provision of pleasure isn't high on the government's list of priorities for health and social care, nor that of most commissioners of care services for older people, she points out. 'It's always the way with the arts. They're

the first things to go when you are understaffed and under-resourced.' Yet, she says, there is evidence that creativity and participation in activities such as those provided by STAA has measurable therapeutic benefits: 'The activity itself is a positive stimulus. It enhances communication, it allows experimentation in a safe environment, it helps build self-esteem and confidence, it helps people relax. If people enjoy the experience then it's been worthwhile. It's about process, rather than the end product. It's about pleasure for its own sake, and everyone should be able to experience that.'

Creative activities can also prevent deterioration in mental health and capacity, she argues; too often older people with mental health problems are written off, when recovery from non-organic mental illness is possible, whatever your age. 'STAA gives people a new purpose by supporting them to take up a new hobby or revisit an activity they may have stopped. It can act as a catalyst to help them get going again. It can inspire them to take on other new activities, and by working with carers and hospital and care home staff we pass on skills. At the moment the arts is an add-on. I would like to see it as an integral part of people's care plans.'

Photographer Tricia Crummay has been doing reminiscence and book-making work with older people with dementia and depression. 'Creativity is a link to a more spiritual dimension of our being,' she believes. 'It's not enough for human beings to exist physically, to be physically comfortable. There needs to be motivation, zest for life, and that's what activities like these provide.'

Another important function is to help older people through life changes: bereavement, or moving from the family home into residential care. STAA artists have gone into residential care homes to set up arts groups as a way of helping new residents settle in and get to know the other people there. Participation in arts activities also helps stave off the decline in the mental capacity of people with dementia, Sharon says. 'We encourage people to make use of the skills they have, and try to keep them as active and interested as long as possible, both through the activity itself and through social interaction. It's also a way of helping a person try new things in a safe and supportive environment. This is something about which they can take decisions in a situation when it feels as though all other decisions have been taken out of their control.' Carers also benefit: 'If the person they are caring for is contented, then it makes their role more rewarding. It's also an opportunity for the carer and the client to do something enjoyable together again.'

The new emphasis in government policy on social inclusion and the requirement on local authorities to make provision for older people's wider social and cultural needs is very welcome but Sharon already sees signs of the all-too-common failure to ensure all government departments are working towards the same ends. While STAA can indeed act as a bridge to enable isolated older people to take up new activities and hobbies and regain their mental wellness, local authority adult education

Enriching lives

Tony Willé has been working intensively with a woman with dysphasia and dementia who is also physically disabled and needs 24-hour nursing care in hospital. 'Her husband never thought of her as a music fan but she's been getting a lot from the sessions. Through learning about her life history, liaising with her husband about what she listened to, we are building up a music programme that we will make into a CD with music and songs that provoke a strong, positive reaction, others that make her want to vocalise and sing, and music that is going to relax her. Sound is free. Everyone has a right to have that to enrich their lives.' He also hopes that the ward staff will learn from his being there. 'There is a senior member of the auxiliary staff who joins us for the sessions and has taken this on board. He says it has opened his eyes to ways he can use music.'

Sandra Andrews is a painter and teacher. Her father had a mental breakdown when she was in her early teens, which she says has given her insight into mental illness. She is currently working one-to-one with a woman with dementia. 'I talked to her carers and discovered that her subject was flowers. So I bought a book and took it to the first session and told her it was our book and we would paint in it. She wanted to be an artist but her parents wouldn't let her leave home and she made an unhappy marriage. I could sense there's a lot of anger. So every week I choose a flower and a poem and we talk about them and make a painting. She's very happy, very peaceful while we are working, and she is doing the most wonderful painting. The book to her is a precious relief.'

leisure classes, to which her clients might progress, are being cut: 'One government department is doing one thing, and another is going in the other direction.'

Trudy King is creative arts officer for adult services and mental health with Sandwell Social Inclusion and Health and a member of the STAA advisory group. Her job involves establishing arts opportunities for people in residential and day care services in the borough. 'Art is a way of tapping into things that haven't been tapped into for a long time. It's a way of focusing on abilities, not disabilities, and certain art forms enable us to communicate with someone with mental health needs in a way that other forms can't,' she says. She regrets that it comes so low on most care commissioners' and providers' priorities: 'In practice the opportunities for one-to-one work are really quite slim, because of the staffing issues. Where we can have arts workers based permanently in residential care homes, they are such a wonderful resource. You can see the lights coming on in people's faces. People have had so much taken away from them. We are helping them have something back.'



This is the third in a series of articles profiling the winners of the 2005 NIMHE/CSIP positive practice awards. Next month: Hampshire Partnership NHS Trust's mental health user group for people with learning disabilities