

A Change of Perspective Podcast, Episode 11. Creativity and Young People w/Beth Smith Transcript

Lizzie Lovejoy 0:01

Hello, everybody. A brief note before we get started - this podcast episode, like all previous podcast episodes, is recorded over Zoom. And because of this, there were some audio discrepancies right at the start of the recording. This doesn't continue throughout the whole episode, but I just wanted to make you aware that that is why some words are missing towards the beginning, and there's some strange sound bugs. Now let's get back to Episode 11, our penultimate episode of A Change of Perspective.

Lizzie Lovejoy

Hello, everybody, and welcome to the Change of Perspective podcast. I am your host, Lizzie Lovejoy. And today I will be talking to Beth. So I guess what I'd like to start with is asking who you are, what your role is, and introducing yourself to all our listeners.

Beth Smith 1:04

Hello, my name is Beth Smith, I work with Tees Valley Arts at the Redcar Palace, my role is Assistant Curator and Head of the Young People's Programme, Blooming Youth Collective.

Lizzie Lovejoy 1:18

So the first question is, how did you get this job, because obviously, you're an early career practitioner, you've only just started working in this industry. And something that's really fun about this podcast is that we've talked to people who've been in this industry for 40 years, but obviously, we're also talking to various people, who've only been in it for one or two, maybe even less than. We'd like to know a bit about your experience and how you got the job.

Beth Smith 1:45

I've only been working since April May time I started working here. Before that I was in university. And that was when I learned what I'm interested in. And I realised that that was mainly helping people and recognising marginalised groups and people that don't often get recognition. So that was when I started thinking about my dissertation at the end, the end of second year going into my third year.

My background is I'm from a really small village out just before the North York Moors. And growing up there was quite interesting. I have very mixed feelings about it. And I wanted to sort of get that across in a study because it wasn't particularly talked about academically. My main study that I was reading into was the Plan International UK study that said that Middlesbrough was the worst place for young girls to grow up. And I took that and sort of analysed it and critiqued it, but in the sense of rurality, and how that shapes young women, because for the most part, it was talking about urban areas, and cities which sort of ignores a lot of rural communities. And I wanted to show that we exist. And that we often get forgotten about and that can really impact people's lives. So it can be really isolating for

people, and can impact on their possibilities in ways that I didn't even realise until I did my dissertation and my interviews, and it really made me think about ways that people interact and how that can impact people's lives in the long run. So things about like role models with young people and things like that, and how role models can be quite different in rural communities, because they're so small, and everyone knows each other.

So I did that and realised how much I loved it, and how much I wanted to, yeah, be involved in trying to like, give people opportunities that they might not be able to, especially in rural communities. So from that I left uni, I got 80% on my dissertation, and that's like, I'm really proud of that. Because I never expected as someone who grew up really working class, and my mum was a single mum for a long time and from a really small village where everyone knows everyone and I went to like this big city by myself. So I graduated - well, not really because it was COVID but I like I got my degree – and then I had a summer job for two weeks in Redcar. And that was how I met James and Peter, who I work with now and I volunteered for Tees Valley Arts for a few months. So from when my job finished it was COVID and I was really quite lonely because I mean my boyfriend lived up in Scotland, my friends were at uni in different parts of England. And I was in this really small village back from doing three years in a big city, in this village where there was my grandparents and my mum, and a few other members of my family. But it was small, and I didn't know what to do. And at this point I was I was really struggling because it was just really isolating, the village itself, but also COVID. So I was volunteering, because it gave me some like sort of purpose. And that was when we started looking at applying for funding, give Redcar an opportunity for young people to come together. After a few months of, of volunteering in creating the garden room downstairs with a few other people from Blooming Youth Collective, buying plants, and planting seeds and sunflower seeds, and daffodils and things like that. It came together, and then I started working on the Kickstart programme.

I still am baffled by the fact that I've got a job. Because so many young people, they leave uni and they don't know what to do. For so many people that's really isolating, and you feel a bit lost. So I'm really grateful, I'm really privileged to have a job and a job that I love, and a job where I get to help people, because I never thought that I could. And I never thought about working in the arts until I was given the opportunity.

