



# ARTFUL DODGERS studios

*Adam was living in emergency accommodation. He rarely went out, spending most of his day watching television and using drugs.*

**A FRIEND** suggested he come to the Artful Dodgers Studio at Connexions because 'you can do art downstairs and get help upstairs'. When he went to the studio he felt uneasy. Was this just another agency with workers just like everywhere else? He came and tried it out. Having people in the room watching him made him anxious. He had been very isolated for a long time and even being in a room with four or five people was something he wasn't used to.

Adam liked to write poetry. But when he received encouragement and praise he wasn't sure if this was genuine. He was fearful of the voices in his head. Could he trust anyone here enough to tell them about this? Maybe. In time, he felt more at home, he felt able to trust the workers and he felt he could share his secret about the voices.

Creating a space where vulnerable young people feel able to explore the arts might seem simple. Give them a room, some equipment and let them have a go. But it takes a lot more than this to make a place that will give welcome, security and support to the mentally and emotionally fragile young people that Connexions was hoping to reach. They were looking for another way of engaging young people while creating an opportunity for them to give expression to their experiences, feelings and skills.

Many of the young people who came in those first years had been homeless, often disconnected from families and other supports that might have helped them as they slipped into mental illness and drug use. It was common for many of them to be engaging in risky behaviours. Prostitution, offending, intravenous drug use, needle sharing, suicide attempts and other forms of self-harm. The harsh, raw, destructive edge of life.

When Sally Marsden came to Jesuit Social Services in 1996 as the first coordinator of the studio, she had been working as an artist practitioner in community cultural development since 1984. She knew it would need careful preparation to make to the studio work. Six months of research and planning was done before the studio opened. In the first year, sessional artists came in to share their expertise on short projects. Better not to lock the young people in to anything long term or they might feel they are 'in school'. It had to

have the right mix of relaxed and easy but with enough being offered to entice involvement. These were young people whose recent experiences with institutions had been negative. Their behaviours often meant they were unwelcome at school, at home, among friends, anywhere that might have given them a sense of belonging. Could they trust anyone? Sally had a challenge ahead of her.

The studio was run on an open access model. The young people could come and go. There were no deadlines, no roll call. Young people could work alone or on a group project.

In that first year the visiting artists offered sessions in mosaics, music, voice, radio, body art. They held a studio exhibition of drawings, prints, painting and body art. There was a group performance utilising puppets and original music. The pain and grief was being drawn and painted and sung and spoken.

In 1997 an exhibition of work was taken out from the studio and installed in twenty-one prison cells of the old Pentridge prison. The bluestone building in Coburg had only recently been closed and as part of

the Fringe Festival the exhibition was opened on the theme 'Entrapment'. For the artists there was a powerful significance in creating their art on prison doors. Due to public demand, the exhibition was extended for four weeks and 10,300 people came to see the works.

Adam's early intense involvement at the studio had dropped away. He had taken up the offer to 'go upstairs' and get some help. But then he went 'bush' for three months. On his return he was anxious – would they give him a hard time, drill him about where he'd been? But there was no interrogation and "it was a real blast to be back". Now he became intensely involved working on a group project which extended over six months.

Sally and her staff had noticed that the young people who usually started working alone in the studio would often be drawn into a group. Support and encouragement were shared between the young artists. As the group formed a bond, they then might begin working together on a project. Adam recalled that time. "The social aspect of the studio helped me to start asking questions about myself, about how, why and what I was doing

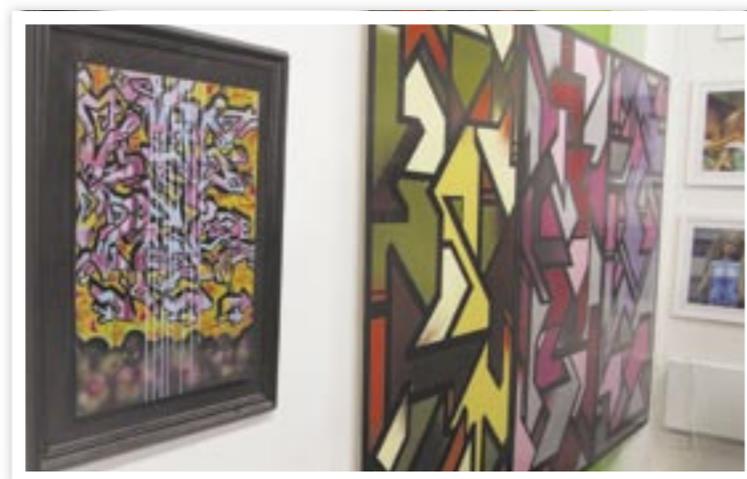
in every way. Being in a group was still hard; it was really difficult to relate to others. But because I was doing art and felt good about it, I wanted to stick to it and keep going".

In 1998, the 2<sup>nd</sup> National Conference on Homelessness at Melbourne Town Hall and the Art and Community Conference at St Kilda Town Hall became the venues for another exhibition of artwork on doors depicting homelessness. The pun was made again when the exhibition was called 'De-hinged'.

In the eleven years of the Artful Dodgers Studio, many young people have formed lasting relationships there. It can be a roller coaster of wins with new skills and confidences gained, and losses with the resurgence of personal insecurities and anxieties.

Adam says: "I am encouraged to make my art. I don't see it as therapy as we are not always doing one to one and talking about our feelings. The artists give us our own space to do our own art. The 'ears' are there if you want them. This year has been a year of change for me."

*the pain and grief...*



*the pain and grief was being drawn and painted and sung and spoken.*

“...a place that will give welcome, security and support to the mentally and emotionally fragile young person.”

to go back to school.

- QUESTION •  
WHEN ARE YOU GOING TO ACCEPT ME FOR WHO I AM?

- ANSWER •  
I'M NOT THE BOXES U KEEP PUTTING ME IN. I'M ME. DON'T TRY TO FIX ME → JUST ♥ ME 蝶