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*Developing the Creative Arts for  
Disabled People through Digital  
Technologies*

**2021 - 2024**

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**Ken Carter - Founder**

**DECIBELS**

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# PROJECT REPORT

## Year 1

### September 2021–August 2022

Leading a project of this kind during what turned out to be a global pandemic has been an interesting challenge, commencing as it did during an extended period of national lockdown.

The increased isolation experienced by our already vulnerable beneficiaries and their families has been exacerbated by this turn of events, and the pandemic shed light on the many imbalances that disproportionately affect this community. The access to news coverage and services concerning the spread and impact of Covid-19 was often unfair and severely inadequate for the deaf population. It not only excluded the opinions and experience of those affected by deafness. It also created and exacerbated problems around deaf families understanding of the health emergency and their access to health, social care, welfare and economic services.

During this time, the majority of children have found school closures, long periods unable to see their friends and play outside, difficult and distressing. However, for deaf children, these difficulties have been made far worse as they have, in many cases, been among family who do not sign or sign very little. With no access to their deaf peers, the frustration of being cut off has also taken its toll on their mental and emotional well-being. We have witnessed this first hand in our dealings with them.

While our original project plans did not include a response to a global pandemic! our programme went on to reveal that the ripple effect post Covid of the failures at large in the wider community to communicate effectively with disabled people and their families had a major impact on the well-being of the young disabled people we worked with as a result.

While we were not in a position to address these issues in their entirety, we obviously did take note and adapted our approach as best we could in order that our beneficiaries were as informed, supported and empowered as much as possible during these unprecedented times.

Unsurprisingly during year one, Covid-19 had a disruptive impact on recruitment of workshop participants and on the opportunities to roll out our delivery of workshops face-to-face. This necessitated a change to the focus of work and we:

- Focused on developing resources and scoping workshops for online-orientated delivery.
  - Workshops included – Creativity without Sound/ Wellbeing through Art/ Peer Relationships.
- Developed a lecture series – ‘Cultural Genogram’ and ‘Cultural Intersectionality re. Black Minority Ethnic (BME)/Deaf’ for delivery at Universities. Seminars scheduled for UCL and University of Birmingham in year 3.
- Scheduled the promotion and roll-out of online delivery.
- Gave strong focus to keeping beneficiaries informed, engaged and supported.
- Completed a comprehensive review and pilot of a range of digital technologies, particular those suitable for distance learning.
- Developed a seminar ‘Digital and Disabled Arts for Brain Health’.
- All the while growing our network encouraging support, sharing and collaboration.

We focused on collaboration with a selection of like-minded organisations, such as Deafax and the Deaf Ethnic Women’s Association (DEWA) - pooling resources and sharing activities to add value and yield the maximum benefit towards the common goal of supporting disabled young people and their families.

While we anticipated a return to greater in-person activity in year 2, we decided to continue to deliver aspects of our project online. This fitted nicely with the digital aspect of our project, which is a central theme.

## **Year 2**

### **September 2022–August 2023**

It has been a year of positive activity with more opportunity to interact, partner and, crucially, resume delivery face-to-face.

Although our focus this year has been delivering in-person we have continued developing both new and adapting existing resources, and maintaining our online presence and digital engagement.

We have significantly increased the level of contact and delivery to ensure that we made up for the time and delayed activities due to the pandemic in year 1.

We were able to utilise our collaboration with DEWA and Deafax – continuing to pool resources and sharing in events and activities.

Instagram mini seminars have been a key way to keep beneficiaries informed, engaged and supported.

A pool of role models have been recruited to help with delivery and to highlight that deaf and disabled people CAN and DO achieve and lead (emphasising the adage of need to ‘see it, to be it’).