And that's what I think is really important is giving young people the opportunity to get experience and for them to realise what they enjoy. Because for many people they don't know what they enjoy, because they've just been told their whole life what to enjoy. And giving people the opportunity to work and realise what they enjoy I think is really instrumental in people's lives. And working here has completely changed my life, and my view on life, and that wouldn't have happened if I wasn't given the opportunity. Yeah, that's how I got the job.

Lizzie Lovejoy

Everything you're talking about is so true in terms of people not knowing what they do and as soon as they leave uni they get isolated and cut off. But the arts and specifically Palace Art Gallery and the Tees Valley Arts area, there is this push for bringing people together and bringing this community of young people. And you've had such a big part in that. And I think the next thing that I really wanted to talk to you about originally was going to be what

projects have you worked on, but I think this more comes into tell us about the Blooming Youth.

Beth Smith 7:41

Blooming Youth Collective was the project that we put like a funding bid in for and we got it. I didn't know what I was doing, but in the best way possible. Everything that I recognised that Redcar and Cleveland needed. So Blooming Youth is a peer led young people's group based out of the Redcar Palace on the seafront in Redcar. And we are a group that focuses on inclusion and diversity and sustainability and communities and supporting one another and having a space that's safe to go to with people there that care and can listen to you. And just having a space that there's no expectations. And there's no judgement. We're a good bunch.

So every Monday we have workshops and sessions in the space and they can... oh gosh, we've done so many. We've done macramé, bookbinding, I'm going to get the list up because there's a whole list.

So it's for people aged 16 to 24 in the Redcar and Cleveland area. But we're not, we're not picky with ages. I mean, we're not going to turn you away for being 25.

We have bookbinding, herb garden creating, macramé, crochet, ukulele, natural tie dyeing, Dungeons and Dragons, British Sign Language, badge making, Bob Ross painting, lino printing, clothing swaps, seed balls, spooky movies, costume making, murder mystery, and climate change protest signs. And upcoming we have costume making with our partner organisation Whippet Up. And yesterday we had cryptids with Carmen Marcus, and on Saturday just gone we went to the day for climate justice up in Newcastle. There was a protest up there.

All of the workshops are based on what the young people want and what they want to be involved in and do and take part in because it gives them an opportunity to experience things that they might not have been able to before. So like macramé, people might not have been able to go to a macramé workshop that costs a lot of money because it's not exactly accessible. But having the community come together, I mean, it was James's mum that came in to do macramé, they're having those like intergenerational relationships. I think it's really important because we have a lot to learn from the older generation and the older generation I think they have a lot to learn from us. With Friends of Redcar Cemetery, when they came in to do the seed balls, we paired one of their group up with one of our group, and the conversations they had were just so wholesome and so sweet. And just getting to know one another, because we have a lot in common. And I don't think people realise that.

Lizzie Lovejoy

How many young people have you had involved in Blooming Youth? Do you know?

Beth Smith 10:43

I think it's been around 60 young people. We have our regulars that come to like every session. But for many people, they can't make Mondays because of work, college, things like that, which is why we started doing more Saturday sessions as well. Yeah, about 60.

Lizzie Lovejoy 10:59

That's a lot of people for like a short amount of time, you've had a really good reach.

Beth Smith 11:05

Yeah, thank you. It's been sort of mainly word of mouth. I'm not very good at social media, not really my forte. So it's mainly been word of mouth.

Lizzie Lovejoy 11:15

So I guess I'd like to expand a little bit on other projects that you've worked on. So obviously, one of the ones I know about is that you had involvement with the Northern Girls project. So I'd like to know a little bit about what you did in that kind of thing. And if there are other projects, similar that you've been a part of, and what your, your role has been.

Beth Smith 11:33

My role is Assistant Curator, so I don't just work on Blooming Youth, I work quite quite a lot down in the in the gallery downstairs. I've worked on quite a few projects. So Northern Girls - so it was with Pilot Theatre, and I mainly organised the sessions here and getting everyone free on the same day, which is harder than it seems. Because people's calendars really clash. But it was mainly organising for people to meet on certain days and times, and organising if people can't come or if they can come, and things like that. And also being like a point of contact between Pilot Theatre and the community of writers with Northern Girls.

