



## Creative Later Life Storytelling Project: the stories

### Background to these storytelling discussions

Since January 2023, Age UK Oxfordshire have been working in partnership with the Creative Ageing Lived Experience Network (CALEN) to gather stories from older people about their connections to creativity. Some of the stories have been collected by those working at Age UK Oxfordshire and some have been collected by the Elders Theatre Company in Manchester, who are one of the founding group members of the CALEN.

The stories have been sourced from older people living in different parts of the country, who take part in different creative activities, and have different viewpoints on creativity and ageing. We are now working in partnership with the Culture and Wellbeing Alliance (CHWA) to reflect on these stories and gather feedback from more perspectives to produce a report later this year. This report is part of a wider project '[Creative Later Life 2025](#)' which aims to ensure older people have agency and equity of access to creativity by 2025.

### Background to the storytelling methodology

The stories have been collected using the Storytelling Methodology originally developed by [Old Fire Station in Oxford](#). Each story was collected during a 1-2-1 zoom or in-person meeting using the same questions:

1. What creative activities do you currently do?
2. What has changed for you because of your creative experiences?
3. Why is this change important for you?
4. What are the main things about your creative experiences that you think has made this change happen?

These conversations were recorded, transcribed and then edited down by Sharmaine Sepehr and Philip Brennan into shorter stories, which aim to faithfully reflect the storyteller's insights, impact and significance, whilst making sure their 'voice' is apparent throughout.

## Your role

For the next stage in the process, we have brought together a diverse group of participants, from a wide range of perspectives across the country, to read our stories and discuss them in facilitated sessions during June and July 2023. Our discussions will help to pull out the significance in the stories and how they can help inform work going forward.

Please read all the stories before we meet. Here are a few questions you might want to think about while you are reading:

- *What story or stories strike you most strongly?*
- *Has anything surprised you in the stories?*
- *Are there any threads or themes coming out of the stories for you?*

During the discussion events, we will make notes, anonymise all contributions, and then share the initial findings, along with the stories, in a report later this year. The report aims to share the lived experience of all participants and identify positive action we can take forward.

Thank you for taking part, your time and contributions are hugely valued.

If you have any questions about this project or your involvement, then please contact  
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## Story 1: Uplifted

Creative opportunities are uplifting for me, because I can take myself into that zone of just doing it. When I don't do it, I don't have that sort of lifting zone. The things that I do have to deal with, I can deal with them in a better way. I'm more happy in me mind. These creative activities are something meaningful rather than just being at home, washing and cooking and whatever you have to do. I don't have children, so I've got a big hole in me life to fill. I mean, I've got a dog, so that fills a lot of time. But I'd like to say to other people: have a try at creating things. If you feel a bit down, it can help you get uplifted again.

The main thing I do is String of Hearts. I sing and get to know everybody. We sang 'Edelweiss' today, 'Island in the Sun', and 'Wild Rover'. Sometimes we make our own songs or write songs as a group. We did a video, a lockdown song, that went on to Granada Reports. I did an interview in the gardens near where I live. And I did a piece there and sang the song and then they put it on the television. We did a piece at the Lowry where we all sang. And we did something at The Limelight recently for Christmas with the Sale, Broomwood, and Old Trafford String of Hearts groups. That was quite nice. When we did a thing at Old Trafford, I did a piece to music about my life, my disability, how it affects me, how I get out, and how I deal with it during my life.

String of Hearts is like one big family. I feel more confident. And I don't feel nervous about doing anything, because they're lovely people and everyone's there to help each other. There's a gentleman in the group that likes to sing with me. He likes this particular song, and he keeps wanting to sing that song. Today we didn't sing the song that he wanted, but we did have a sing together. And I did that to help him because he's got something the matter. It helps boost his confidence. I like to think the gentleman went home happy with that. When I put myself forward to things, I do it in mind to help somebody else. Making new friends makes me feel good. With some of those friends, I can talk about the things that I'm going through. And they can help me, be there for me.