Following regular online discussions and planning, we implemented a range of activities:

- Monthly deaf-led workshops for deaf children at **Kingsbury Green Primary School** in London - Key Stages 1 and 2 creating ‘Landscapes and Seascapes’ – 19<sup>th</sup> June. Attendance: 70.
- In-person seminars for deaf people held in the gallery at the **Wallace Collection**, London, learning how to draw and sketch while learning about the history of the collections in the gallery - 20<sup>th</sup> June. Led by a deaf artist. Attendance: 150.
- **‘Wax in Art’ session at the Wallace Gallery**, London – Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> May. Attended by older deaf adults with a spectrum of hearing loss - Deaf/Deafened/hard of hearing/hearing with BSL skills. This group also experience mental health issues. The workshop began with a short tour of the wax items in the collection which were created during the 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> centuries, mainly in Germany. The group looked at the techniques used to refine the wax into shapes and colours, and observe how glass was used to make eyes and jewelry in such fine detail. Wax art was a popular skill in the past involving precision detail. The group had a range of communication needs, which we ensured were met; e.g. Sign Supported English (SSE), lip-reading, voice, BSL, plus visual impairment. The Trainer considered her placement, lighting, which communication methods and resources to use. In addition, a Sign Language Interpreter was also present delivering the information in BSL. Session allowed: 45-60 minute tour, then 2 hours of art making time with refreshment breaks. Attendance: 18.

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*“I really enjoyed the Wax in Art workshop. It inspired me further as Rubbena stated my first attempt in this activity has shown I have talent! It is such a therapeutic event meeting new and old faces”*

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- **Deaf Ethnic Woman’s Association Summer festival** – a choice of workshops at a series of festival days in London throughout June and July – ‘Communication and Wellbeing through Creative Art’. Deaf women and girls in attendance: 35.
  - Presentation by Rubbena Aurangzeb-Tariq at **‘Deaf Together’ day** on May 6<sup>th</sup>. All about the ‘Life of a Deaf Artist’. Followed by a demonstration of the exciting ‘Woojar’ top, which is used to feel sound through an amplified vest, the sound pulsates through it and provides a physical, immersive experience. Attendance: 65
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- Liaison with **National Deaf CAMHS** (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) in Cambridgeshire enabled us to adapt a specialist NHS Autism Spectrum resource into a far more visually accessible format suited to deaf people. We then utilized this with small groups of deaf, neurodiverse children in London and Derby **See ppt CAMHS**
  - **‘Marble Arch Frameless’** where we took a lead participating in a new multi-sensory immersive art experience in central London. – In attendance: children from Oak Lodge, Balham. 120 children, 50 staff, 4 wheelchair users. Sybil Elgar School (all ages) 14 - 8 pupils + 6 staff. Swiss Cottage School (pupils aged 8-15) 22 - 10 students and 12 staff, all with Autism/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).
  - Deaf Ethnic Woman’s Association ‘Live Debate’ on June 10<sup>th</sup> – ‘Deafness, Culture and Wellbeing’ (**recorded on Instagram**).
  - DEWA **‘Embroidering Wellbeing’** taster Session – June 10<sup>th</sup>. Attended by: 12 deaf women.

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*“.. to connect with other deaf women like me to create something helped me. I’m not alone”*

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**The World Congress** is an official event of The World Federation for the Deaf organised by an Ordinary Member. World Congresses are designed to bring together delegates from member national associations, youth organisations and other participants who seek to partake in global exchange of information and furtherance of the WFD vision, mission and goals. It is organised every four years. We were invited to participate in the July 2023 event held in Jeju, South Korea.



Although the trip and associated costs fell outside the remit of this project, we still wanted to share our presentation along with some of the congress findings with project participants in the UK. This was done via Instagram.

The theme of the WfD congress was ‘Human Rights in Times of Crisis’. We chose to talk about the importance of ‘Art Therapy/ Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)’ as a combined method of therapeutic intervention, and how it could be used to treat trauma during natural disasters.



We believe early intervention in such situations can reduce the potentially life-long impact on the mental health of deaf people.

Deaf people often experience trauma very early in life due to barriers around communication in society. With no or limited access to signed languages to communicate their fears and

anxieties, these aspects of their mental health are often neglected. Deaf people develop resistance to their life experiences and, as a result, the level of risk for them developing poor mental health is four times greater than their hearing peers.

The audience was made up of deaf and hearing professionals representing 101 countries.

## Year 3 September 2023– December 2024

The final year of the project was extended by a further 4 months at no additional cost to the Sobell Foundation. This was possible because of funds remaining in the budget, along with the opportunity of working with large numbers of deaf children post summer holidays, when they were available to join our workshops.