I helped a little bit with the young people podium with Festival of Thrift, mainly doing similar but also signposting people from Blooming Youth Collective to take part in the young people's podium, connecting them together. Because a lot of the time I think, there's Blooming Youth Collective, and a lot of young people don't know what's actually happening in the Redcar area. So I sort of have like an ongoing list of things that are happening for people if they aren't, if they don't know what to do, I can be like, look, these things are happening, you can take part if you want to.

And then I think my favourite thing so far this year has been the Free Fem performance, which went on downstairs, which was a pole dance performance with a lady called Georgina Lance from, she's originally from Newcastle, but she's living in London now. It was with Michaela from Pink-Collar Gallery. And in connection with a group in Brazil called Las Illuminasta, Las Illuministas, and it was looking at female identity and femicide and people's experiences. And yeah, it was just really powerful. And really incredible to see the place come alive like that. Everything was pink. It was in the garden room downstairs, which is the home of Blooming Youth. We just transformed the space. And because it's outward facing to the, to the windows, there was a couple of people walking past and wondering what was

going on, and when they learned about it, just getting, getting the word out, and for people to understand what Georgina was doing and how what she was portraying was really important, owning that, that was, that was wonderful. I loved that.

Lizzie Lovejoy

I was watching the Twitch livestream for that as well I was gonna add, so it's good that you've got like, an accessibility side of these things as well where you're considering where multiple people are at and how they can interact with it.

Beth Smith 14:28

Yeah, I mean, it was just, it was such a wonderful day. We, the Kickstarts... yeah, I'm not techy, so I sort of gathered them and was like, please can you do this? And could you do this? Please? So like the sound, we have Ari who is like brilliant at sound. And they, they sorted all of that out because it had a backing track. And then Daz and Aiden worked really hard with recording and taking pictures and filming so that we could document the day, because I think they're making like a little short film about it. Peter and Joe and everyone worked really hard at setting up the TV so that we could get the Twitch live stream. Because, yeah, I think recently, due to COVID, we've realised that this doesn't just need to be a COVID thing, it can just be an everyday thing for people to be able to have access to things like Free Fem, and the gallery in general. So we take like, pictures of all the exhibitions and things like that. It was, it was just such a fun day as well. Everyone was, everyone just loved it. And Georgina is brilliant. She's, she's lovely. And she just, she did amazing. Yeah, so that's, that's what I've been up to, as well as everyday things.

Lizzie Lovejoy 15:48

We've kind of been covering what the direction that I was gonna go in next to ask you about, because everything kind of interlinks with each other. So I wanted to know more about the arts and young people and how you've seen that evolving recently. But obviously, you've really talked about that, and how that's almost the entire point of your role. And everything that you've done is working with young people and getting them to interact with arts and creativity. So I guess, I'd like to know whether you've seen a change over your period of time volunteering and working there.

Beth Smith 16:22

Yeah, yeah, I think the arts for a lot of people can seem quite daunting, and quite exclusionary. And at the Redcar Palace, and Blooming Youth especially, sort of breaking down barriers and giving people the opportunity, because there's so much good, I think we all know, and think that young people are solutions to so many problems that are happening. And they have so much potential, and so much, so many possibilities. And I think grabbing that, and helping them would, just enriches the whole of society, and getting people to see and to realise that the arts is for everyone.

And I didn't know growing up that I would ever be in the arts, because I never, I never thought that I'd have the opportunity. So I just never, I just never thought about it, because I'm going to manage, I was managing my expectations, because I didn't know. And I think working class culture is so special, and really can just bring people together. And that's what the arts is for me, now. I think growing up, there's so much about the working class identity and communities and culture that needs to be celebrated, whilst also realising that it can be really difficult. And I think, embrace, embracing people, and bringing them together, and giving them a sense of belonging, community can really help people.

In Redcar and Cleveland, there's just so there's so many people that are creative, that don't get recognition. I mean, people that, for example, people that knit and crochet, and so on, there's so many talented people that aren't known about, because for a long time, they were excluded from the arts. And I think they are still quite a lot. So yeah, trying to break down those barriers and trying to encourage people, but I can see why people feel a bit put off about it. The whole idea of like, oh, no, we don't go to art galleries, no, they're not like they're not for people like us, is... I understand why they feel like that. Because for a long time, I felt like that, because it never felt safe. So we're just, we're just trying to make it safe, and for people to walk past the gallery and to see oh, there's people like me in there.