Everyone should get out and do something creative, however small it is. It's good for people to learn a new skill, or to bring out the skill that they already have. And whatever bit of creative skill you've got, you can help other people, and give that joy to someone else. I'm learning how to crochet as I've wanted to do it for years. I'm doing it in a circle trying to make a play mat or something like that. I've been given these instructions by this friend to do this stitch and I'm just going to see where it takes me. It gives me something to do whilst I'm sat watching telly or things like that. When you watch people crocheting, they all seem to do it quite well. I'm a bit concerned that everyone else does it right-handed and I do it left. It took me a long time to find somebody that can show me how to do it left-handed. It's got to be over 30 years to find that person. And I've asked 1,000s of people. I keep getting very odd shapes, like a hat shape. But I'm hoping that one day I can perhaps get to following a pattern or something like that with it. Tapestries are really me passion but because of me vision I've not done any for a long time.

I did for a short while go to some mosaic classes, which I enjoyed. You get a tile cutter, cut the tiles up into little pieces, and then stick them on a tray. I didn't actually carry on with the class, just simply because we didn't have a lot of time. I found that when I was getting into it, we were packing up, which got a bit frustrating. But I'm looking into pottery at the moment, to see whether or not I can

find anywhere. I did go to college a lot of years ago to try and get on a course. But due to my disability, I couldn't. They said that I'd need special tutoring to help me. But they didn't have the money to fund that. I would still like to do it at sometime.

I read a lot as well, probably too much. Sometimes I'm not always able to read because of my vision. But I am starting to listen to some talking books. I like Joan Jonker, Josephine Cox, Freya Samson, and Sheila Newbury. I'm just a big reader full stop. I like family-orientated novels. And I also like autobiographies. I've read a couple about climbers. I've always dreamed this dream that I'd like to climb a mountain. I'm always climbing and sometimes I dream this dream of running with Sebastian Coe. Why? I don't know, because I don't like running! But I'm always dreaming this dream. And he always waits for me, until I get to the finish.

I've been out of work for a long time. And I loved my job. I'm trying to replace that feeling by doing all these creative things. It's very hard when you've had a job and suddenly it's finished. I lived in a bit of a bubble. I went to work, came home and had my tea. I'd go to the church and do things there. Your life's a bit of a circle. And when your job stops, that structure stops. I found that really hard. People can spend too much time at home, lonely.

## Story 2: The Spotlight

Thanks to my creative activities, I'm just a happier, fulfilled, lively person. Perhaps I should be sitting on the sofa reading a book! But the theatre is my second home. Someone said, life can be black and white, but drama adds the colour to the palette. It brightens me and fills me with joy. If you're running a race, you're trying to run as fast as you can. But with a performance, there are many ways to express it. It's yourself, you're creating, and you're being somebody else. It's almost like you've got an extra life inside you coming out. You could be dancing the polka at the Countess of Chell's ball, or you could be moving the furniture for a suffragette. You learn so much. And it gives you a good night's sleep as well.

I'm the Chair of Ages and Stages. The group was formed when Keele University and the Vic Theatre had a grant to find out how the theatre benefited older people. I was interviewed as a theatre goer and then it was thought to put on a performance with all the 99 recorded interviews. We put the show on for an international gerontology conference. It was a full house and it went down so well. That was the first time I was on stage. After a while the theatre put on a performance of 'Inherit the Wind' and they needed extras for a court scene. I couldn't make the workshops for the community cast, so I later sat down with the director and somebody who works at the Vic. The director asked me to tell him something that moved me recently. I told him about a funeral I'd been to, how the words of the celebrant had really moved me. Then I had to stand up and tell this other woman all about the same thing. And I'm thinking, ooo 'eck, this is like an audition! I got cast. And because it was set in America we had to praise the Lord, praise the Lord!