Making art can be such an important step in the development of reading and writing for all children but especially deaf children. Mark making is the route through which children come to understand words can have meaning, while the act of making art enables children to develop the fine motor control needed to form letters and words. Children who take part in arts activities have been shown to grow their creativity, innovation, empathy, and resilience. Engagement with the arts support the development of communication, social skills and can motivate children to learn.

Through this project we harnessed the power of the arts to attempt to begin to close the disadvantage gap that deaf children with limited access to the arts-rich environment experience.

**Heathlands School for the Deaf, St Albans Summer Fete on July 15<sup>th</sup>** – theme - 'World' based around 7 continents:

- Antarctica
- Asia
- South America
- North America
- Europe
- Australia

We were asked to deliver a day of activities around Antarctica and found ourselves in the fortunate position of having access to 4 live penguins! We decided on a drawing activity and created Penguin Island.

In addition, during the day there were 15 minute intervals of international sign language running every hour, a flag trail for the children and a green screen traveler photo booth.

It was a most creative event with live penguins!

The deaf children created images of these with guidance from our deaf artist Christopher, who created three different penguin display samples so that children could see options for them to either copy or adapt.

- 'Normal' Penguin
- 'Minecraft' Penguin
- 'Signing' Penguin



Approximately 28 deaf children and 50+ deaf and hearing adults attended (28 penguins were made). Children were in the age range of 5 to 10 years with the majority around 8 years old. Most of them were fluent BSL signers - deaf and CODA (Children of Deaf Adults). A few used a mixture of speech and sign language, and a few spoken English. The majority of children were able to follow instructions to make the penguins. A few required a little more assistance e.g. with cutting out shapes etc. Overall, the workshop was a huge success!





### ‘Art and wellbeing’ at the Royal School for the Deaf, Derby (RSDD)

One of the areas of this project involved increasing teachers’ confidence about artistic practices with deaf children and deepening their pedagogical understanding of how to use the arts within deaf education. An example of this is our workshop series ‘art and wellbeing’ at the Royal School for the Deaf, Derby (RSDD). This ran throughout September and culminated in exhibitions plus an art gallery in the town.

The workshops began with the young people (post 16) choosing and creating themes e.g. the future, role models, wishes, feelings and hopes, in the form of a timeline and/or mind map. They were encouraged to consider what colours to use to represent these themes (and moods).

The aim of the project is to create visual images about emotions, the development of which gives the pupils a vocabulary to communicate their own emotions. The finished artwork is permanently displayed in the main Post 16 social space of the school. The images will convey moods through handshape images and colours, but at the same time they will contain elements of a game – for example, the handshapes have different meanings depending on how one interprets them. What the viewer sees in the images allows them to share and connect with other viewers.

We worked together as a group exploring the issues that impact young deaf people as they move into adulthood. The participants shared their uncertainty about what they will do following school and how to access things in society and where to seek support.

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*“.. I loved using colour like a feeling. Felt free ”*

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The deaf trainers encouraged group discussions on the value of having an educational placement with ready access to support and communication. The participants then translated the emotions into BSL handshapes that had many meanings. They used a range of drawing materials to express their ideas visually and where the participants struggled to draw, their hands we used as shadows instead as a reference shape to help them capture their idea.



For those that really struggled we used LED lights to assist with tracing in a more traditional way. This was the first time many of them had used tracing as a medium. The LED light was helpful for those with visual issues too and clearly boosted their confidence in drawing.

On day 3 the participants began putting paint to canvas and chose colours and moods to represent emotions.

They worked together as a team to build confidence and develop skills. The images were projected large onto canvases, then they supported each other to focus as they drew the handshapes onto the canvas from the projection.



These were then painted using acrylic pens.

Over following few weeks a total of 15 canvases were created, varnished, and were ready to be hanged.



The artworks created by the children at RSDD are being shown in the Artcore Gallery in Derby.

### Deaf Mosaic Day, Artcore Gallery in Derby

On 4<sup>th</sup> October deaf cinematographer Samuel Ash gave the first public screening of 'Deaf Mosaic'. It features a documentary film about the deaf photographer Stephen Iliffe, exploring his motivation for his project.

Our lead trainer Rubbena Aurangzeb-Tariq, is one of the deaf people featured at this event which portrays the lives of deaf people from diverse backgrounds.