Lizzie Lovejoy

I remember... this is a bit of an anecdotal tangent, but just with what you were saying about like, not feeling like a place is for you like in an art gallery. I remember going out with my mum and dad to, to a gallery. And when we got in there, we were followed the whole time by a member of the security and it was simply because we were dressed in hoodies. And we clearly had just come back from work, because my parents work on the industrial estate in the town. And we yeah, we got followed the whole time and we thought, man, we'll never go back in there. We'll just never go into an art gallery space again, because clearly, we're not wanted and it's assumed that we wouldn't be suitable for that area. And so I think it's really important what you're highlighting, that these places need to become accessible and for people to remove these, these barriers that have come into place.

Beth Smith

Yeah, I think and just making it really welcoming, because minorities in the UK, so I mean, working class people, people of colour, people that are part of the LGBTQ+ community, for a long time, and still are being pushed away from the arts. And I think, trying to get people to come together and realise and create a space that they can come to. Hopefully, it'll create waves that other, other places will take on board.

Lizzie Lovejoy 20:46

So this is another slight tangent, but I wanted to ask, just because we've kind of talked about the space as a performance venue as well. Is that something that you're wanting to do a lot of in the future, like work as a non-traditional performance venue to have things like the pole dancing for femicide and the young people's podium and different events like that?

Beth Smith 21:09

Yeah, I think so. I would love the garden room especially to be a community space that can have takeovers by other, by creatives. And I think highlighting the different mediums, and that every medium is valid, is really important. I think that would be... I'd love that. I loved the day that Georgina Lance was here, it was just brilliant. And she called our team the dream team. And that made my heart really happy. And everyone was so proud of one another. And just having a really supportive space just, it makes me so happy and so fulfilled. There's so much possibility about where we are in Redcar to have that space be used to help push that creatives are valid. I think it'd be really great.

Lizzie Lovejoy 22:10

So moving on to our final two questions. And this was really the idea of exploring what your creative future is going to be. What projects and plans do you want to do? Where do you want to go? And it's okay if you have no idea or just a vague idea. We're just interested in what you see.

Beth Smith 22:30

I'll be honest, I don't know. And I've gotten to a point in my life where I'm very much okay with that, very much okay. I just know that I love working here, and I love the people. And I mean, in the short term future, we're doing a project with Casey Orr the photographer, showing Saturday Girl about town, in the Redcar Palace, the art gallery. And it's got people from Redcar and other areas, young woman especially, involved downstairs and they'll have their portraits hung up, and empowering young women especially, young women and non-binary people, to be involved in their community and see their face especially.

And in the long run. I don't know, because it's going to get to a point where I'm not Blooming Youthful anymore. I just hope that it continues. Well I know that it will continue. But with a peer led programme, having a young people's peer led programme, it's important that it's run by young people. So I'm not too sure where I'm going, but I'm enjoying what I am doing and I'm trying to get the most out of it as possible and trying to help as many people as possible and empower as many people as possible in the time. Yeah, I don't, I don't know.

Lizzie Lovejoy

It's really insightful of you to be thinking of like the fact that this will have to be ran by young people. And by like, once you get past the 25 barrier - which I'm sitting on! - once you get past that into the next stage. It's really very forward thinking and insightful of you to know that there will be a time for you to step back. I don't know about you, I get very in control of my projects and very like, they're my children and I want to keep hold of them forever. And so it's, I mean, that's gonna be quite a difficult thing, the idea that at some point, you'll let it go. Obviously, you've got several years. You're all good.

Beth Smith 24:49

I mean, yeah, it's really difficult thinking about it because this Blooming Youth is my baby and it came from such a difficult time in my life, but I'm very aware that to keep it being what it is, I can't always run it. Because I'm a, I'm a bit old.

Lizzie Lovejoy 25:13

You'll have to do a 25 to 30s group after that.

Beth Smith 25:16

Yeah, well, this is the thing, this is, this is a thing. You get to age 18 and there's not really much for you to do and be a part of. And that's what Blooming Youth I'm hoping tackles, but then after, after that, I mean, I've met people that are between 25 and 30, and they've been like, it doesn't get better, there's like, still not groups for us. So I think having that is also really important. And just working in the communities and bringing people together and enjoying, enjoying creativity and art.