There was also a performance of 'The Ladykillers', which is a crazy, fun show, with a dear little old lady who takes in all of these gangsters who are going to rob the mail train or something. In one section of the play she has a little music concert with her dear old friends. They needed a community cast of dear old ladies for this performance. I was a little old lady. But also in that performance, I had to dress as a chap who moved furniture. They had me bringing on chairs and moving trays, as if I was backstage somewhere. That was a fabulous experience. And then to celebrate an anniversary of votes for women, they put on a performance called 'Votes for Women'. They needed a crowd of suffragists and suffragettes. We're talking in London, we were listening to the speeches, and we had to shout things like: go 'ome and make yer husband 'is tea! What you doing 'ere, wasting our time?!

I've recently started rehearsals for a production of Arnold Bennet's 'The Card'. On Tuesday night, from six till ten, I was dancing the polka! There's a ballroom scene where The Card forges himself an invitation to the Countess of Chell's ball. I suppose I am in the background, dancing and carrying on chairs and supporting various things in the performance. It's such good fun. I haven't got a very good singing voice. But apparently we're all singing as well. There's a scene at Llandudno, where there's a disaster with a ship. The lifeboat men are to the rescue, and we sing a sea shanty. It's absolutely brilliant because you're working with professional actors. It's a privilege just to watch and listen to the director, the stage manager, and there's a musical director and a choreographer too. It's full on and fantastic. I've got another rehearsal on Saturday which means I can't take me husband to the football match at Stoke City... hurrah!!

As a group, Ages and Stages, we've also been to other theatres, to talk or join in their workshops, or even to perform. It's been so exciting and lively. We performed at Latitude festival which was great. We all dressed up in these fantastic costumes. And there was a great big model of a yeti. I don't know how tall he was, but it took a lot of people to operate him. We danced and reacted with all the crowds at the festival and it was marvellous. We camped there in a bell tent and we had a very, very wet night.

But we watched all the performances – George Ezra, groups and comedians and poets – we had a fabulous time.

Another creative thing that I do for certain friends is I wrap their Christmas presents or birthday presents in a fun way. I had some chocolates for Christmas one year and for some reason I saved all the silver paper wrappings. I made some beautiful flowers with these wrappers and decorated my Christmas presents with them. Then somebody was sort of saying, oh, I wonder how she's gonna wrap me next presents. So it's a bit of a challenge now, I have to wrap presents in very special ways! When I was in the performance of 'Votes for Women', the woman who had to put wigs on me every night, we became very chummy and friendly. On the last night, we gave her a present. I'd wrapped it up with green, purple and white – the colours of votes for women – with white feathers and green tissue and purple glossy paper and ribbons. It looked like the wrapping was better than the present!

When I retired, I found out there was a group called Revolve. You go along and learn more about theatre. You might get someone from the costume department who gives a little speech, or a musical director, or the lighting director. I really enjoy finding out how a show is all put together. They were looking to train some audio describers, to tell visually impaired people about what's happening on stage. So I said, oh yes, I'll do that. I had some intensive training, and then you've got almost a full-time job audio describing all the different productions. It's been an eye opener. I never thought of myself as a writer, but to explain what's happening on stage it's got to be written down. You have to make it interesting, describing all the actions, the clothes, the facial expressions, whether someone's tiptoeing, creeping, stamping or striding. The more elaborate or precise you can be with language, the better the performance for someone who's visually impaired. Before a show starts, we take people into the auditorium on a touch tour. We talk about what's on the stage, the set for the performance, and they can handle some of the furniture, props, and costumes. They can walk around the stage and get an idea of the geography. People really enjoy it. And sometimes you get to stroke guide dogs as well. It's making theatre more accessible, which is so important for everybody.

