
Training with Life Circles

Susanna Oxenham and **Angie Ward** have been trainees on the Life Circles Project, an 18 month community dance project that celebrates the lifelong creativity of older people across eight care settings in Somerset, Dorset and Devon, delivered by Take Art and Core Dance and funded by the Arts Council, Baring Foundation and Guildford Trust.

Susanna comes from a dance background and Angie from an education and social care background. Here they write about the different and positive experiences they have had working within the project.

Angie Ward, Community Dancer

Before becoming a trainee dancer with Life Circles I had no experience of dancing professionally or attending classes. I did, however, love to dance, have 20 years' experience in health and social care and a personal goal to experience work in the arts.

I have worked as practitioner, further education lecturer, trainer and manager and found many of the cultures in these settings didn't embrace the way I wanted to work. People I was keen to reach often weren't able to access or maintain a place at college or emphasis was placed on evidencing life skills. Creativity was not recognised amongst them and I felt frustrated and isolated in my beliefs. I began leading small innovative outreach and research projects, often linked to the arts, on a freelance basis and found working alongside artists refreshing and a powerful mechanism for raising awareness of social issues and promoting positive change. I discovered a passion for empowering others to express themselves and, at the age of 40, I decided to actively pursue working in the arts myself. I wrote scripts and poetry, reviewed performances in exchange for tickets and workshop places, facilitated workshops, performed in a film giving birth and toured for six weeks in an interactive play where I had my first taste of writing for theatre and

performing dance. I felt so drawn to this sphere of work; dance immediately conveyed what I wanted to express, getting others to recognise and feel so uplifted and powerful.

Life Circles offered a great opportunity – I knew I enjoyed working with the elderly, finding people authentic and with much wisdom to share. At the interview Sue Way, project lead (and my mentor), shared the aims and ethos with such passion and conviction that I knew it would be part of a much needed culture shift in provision for the elderly. Life Circles involves three highly experienced dance practitioners mentoring six trainees and sharing their expertise which meant I could learn through experience, feedback and reflection.

I immediately loved the planning, evaluating and participatory part of being involved with Life Circles but when it came to me demonstrating or leading I initially felt like a frightened rabbit caught in the headlights, exposed and vulnerable, hiding behind props and planning complicated routines. I then became aware of confidence issues I had learnt to mask extremely well. Dancing, together with Sue's expert mentoring and self reflection, gave me the tools to work through this, reassured that I was in a learning process.

I began to deliver some sections, practicing and developing my confidence, began dancing with Tone Dance, an established over 50s

dance company and their outreach programme, experienced training days with Diane Amans and Life Circles dance artists and met and danced with other trainees. Life Circles has empowered me to really deepen and develop my own imaginative and creative practice, get comfortable with the mind-body connection, be present: responding to the participants in a natural and authentic way and experience a powerful connection – the range of abilities and reactions never being a hindrance.

Life Circles is about belonging, creating and sharing a safe space for participants to express themselves through music, dance, spoken word and movement. I have learnt to accept my limitations, recognise my strengths and celebrate the remarkable change Life Circles has brought, both in movement ability and social wellbeing. Shared memories (often stimulated by the props and ideas we brought in), detailed accounts of travel, living in Africa, beaches, parties, weddings, lost loves, anger and betrayal created many participatory dance pieces. The impact has a ripple effect; higher expectations for residents after seeing them react and express themselves in new ways, residents creating new props and an activity coordinator having dance training.

Life Circles is also working with a filmmaker to produce a high quality, stunning, inspiring and educational film that shows the creative process in >

Below left to right: Sue Way (centre) Angie Ward (right) with dancers and participants, Life Circles Project. Photo: Jacqueline Cairns. Susanna Oxenham (left) with Tone Dancers and Markers Dance group, Silver Dancers Party in conjunction with Life Circles Project. Photo: Dave Oxenham. Angie Ward with participants, Life Circles Project. Photo: Jacqueline Cairns



action and how movement work can support older people to value their experiences, remain playful and be imaginative and creative.

It's fantastic to be part of this and I intend to use the film and my new skills to support the ongoing development of lifelong creativity in the future.

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Susanna Oxenham, Community Dance Artist

As a choreography graduate near the beginning of my career as a community dance artist, I have had the privilege of going on a journey over the past year as a trainee on the Life Circles Project, discovering

how to adapt my skills and develop my creative practice in the context of working with the fragile elderly using movement, dance and imaginative play.

I believe the work has made a difference to the lives of those we have met in these residential settings, a community of people who are so often invisible and yet where there is such a richness of experience.

My understanding has deepened in how to support the creative expression of individuals within this context and how to use dance activity to value people in the later years of their lives, supporting them through many of the physical, emotional, mental and social challenges this stage of life brings.

Sue Way, community dance artist for 30 years, has been my mentor and has demonstrated a very personal, inspirational and therapeutic approach to leading these sessions.

In conjunction, I have also had the opportunity to coordinate and lead on the delivery of the Silver Dancers project, on behalf of Dance in Devon, which also aims to develop dance opportunities for those over 55 years old in mid Devon.

I have grown not only in confidence as a dance leader working with older people, but also as a person being able to unmistakably recognise the wealth of creativity inherent in each one of us, the ability we have to share this resource with each other and the positive result this exchange brings. As a teacher, I have learnt the significance of simplifying the movement material and concentrating instead on encouraging participation, whilst still providing depth to the session through contextualisation and using a wide range of stimuli from which to create the work.

The impact of this work is



unquestionable but hard to measure. It has the power to stimulate the body, challenge mindsets, nurture deeper connections between people and over time begin to alter culture within the residential homes. I have witnessed the power of transformation as people are awakened from apathy and often overcome deep emotional trauma and complex physical frustrations. Through using a variety of pertinent themes such as, 'saying goodbye' or 'holding something precious' people have faced issues that have been holding them back from being able to enjoy life here and now. In some cases change may take time to become apparent but the evidence can eventually be seen, often in a changed countenance and increased physical confidence or even a new sparkle in their eyes. Seeing these moments has increased my desire to learn more about movement therapy and hope to go on to pursue

more study in this field.

Through the training days provided through Life Circles, I've learnt that the practitioner is key in creating the right atmosphere for change and in supporting people to overcome many unseen barriers to participation. This can be achieved by modelling the desired behaviour such as; being in the present moment, demonstrating taking risks and celebrating the playfulness of the inner child. I have seen the importance of creating a non-critical environment that gives both the permission for each person just to be present or to explore new ideas. Additionally, negative mental limitations are challenged and the group is guided to focus towards what each person can do and the world of possibility.

To connect with each person the sessions are multi-sensory, using everything from scarves and feathers

to costumes and shells. Engagement is also supported through using a richly diverse range of delivery techniques and artforms. Even though the sessions have a clear structure, there is flexibility to adapt the plan and respond to the individuals in the room allowing them to feed-in to the direction of the session.

Life Circles is a great example of how dance can be used as a powerful tool to change lives and shift culture. I have met some exceptional people and am passionate to develop this work further not only with older people but also with others in the community who would benefit from being empowered to find their creative voice in a society where they may have often felt unseen.

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