

## **Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich**

### **Fiosrúcháin ar Chuimsiú sna h Ealaíona i measc pobail an Lucht Oibre / Inquiry into Inclusion in the Arts of Working Class Communities**

**Aighneacht le: Eimear Ní Mhathúna, Stiúrthóir Feidhmiúcháin, Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich**

#### **Who We Are:**

Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich is an arts and cultural centre dedicated to the promotion of Irish language arts. We are based in a Presbyterian church building on the Falls Road since 1991 and produce a multidisciplinary programme of events catering for all ages and interests.

Our mission is:

‘To Promote the Irish language through the Arts,

To promote the Arts through the Irish language’

#### **We aim:**

- to provide a superior service to meet the evolving needs of the Irish speaking community and learners of the language
- to provide a positive and welcoming flavour of Irish culture to people of other cultures including the many tourists to Belfast
- to assimilate Irish into everyday life and to widen participation and accessibility by all.

#### **Our objectives include:**

- The provision, maintenance and development of a multi-purpose arts centre with a programme of events that caters for all ages and interests.
- The provision of services that encourage accessibility such as; the café, Tourist information point; book/craft shop, work space and art space.
- To outreach to other communities in order to break-down the barriers, perceived or real, which inhibit engagement with the language.

#### **Funders include:**

- ACNI
- Foras na Gaeilge
- Belfast City Council
- DSD
- CRC
- CFNI

**Staff:** We have a total of 9 staff comprising of: Executive Director, Finance Officer, Project Coordinator, Events Manager, Administrator, Tourism Officer/Receptionist, Gallery Invigilator, Caretaker, Cleaner. A further 30 are employed in facilitating regular classes and workshops. We also employ a number of volunteer workers including currently a Mencap placement, a university placement and in the course of the year we will take school placements and as well as offering opportunities for 3<sup>rd</sup> age and others.

### **Core Activities**

Cultúrlann produces a year round programme of events including drama, music, dance and visual arts. We also run a host of regular activities, workshops and classes for all ages and we are involved in a number of festivals throughout the city; Féile an Phobail, Féile an Earraigh, Young at Art, Belfast Film Festival, Seachtain na Gaeilge, Community Relations Week and Positive Ageing week. We also organise Fleadh Feirste, the annual Gaeltacht quarter festival and the Townsend street festival in partnership with originally, Shankill Women's centre and this year, Townsend Presbyterian Church.

### **How Cultúrlann contributes to the Inclusion of Working Class Communities**

Cultúrlann is situated in an area that suffers from high levels of socio-economic disadvantage. With a population of upwards of 85,000 it is an area characterised by high levels of intergenerational long term unemployment and unemployment levels which, along with the Greater Shankill area, are far ahead of the other districts of Belfast. The area has been deeply affected and has suffered both in terms of lack of investment and also in terms of high concentrations of victims of the conflict. In spite of this climate, and in an area where opportunities to engage in the Arts have been limited, Cultúrlann has succeeded in engendering a sense of ownership in the centre among the local community. The range of activities at Cultúrlann guarantees opportunities for all sections of the community to become involved.

We target specific groups to ensure maximum participation in our programme. Our ticket prices, which compare very favourably to other venues in the city, are fixed to make access to the arts affordable in an area which has traditionally suffered high levels of disadvantage. We also regularly make free tickets available to groups we work with and to local residents to encourage participation.

Again, the range of events at Cultúrlann affords the opportunity for many young people, through work experience and voluntary work, to gain useful skills and training in areas such as sound and lighting, performance arts and hospitality.

Further to that, the centre is a thriving community hub and the café, bookshop and tourist information point on the ground floor have proved useful ways of enabling the public to access the rest of the building and the arts programme.

### **Current Activities**

Our regular activities open to all include:  
Children's theatre school:  
Song & Movement for 0-5years

Regular workshops involving local schools such as Breochloch archeology projects working with local schools  
Annual art competition for schools  
School gallery visits  
Irish dancing school  
Weekly youth club  
Music and language classes  
3<sup>rd</sup> age language and culture class  
Traditional Irish choir  
Women's choir  
Choir in partnership with the Montague Centre for people with on-set dementia, carers etc.  
Open music sessions

**Other projects:**

In 2011, we opened an extension to our building with the help of a cocktail of funders. A condition of funding from the International fund for Ireland was that we should also employ a Good Relations officer, a post that lasted until end of 2013. What we learned from that experience was how much more inclusive we could be with a dedicated outreach officer to go out into the community and encourage people through the doors and we have been careful to nurture the partnerships and the links created.