I had a bit of a challenge recently because I was asked to audio describe a performance at Fenton Town Hall that had a lot of dance and movement. The Vic Theatre is famous for spoken word. So I had to really challenge myself to describe all the movement on the stage. People were crashing as waves in the Odyssey. But that was superb, I loved that. And we had quite a big audience. It was part of a national scheme, and the National Theatre came up and filmed it. And they also recorded me audio describing it. The director of the production said she would be interested to hear what I'd done. I sent her my script, and she sent me back such a lovely email. I was thrilled to bits.

Theatre's made me a funnier person. I've got the confidence to not sort of withdraw, or let somebody else put their hand up instead. It's made me blossom. And it's just a delight. You can either grasp challenges or walk away. If I'd walked away, I think it would be a bit gloomy. So I don't want to be in the gloom. I want to be in the spotlight. I want to have fun and feel as though I'm helping people, sharing things, and just having a really good time. As you get older, you think, well, if I don't grasp it now and go for it, then I've missed out. I'm old enough and wise enough almost not to care if it doesn't quite go according to plan. Because it hasn't gone according to plan, it's just gone differently.

## Happy Place

Having my creative activities has helped me change the way I think about how I am. It's helped me adapt to getting older. I've always been a very busy sort of person. You'll have your career and your children and your grandchildren and then all of a sudden there you are with nothing. Or not nothing. You've lost that sense of being useful. Creative activities have made me feel useful again. It's that feeling of being wanted and having your place in society, holding your head up.

I'm the booking secretary for the Cotswold Flower Club, a flower-arranging club which I've been a member of for over 35 years. I've always loved flowers and gardening and flower arranging, and I love the club, although it's changed an enormous amount. We didn't know if we would exist after Covid. But we came back with about 20 members and they're all dead keen. It's my job to try and provide them with something to do each month, on a very limited budget. You have to be quite creative in finding things to do. We have demonstrators some months. But a demonstration these days costs approximately £300, it's a lot of money, so we can only afford three or four of those a year. We do a lot of fundraising in the year to try and keep us going. And we're off to Gloucester cathedral next month because we belong to something called NAFAS, which is the National Association of Flower Arranging Societies. They hold a national competition, so I've organised a coach and off we're going for a jolly.

I'm also a member of the local u3a where I do the monthly meetings and outings. For example, I'm booked to go to Exbury Gardens in April to see the rhododendrons and the azaleas. The nice thing about the u3a is it's organised for people who are older. You're not going to be asked to do mountain climbing when you get there. I mean, some could climb mountains, but not everybody could.

My main creative activity is TeaBooks. It means a great deal to me. I saw it in an Age UK magazine in 2015, while I was Manager at Carterton library, and I thought we could do that here. Now we've got ten lovely ladies. They are very strong women. There's a lot of opinions flying around the table, some louder than others, so you do have to sort of keep on top of it sometimes. But it's fantastic. When you're a pensioner, suddenly you feel as though you become invisible. But my ladies are not invisible. We make sure we're not invisible. That's where I think Age UK is brilliant, championing older people. We may be a bit frail in the body, but there's nothing wrong with this up here. We still have something to give to society.

At TeaBooks, we all get a little bit of an insight into other people's lives. You realise we all have the same problems really, underneath it all. One of the ladies said to me a couple of months ago, oh, I do look forward to this day, it's the best day of the month. And that's what makes it all worthwhile. But I also get as much out of it as they do, because I'm such a reader. My mother was a big reader, I've always been a reader, and my childhood was full of books. The library service is my happy place.

Sometimes it's quite hard work trying to find a book and then finding enough copies and getting them delivered. But we're very lucky to be able to use the library to have our meetings, because it's a place they're all familiar with, and they feel safe and comfortable. We're made welcome. We talk about the book, but it's also social thing, isn't it? I say to them, oh, what have you done that's exciting this week? And we might end up discussing air fryers. You get so much from listening and sometimes other people's lives are fascinating. I've got this willingness to want to keep going, even when there are days when you don't want to. It's feeling that belonging, feeling that you have a voice and that somebody's

listening to you. It's also nice to be in the company of other people of your age. We've got quite a wide selection living where we do, a lot of people who are ex-military, and have travelled all around the world. We have a couple of people in our group who are local and have never moved out of the village they were born in. There are those with children and those without, widows and single people. We have a new lady that's joined us recently and her granddaughter brought her. She's had a lot of personal difficulties and lost all her confidence. But her granddaughter brought her in and said could she sit in on the meeting? And she did. And that's it. She's there now! She's now very much a part of the group and bringing something else to it.