### 'Marvelous Me' Family Day at the British Library, London

September 21<sup>st</sup> as part of British Sign Language week – 'Creating the Self through Art Making' with their Families and Friends.

Deaf and hearing primary aged children attended the workshops to craft self-portraits creating a 'marvellous' vision of themselves. Filled with hearing families learning more about

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*".. a humbling and moving day where there is no barrier to communication. I'll always come back to this event. I am never not moved by this family day"*

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the ‘deaf experience’, with some beginning to learn basic sign language. The children were clearly excited to create something. We demonstrated how to make funny expressions.



The workshop took place with a deaf supporting artist called Fiona Barclay (role model), due to the high numbers of families attending. Many children took their works home but others wanted to leave theirs with us for display.

Attended by a record number of participants 1,009! (adults 459 | children 550 | families 271).

### ‘Speak Up’ Project in Doncaster during November and early December

We had the opportunity to collaborate with the Speak Up project, which was run by Cast, a company that seeks to encourage children to ‘speak up’. We provided a deaf artist and trainer to explore how a workshop delivered in a deaf-friendly and inclusive way compared to delivery by a hearing person with no BSL skills.

Using clear accessible communication and visual workshop resources, the deaf trainer was able to encourage the children to speak up to share how they felt about the world today.

In *workshop 1* they explored how they felt about things they perceived as barriers. Many of the children shared their frustration at the lack of subtitles in cinemas for example. They went on to draw their feelings and the barriers.

In *workshop 2* they developed portraying visually their feelings about barriers and limited access. For example, they explored linking different colours to feelings such as frustrated, angry, sad, or disappointed. Many picked reds and blacks. Using the canvases, each participant picked one colour. We showed them how to paint in a mindful manner as depicted in the scene painting the fence in the Karate Kid film e.g. “Left the circle, Right the circle” and “Up and Down” respectively). They enjoyed being allowed to fill the canvas with just one colour. They obviously wanted to mix colours too, but the rule was to use only one colour. They did this with great calmness.

In *workshop 3* they considered their feelings and thoughts and discussed what it would look/feel like for them if things that concerned them were positive.



The children created and recorded the process of going from being fearful and frustrated to feelings of calm and happiness. So, in the example of the captioned films, were there subtitles during appropriate times and days, even at all times, then they would have equal freedom to

watch any film at any time on the big screen and not be sidelined to watching on small screens at alternative times. If they could have access to entertainment, then they could participate in local activities and feel included.

While the children recognise that there are hearing people who are deaf aware, there is a long way to go for widespread deaf awareness and inclusion and access. These children ‘spoke up’ about their feelings through colours and emotions. The canvases will be displayed in a theatre show in July 2025. They will be available for the public to view and see how these children experience the world of today, along with their visions and hopes for change.

### **Wallace Collection – 14th and 11th December**

Deaf children (Key Stages 1 & 2) creating portraits, crowns, and armour.



During these workshops the process of ‘creating’ gave participants choices, while encouraging them to make decisions, think critically and problem solve.



They had the freedom to explore new ideas, take risks and welcome uncertainty! 22 children attended.

### **Group visit to the Hayward Gallery, Southbank, London 7<sup>th</sup> December.**

Inspired by celebrated artist Heague Yang’s Leap Year series (9 October 2024 – 5 January 2025) illuminating Yang’s captivating visual and sensory experience through installation, sculpture, collage, text, video, wallpaper and sound. The deaf young people had the opportunity to witness first hand a sensory approach to artistic endeavor and expression and immerse themselves in an arts-rich environment. 18 attended.

Decibels is an advocate for spaces for enthusiastic creative exploration through art. We believe that it fosters creativity and promotes healthy child development not to mention curiosity, creativity, imagination and confidence. From using a paintbrush, mixing colours with crayons and using scissors, art can help children improve their coordination and dexterity while performing a task they enjoy.

Art encourages language development, reflection and mindfulness. It gives deaf children the opportunity to expand their vocabulary through the experience of new colours, shapes, textures, actions, sound and music. Art gives deaf children a safe outlet to express emotions that they may not be able to articulate verbally, helping to make profound feelings more manageable.