*Townsend St. Festival* is in its fourth year now and is organised as part of a collaboration between Cultúrlann and Shankill Women's centre, involving Brown Sq. residents, Finn Square Residents, Edenderry primary, Malvern primary, St. Mary's primary at Divis, St. Clares primary, Bombay street, Townsend Presbyterian Church, Careers 'n kids, Women United, St, Mary's Community Group, West Belfast Senior Citizen's forum and more. The festival is a celebration of International Peace Day and takes place at the first interface gate between the falls and Shankill roads. The street is transformed into a colourful scene from 'Old Belfast' by two artist and the schools and groups mentioned above. The street is full of performers, musicians and activities and is very well attended by local people, many of whom volunteer on the day.

*Cultural Connections* was an 18 month project between Cultúrlann, Windsor Women's Group and the 174 Trust

We first connected with Windsor Women's Group in an effort to recreate the connection between our building, a former church, and its original congregation. A group of women from both places worked with a stained glass artist to design a stained glass window for Cultúrlann building to commemorate the former congregation and also produced a booklet remembering the previous life of the building and the stories of the people who frequented it in the past.

The connection with 174 Trust was a natural one as at the time they were working on converting a former church into an arts centre.

The initiative took the form of three arts projects shared amongst the organisations: a photographic exhibition, a site specific drama and a historical exhibition. The various participants were pooled from centre users and the project began with visits to each other's centres and a trip to a place that explored each other's cultures. The project also required the organisations to work together as a team throughout the duration of the project building long lasting connections and sharing best practice. One of the strongest outcomes of this project was that participants crossed both physical and other boundaries which they hadn't been able to in the past. They did so by entering into areas they hadn't felt comfortable with in the past

and by trying their hand at artistic activities. The project ended with a final celebration event in which all participants were invited to bring their families along to meet the other participants and to celebrate their achievements.

*'Making our Truth Visible'* was a photographic project in conjunction with Dundalk Institute of Technology and refugee women confined in Mosney, recent immigrants to Belfast who use the Falls Women's Centre and women from the Shankill Road who were contacted through WISPA. The aim of the project was to allow each participant to take three images of themselves; one to represent their past, one to represent their present and one to represent what they hope for their futures. The photographs were facilitated by DIT. The three images were accompanied with short explanations given by the women that came out of a number of workshops. The exhibition went on display at Cultúrlann and the women (barring those confined at Mosney) were present on the opening night to discuss their images. It was an incredibly moving project that brought to the forefront the fear and inequality suffered by many women and their unwavering hope for a better future. It also formed friendships amongst the women.

*Walk the walk* was a cross-community initiative facilitated by Cultúrlann involving participants from the Falls Women's Centre and the Shankill Women's Centre. The women took part in walking tours of the Falls and Shankill Roads and shared their stories and memories from the areas. They took photographs of places that held some significance to them and partnered with another woman produce a shared experience in photographs. Images of the maternity hospital, sweet shops and dance halls prevailed and shared experiences emerged from either side of the interface. The exhibition went on display in Cultúrlann and in the Shankill Library, with both holding receptions on opening night at which the women and their families were present.

While the funding for the Good Relations post ended, we have secured funding from ACNI and City Council through the Creative Belfast fund to undertake a large scale project on the river Farset. This project will track the course of the river from source to mouth and engage the communities through which it flows and over the next few years will be probably the biggest arts project to take place in the city and will be focused almost entirely on 'working class' communities in North and West Belfast.

### **Recommendations for improvements**

As an organisation we are convinced of the importance of the work we do in the community and as stated previously of the importance of having a staff member dedicated to outreach. We try, on an organisational level, to be cognisant of the differences in how we communicate with different groups of people, of the digital divide, not everyone is on social media or connected to broadband and for the most part, engaging people is about relationship building which means getting out and meeting people, this takes time and time is money!

The absence of funding for this post put severe strain on our organisation in the early part of this year however and while we were fortunate that the Creative and cultural programme dovetailed with that work and that ultimately we were able to retain the post for the moment uncertainty is not helpful and relationships need to be nurtured to be sustained.

It is important to build the practice of engaging with the Arts from an early age and for that reason we place value on maintaining a vibrant youth programme and connecting regularly

with schools. Currently engagement with schools very much depends on individual teachers and their personal levels of commitment rather than integral to the curriculum.

Establishing the value of the arts across throughout society is crucial to meaningful engagement, cross departmental engagement is therefore important. Business has a role to play and we have benefitted greatly from a partnership with a construction company who helped create our community roof garden but the business also benefits. Emphasising the centrality of the Arts to a healthy society, to an educated and rounded society and a happier people is a role for all departments.