TeaBooks is like an extended family. I was very ill last April and had to go into hospital and have a major surgery. I'm not aware who told who, but word got around and within days I was getting emails from the group. Don't worry about TeaBooks, we'll do it this month! Wanting to get back to them helped me recover.

I don't think anybody has ever addressed how difficult retirement is really. I didn't enjoy it at all really. I missed working. You pay into retirement, you've looked forward to it, but if you're not doing anything, you're not going anywhere. What's the point? I went through a period of feeling very down and sort of useless in a way. But through my creative activities I've found I still have something to offer. We don't know how long any of us have got. But I still love the company of other people. I still enjoy being part of a group, doing things together, having lots of friends and activities and things to look forward to. Loneliness is probably the worst thing about being elderly. The isolation. And so having something to look forward to, like a creative activity, is so important. It's a reason to get up in the morning, to brush your hair, to put on a little bit of makeup, to show off a new jumper.

## Putting The Sparkle In

I draw and paint. They're my favourite creative activities. I have my shed. I study what's round me. I pick certain things and photograph them. And then I try to put them on to canvas or paper. But I've not always been a painter. I'm one of these procrastinators, I've always loved the idea of being a painter, but there were always some other pressures that meant I couldn't make the effort that was needed until I retired.

Now I've developed new skills and a new me. I'm not looking at myself as a math teacher. And I'm happy that I feel my time passes profitably. I don't mean money-wise, I mean emotionally. I'm self-satisfied. I do some paintings for people, and there's an artist in me somewhere. But the main thing is just escaping for a wee while. If I achieve something, that pleases me too. That's what life's about, especially if you paint something as a present or a surprise for somebody, and you hand it over and the next thing you see there's tears running down their face. And not because it's a bloody mess!

Before I took up painting, I was a mathematician, I was a scientist. And even in my world outside teaching, I became a councillor. I tried to make the council money go further. And it was an uphill struggle to make the books balance. But these pressures lifted the day I stepped out the council door. With painting, I've started something new. At the end of the day I've got one or two paintings outside and I've got one on my own wall, you see the best of all possible worlds, you see the magic that you can do with just giving brushes a little splash on the board with watercolour, or even just water, and then you see the precision that you can have with the oil.

Where I used to live, everybody knew me. I was part of lots of events. And when you met somebody in the street they knew me as a teacher, they'd say, hello, what are you up to now? I wasn't aware of feeling lonely because I was still busy. But when I moved to Manchester, I really didn't know many people. I missed my friends. I just wasn't sure about Manchester, to be perfectly honest. But through my painting lessons I met new people. Painting brought back into my life the type of folk that I like to talk to and set the world to rights. And I saw the positives because of the art, because the first place that we took off to was the Lowry Centre. So once I got onto the painting, I just didn't want to move back.

I discovered somebody that I'd watched on YouTube, who was holding a week-long lesson. I had to stay over at a place called Darley Dale. The artist was Geoff Kersey, a very well-known watercolour artist. Most of my time was spent correcting my mistakes. But the happiest accident, well it was tragic in a way, happened a short while after that. Another watercolour artist was coming to teach across in Bolton and unfortunately the day of that lesson I had to cancel, because Urquhart was taken very, very ill, and in fact he didn't recover. The lady phoned me later on, she says, I'm really sorry, I can't give you your money back because I have to hand it over to the artist. But if you like, you can come by one of my oil classes. I was happy to take her up on that. And it was the best decision ever. She was a marvellous teacher, absolutely perfect for me. I now paint mainly in oils. I love them because you can mix and blend and get every colour that you want to the consistency you want. And if you make a pig's ear, you can paint over.

