



Why I work in the Creative Ageing sector by Farrell Renowden, August 2023

Early in my career, I was an Arts Development Officer in local government, creating new pathways into creativity for groups that were deemed “hard to reach”. My project focussed on young carers, asylum seekers, and older people, offering an opportunity for those who don’t traditionally see themselves in the theatre, to write a script and see it come to life on the stage. I spoke to both the Carers Team and Inclusion Team who were immediately on board and willing to refer participants, but when I spoke to the Commissioner for Older People he rebuffed, “Older people don’t like scriptwriting.” But how did he know? His answer is etched onto my heart, “Because my Grandma wouldn’t want to do it.” This, the Commissioner who makes evidence-based investments...

But where was the evidence? At the time, there was so little research to back me up and make my case. We agreed that he would endorse the project if (and only if) I could recruit individuals from a specific postcode, of a certain age, who had never written for the stage but wanted to: the gauntlet was down, and I started knocking on doors. Few people in that postcode opened their doors to strangers, but of those who did, I managed to recruit a modest group interested enough to commit to the first session.

Fast-forward several months, to the night of the performance, and not only was the audience full of the friends and family of the participants, but the infamous Commissioner was back, and I was finally able to gloat. These individuals hadn’t just written something for the stage, but they had written something special, and the evidence base was literally in the spotlight. Shortly afterwards I was commissioned to take my new writers on a cultural exchange programme to Stuttgart as local ambassadors, the pride of the town!

So, that is the start of my story – and career – in Creative Ageing. I wish I could say that this unnamed Commissioner was the first and last person who ever doubted the agency of people because they are aged over 50, but a lifetime later and it is still a conversation I have on a regular basis. Even the fact I am not aged over 50 and choose to work with older people seems to be an issue of contention. Is the youth sector restricted to young workers? Why is it normal to care about younger people accessing creativity but an “odd choice” to care about older people? Ageism comes in many forms.

So, do I think of myself as a trailblazer? Not really. They say that “if you can see it then you can be it” and in my case this is true. I grew up with an amazing role model who blazed the trail before me. From a young age, I can remember sorting through my Nana’s buttons and asking about the protests she went on and organised: “Save the Whales”, “Stop the Bomb”, “Save our NHS” and for many years she focussed on “Pensioners Rights”. I saw her organising coaches to London, checking petitions, and constantly writing to the paper, because some of the women in her choir couldn’t afford to eat and heat. The reason she kept going, year after year, was simple, “If not me, then who? We all should be angry!” So **why** do I work in Creative Ageing? Because my Nana was singing and fighting right until the end, and I plan to do the same.

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