Lizzie Lovejoy 25:54

Yeah, I think what that, half of that is, is that between 18 and 25, they're like, oh, this is the time for you to figure out, we'll leave you to it. And obviously, that's really frustrating. And then once you're past 25 to 30, they're like, oh you've figured it out now, we don't need to get involved. And so I think it's those two attitudes.

Beth Smith 26:13

And for anyone listening, if you're like, my age, maybe a bit younger, it's all right to not know what you're going to do. It's completely okay. Especially now in such precarious circumstances. And even I don't know if I'll know what I'll be doing when I'm 25. And that's okay, it'll come.

This is, this going to be a bit deep, but I think I spent so much of my life worrying what I was going to do, and where I was going to go, that I've gotten to the point now where I don't have, I don't have, I don't have much left. And there's nothing to lose. I just know that I'm, I'm just enjoying right now. Yeah, I am excited for the future. I know that it'll be, it'll be good. And I just want to keep, I just wanna keep helping people and bringing people together.

Lizzie Lovejoy

You do have that fantastic mum energy.

Beth Smith 27:12

We did, we did like a, it wasn't like a quiz, it was like a Google, like a Google quiz thing where we did funny questions with all of the Kickstarts. And one of the questions was, who's the biggest, who's the best parent? And I won by a longshot. And, yeah, it made me really happy. Because I just, I just care so much about them all, and want them to do so well.

Someone, someone came, one of the Kickstarts came in yesterday and said that they got they got a job that they'd applied for after their six month contract here is up. And it just made my heart so happy. Because I'm so proud of them and how far they've come and what they've done in these six months. It makes my heart really happy and I'm just really proud. So well done Daz! Yeah, um, well, I didn't really explain what the Kickstart programme was.

Lizzie Lovejoy 28:09

Do you want to do a quick explanation of what the Kickstart programme is? Because I mean, they've got them all over the country at the moment.

Beth Smith 28:16

Yeah, so the Kickstart programme was made by the government to help young people get experience in work environments. So it's for people who are 16 to 24, and they get a six month contract in a workplace environment. So we took on 10 young people, and it's coming to the end of their contracts now. And then in the next few weeks, we're appointing 10 (ish?), maybe more young people to come and work for us for another six months. So that's, that's coming up. So if you're listening, and you're aged 18 to 24, and you're on Universal Credit, and you want to, you fancy working, that'll be happening soon.

Lizzie Lovejoy 29:04

So this is the final question. And it's a question that I ask everyone and it's notoriously difficult. And that is what is your favourite project slash event that you've been part of so far?

Beth Smith 29:17

I would say Free Fem, or Blooming Youth the garden room in general, and how that's coming together and how people take pride in it.

Lizzie Lovejoy 29:32

The garden room is gorgeous. I'm in love with, with the cactus section particularly, I've got a soft spot for cactuses.

Beth Smith 29:41

Yeah, we got our, we got most of our cacti from a man in Saltburn, who we call the cactus man of Saltburn. And he has the most wonderful back garden. But yeah, the garden room's just, it's sort of an amalgamation of plants, crafts, well-being. So we've got the library, which we're needing to extend because we've got a lot of books now, we've got the rag rug, the sofa, all of the plants. And the exhibitions usually sort of flow through to the garden room.

So at the minute, we've got pieces by a lady called Linda Ingham. And she came sort of like as a residency, between here and Saltholme, she drew and did like a little sketchbook of her time here in the Redcar Palace. And some of her pieces are on the wall that are part of the upcoming exhibition. And yeah, it just flows through. It's just really lovely to see it transform, and to see it grow. I think instead of it being just one solid thing. Oh, wow. My heart's really happy now. I've had a lovely, yeah, that was a lovely chat.

Lizzie Lovejoy

Well, that brings us to an end of this episode of A Change of Perspective. Thank you so much, Beth, for coming on and talking to me.

Beth Smith 31:15

Thank you, Lizzie. I've had a wonderful time. Thank you very much.

Lizzie Lovejoy 31:20

All right. Goodbye, everyone. See you guys in the next episode, which will be the final episode of this series. All right. Goodbye, everyone.