I've never been able to follow painting with the determination that I have now. It wasn't possible because of so many factors, because I've been a carer all my life, my parents, my job and so on. There just wasn't the time to sit down and do something. And then, suddenly there was. So this creative

activity is important because it's for me. I've kind of changed direction really. I'm happy to sit and to do things. I don't resent the fact that I'm disabled. And I can fill in the hours contentedly. My husband David was very ill for a very long time. He couldn't be left but I found that I could paint in a little conservatory and keep an eye on him at the same time. It gave me these wee spells that were a rest from just perpetually looking – is he breathing properly? He's not gonna choke is he? Cancer's not an easy thing to deal with. But painting gave me profitable breaks.

I love to share what I've learned. My style is just to point out the shading and so on, that helped me on my way. I'm enjoying life to a huge extent. My family is one part of it, but my painting is the other outlet. I love reading up on the quarrels and squabbles that go on in art, especially among the Impressionists. I hadn't realised that 'Impressionists' was actually a scornful term! It was those who gave only the impression of a painting.

When we had Covid, I don't think I could have coped without a hobby. I set myself to work on my tutor's pet painting course. I would go to my shed a certain length of time each day to learn whatever new trick of the trade was in the lessons. I painted several dogs and several cats. That kept me really busy for a year or so. I tried to get around to painting family pets and so on, until I'd got to the stage that I could pick up a photograph and paint. I get lost when I paint. There's nothing nicer than to be set on the shades, the darks and the lights, putting the sparkle in a dog's eye.

## Like a Kid Again

The best creative thing I found since I retired is walking football. It gets me out and about. I saw the advert on television, and it showed doddering old men. I thought, well, I'll look at it. I Googled walking football and I found they did it at the Etihad. So I went there. That was seven years ago and I've never looked back.

Walking Football is now the fastest growing sport in England. It's for all ages. I even play with people who are 75, 78. I had a couple of heart attacks and playing walking football has helped me with that. I don't suffer any discomfort when I'm playing, or anything like that. We face different clubs, so you get to meet new people. It's like a circuit. I've made loads of friends from Scotland down to Cornwall. You're not stressed, there's no pressure on you. You go down, you kick a ball about. If you want to go to the next level, nothing to stop you. I even play for the England Walking Football Community, which trains once a month down at Redditch. We have international games. I'm playing in Glasgow next month. And I'm playing in Dublin in July against Italy, France, Ireland, Wales and the Isle of Man!

The camaraderie at walking football is great and the mental health benefits are fantastic. As you get older, your friends drop off. Friends that you've known from childhood pass away, move away, then you make a new circle of friends. So mentally, walking football helps. You're not sat in the house looking at four walls. I speak to lots of guys and they say, at least we're not in the house. A lot of us who play never thought we'd put a pair of football boots on again. You get to an age, you're 70 plus, and you're putting the football boots on and you're a kid again. You really are happier for it. It's something to look forward to. Day in. Day out. When I did my Achilles tendon, I was out for three months. I was climbing the wall. I couldn't wait to get back. Once I'd come out of plaster and done my physio, I was straight back.

I also do fishing which helps me relax. You sit there with your fishing chain. The dogs and robins come and pinch yer maggots. Kingfishers fly up and down. Everybody needs that little bit of time just sitting. Relaxing. Not thinking about what's going on in the world. It's just you and your rod.

There's also stewarding which I do at the Etihad. We have a laugh, we have a crack. I'm part of the search team. I do the main football, which is the first team. And I also steward over at the academy, for the youngsters. Over time, the fans get to know you. 'Y'alright mate, have a good day.' 'What are we gonna do today mate, are we gonna win?' