

# Working in challenging settings

Working in isolation within care settings can be challenging as well as rewarding. Here, one experienced community dance artist shares a personal experience and their reflections about what can happen when people are placed in vulnerable situations

**We love dance don't we..? That's why we do it!** But despite the happy, smiling faces, the feathers, hats and parachutes, and reports of how beneficial dance is to wellbeing and health, there is very little spoken about how hard and emotionally challenging our job as community dance practitioners can be and how physically vulnerable we sometimes are.

Over the years I have come into contact with many people living with different stages of dementia. I have been very lucky to have worked within many wonderful settings, and alongside some fantastic staff and volunteers. However, no amount of experience can prepare you for an occasion when things don't go as planned.

Last August, I received a phone call from the manager of a local residential care setting that specialises in caring for older people with complex mental health needs and dementia. We spoke of the residents' needs and of the general layout of the space within the setting. We booked for two weeks' time. She reassured me that she would be around on the day to introduce me to the staff and residents, and give me a tour of the building.

Whilst planning for my visit I remembered I had visited this setting some years before as part of a project organised by a local arts organisation. I remembered observing some upsetting and distressing scenes.

The staff had placed themselves at a considerable distance from the action and I had felt vulnerable. However, even whilst recalling these feelings I also remembered the participation by one or two residents as being wonderful, and it was those individuals who had made a rather unpleasant situation bearable.

I now had a quandary: should I follow my hunch and cancel the session due to the last visit, or should I take a chance and trust that if the manager has organised for my visit, then perhaps in the intervening years things had changed? To inform myself further, I searched the Care Quality Commission website for more information on the setting. What I read was reassuring and the recent inspection report didn't give me any cause for concern.

On the day of the booking, I approached the reception desk and introduced myself. I was told the manager wasn't on the premises and the staff knew nothing of my imminent arrival. I was directed to wait in one of the communal lounges and left there along with my props, without any staff around to supervise my movements.

I kept to the back of the room and tried to be as inconspicuous as possible, which isn't easy when dressed in red and holding a huge beach ball!

I then observed a resident who was walking in circles – out of one door and back in again through

another – making circuits of the setting. My presence seemed to upset her and she began to verbally abuse me, displaying quite aggressive and agitated behaviour on two circuits and on the third approached me from behind and punched me in the back.

Straightaway, I left where I had been told to wait and went back to the reception to inform the staff. Unfortunately, I had to interrupt a conversation and tried to explain what had happened. At first, I received very little reaction and needed to explain the situation several times.

The nurse in charge arrived on the scene and said, "Well, we don't know who you are and what you are here for..." and another nurse said it is, "to be expected in an EMI (elderly mentally infirm) residential home". I am well aware of the potentially aggressive and violent behaviour of some people living with dementia but, until then, hadn't actually experienced any and their comments came as a shock.

It was decided by me and a kind care worker, who had subsequently arrived on the scene, that it might be best for me to leave the setting. She assured me that the incident would be reported and that it would be documented in their incident book. The next thing that happened came as a complete surprise... I began to cry! I have no idea why, the punch wasn't even that hard.

I returned home and contacted

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several supportive and knowledgeable individuals. Each person advised me to contact the manager and explain what had happened. With regret I didn't follow through on this advice. Was it because I didn't have the courage to do so? Was I:

- afraid of the implications of my concerns?
- afraid that the reporting of the incident may damage my reputation?
- letting the participants of my sessions down by shedding a light on this unpredictable behaviour?
- afraid I had somehow brought the incident upon myself?

The incident could so easily have gotten out of hand; one of us could have been hurt. How can we better equip ourselves in preparation for this kind of situation? Are we talking enough about the more 'dangerous' parts of our job?

The setting has a general duty under the Health and Safety at Work Act to "ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety, and welfare at work of all [their] employees," which includes visitors to the setting. Could I have protected myself by ensuring I had a neutral, supervised space to wait? Could I now have had a frank conversation with the manager about the implications of the staff not being properly prepared for my visit?

I regret the incident and feel in sharing my story I might be doing a disservice to the people I love working with. However, community dance is not all about smiles on faces; it is also about having uncomfortable conversations that provide increased learning. With that in mind, I hope that sharing my story might spark others who have had similar experiences into beginning these difficult, but important, conversations.

This article has been published anonymously to respect the privacy of the author. If you would like to contact the author, please do so through People Dancing.

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# Bringing people together

**Siân James**, Communications Officer, Arts Council of Wales, discusses the positive repercussions of investing in new artistic opportunities for communities and dance practitioners in Wales

**Arts Council of Wales (ACW) were delighted to see last autumn's People Dancing conference – the first international event from People Dancing dedicated to participatory and community dance, and socially engaged arts practice – come to Wales.** Acknowledging our support for the event, we were pleased to be able to contribute to the 'Welsh' elements of the programme via our logistical support and funding for the Wales Commissions. We were very pleased that this prestigious community dance event took place in Wales, giving a boost to the nation's dance community and bringing new audiences to venues in Cardiff.

Wherever and however you work with people in dance, the People Dancing event provided an opportunity to share your practice and approaches to engagement across different international, social, economic and political contexts. It gave an opportunity to meet other artists, teachers and leaders, and to watch and talk about their work alongside inspiring and provocative keynote presentations from world-class figures.

ACW's funding allowed People Dancing to commission Wales-based community dance organisations to curate and present four new, high quality creative experiences and community dance performances. Each

of these was led by a Welsh dance artist working with an international dance artist, created with and performed by community groups from across Wales.

Wales has a long tradition of innovative community dance practice, which is widely recognised for its pioneering work. The commissioning of high quality international artists to work with Wales-based artists and groups challenged and inspired this practice. The attention given to researching and developing the creative process throughout the project is already having an impact on the development of community dance practice, increasing the quality of regular activity delivered. There is a real appetite for the development and sharing of opportunities within the dance sector in Wales, and being a part of this initiative was the perfect opportunity to whet that appetite.

Celebrating and reflecting the unique history of community dance in Wales, the four commissions that showcased at People Dancing were:

- Cai Tomos, who worked with international artist Anna Halprin, USA on a film documentary showing a new creative process. He shared his learning and spoke about his broad experience of working with older people
- Joanna Young, who, in partnership with international artists, Felipe