

### 3. Storyteller in Residence

Exploring the making that already exists within Amber Valley.

Storytelling is something that people forget. And it's often lost, because people don't realise that they have a story to tell.

Ian Pringle, Listening Shelf Audio, partner to Maison Foo



# About the Project

This was a six month storytelling residency working with three community groups to collect and share stories. The aims of the project were to:

- Make visible the making that already occurs within people's everyday lives.
- Find and hear the stories of those people who might not necessarily consider themselves as creative.
- Retell and amplify the stories back to the communities.
- Generate a feeling of agency in communities and pride in what they do.

## Project Activity

- 6 month residency to collect and share stories.
- 15 sessions.
- 4 community groups.
- Produced in collaboration with Maison Foo<sup>20</sup>.

Beth Sheldon (Maison Foo) and Ian Pringle (Listening Shelf Audio, working with Maison Foo) worked with three groups:

- Swanwick Men's Shed, a community building project for people to gain new skills or put their existing skills to work.
- Sew Lovely, a social crafting and sewing group.
- South Normanton, Alfreton, and District Amateur Radio Club (SNADARC), a group for radio amateurs, short wave listeners and radio enthusiasts.

Beth went to see the groups wherever they met up, and after three visits started a photographic and audio collection of participants' stories.

She was joined by Ian, interviewing participants and editing these down. They produced two versions of the story tapes from each group as a means of sharing the stories with the groups and also the wider public. One was 20 to 25 minutes long, the second much shorter (3 to 4 minutes).

Two characters were gradually developed, Valerie and her husband Trev, to reflect certain characteristics of the groups and their participants. And through *Valerie's Gallery* – "a listening gallery sharing stories that celebrate the extraordinary power of everyday making in our local communities"<sup>21</sup> – the stories were presented.

Valerie and Trev evolved through a process of meeting people, absorbing their personalities or interests, and learning more about the groups. Valerie reflected back to people elements of their stories, but also allow Beth to explore things that she as a young woman artist couldn't.

For example, Valerie's brightly coloured patchwork jacket reflected the crafts made at Sew Lovely – and the banter that always happens within that group is embodied in Valerie's character.

The group discussed Valerie with Beth as the character was being (co-) created - so when they met her at the Golden Glues Awards (see below), they felt like they were in on the joke. Trev was also partly co-created – his reserved nature and love of details reflecting those taking part in Men's Shed.

[Valerie] is a bit lonely but wants to build community – she's on a mission... And it's almost like she's... a microcosm of... what they [the groups] are.

Beth, Mason Foo

From this project, other events have arisen:

- The **Golden Glue Awards** was a celebration of the groups involved in the Storyteller In Residence project plus others who had worked with Make/Shift in the first year and was hosted by Val and Trev (see below).
- The development of **Val & Friends Community Living Room**, a pop-up 'home from home' used as vehicle for sharing the stories and running craft workshops.

## Approaches

Make/Shift's deep relational and process-led approach played out in this project through taking the following approaches:

### Surfacing people's stories

Storytelling was chosen as an appropriate methodology because it was important to listen to, and bring to the fore, the stories and experiences of the people involved in the groups.

### Connecting people to their inner maker

Talking and starting conversations were key. Particularly about what mattered to people in the groups, enabling them to connect to their inner maker and build emotional connections.

Maison Foo were selected as the core partner because their work embraced improvisation. This flexible and responsive approach created the right conditions for rich conversations and new ideas to emerge – accepting the need to change and adapt to circumstances.

### Seeing yourself and your creativity in others

Part of the thinking behind the project was if people see other people like themselves being celebrated for being creative, they might identify with them. Through this identification, they then want to engage in creativity themselves.

# Outcomes

## For group members

### People became storytellers

Through taking the time to build relationships and trust, people were willing to share personal stories. Their openness **was quite astonishing**<sup>22</sup> and they were keen to share what the group meant to them and their wellbeing.

**[It was an] opportunity to consolidate their understanding of the benefits they receive from what they do... [and hearing your story back] creates a better sense of your own story.**

And the sharing of a story, and the wisdom it may contain, itself had meaning:

**[It is] powerful to recognise that you are able to pass on knowledge and experiences that will make a difference to others**

Ian, Listening Shelf Audio

### Overcoming isolation, improving wellbeing, building community

Members of the groups were moved to hear the stories of other people in their groups.

**It's good to talk, share, [and know] I'm not alone!**

Comment from Audience survey

The stories from all three groups talked about the importance of the group for people's mental health and a strong sense of community.

Men's Shed described how, following bereavement, members have talk of the group as being **my family now**.

A participant in Sew Lovely attended the group **for the chatting to people as well as all the crafts that they do** and described the group as a form of **therapy**.

A member of SNADARC said **if you need something doing, there's always somebody [in the group] that can help**.

### Developing a sense of worth

Investing the time and effort to develop the Valery and Trev characters to retell the groups' stories validated what the groups were doing and they felt more visible.

It was also valuable when thinking about future funding – by getting people talking about the positive impacts of being a member, these could then be articulated to funders .

### Developing confidence to run workshops

The groups are now going out with the Val & Friends Community Living Room to deliver workshops to the general public. They attended an event in Ripley where the Sew Lovely were making Val's Pal's badges and Men In Sheds were making birdboxes.

Additionally, Men In Sheds joined Make/Shift and Valerie at the Timber Festival to deliver the same workshop. This was significant as it was somewhere members would never have gone before.

## For the artists and Make/Shift

Time and space for the work to develop and evolve in an organic way

While a slow pace was essential for building trust between the artist and the groups, it also allowed the artist the opportunity to focus on the 'process' as much as the output.

Traditionally, funding and delivery of arts projects is quite prescriptive, with pressure on delivery causing anxiety. By focusing on the process, it allowed the artists the time and space to meet people and see what happened in an organic way without undue pressure.

### New ways to talk about creativity

Make/Shift now have a set of stories they can use to help model and shift conversations around the value of creativity and the role of everyday making and creativity in people's lives. As a whole, the project has been a validation of Make/Shift's approach and way of working.

**We have so much learning and content now which can help us create really compelling, values-led invitations for more people to get involved and to feel part of what we're creating**

Rachel Smith, Creative Director, Make/Shift

## Learnings

- **Slow and organic is essential for trust.** The slow build up and organic way of working was invaluable to building relationships and developing trust.
- **A flexible framework.** Perhaps sometimes this open-ended way of working can feel like its drifting. Maybe it would be useful to have a loose, flexible framework to give an underlying structure and direction.
- **"Let's have a go".** Learning to feel safe in the unknown and embracing the possibility of failure creates an opportunity. Whilst it can feel uncomfortable, it opens a space to trust instincts and to lean into the messiness.

**So far it has been a success, and this way of working is really paying off**

Beth, Maison Foo

- **Surfacing the deep work.** This way of working – deep relational and process-led – can feel quite invisible at the beginning. There may be a need to think creatively about how it can be made more visible as part of sharing and developing the skills needed for this type of practice.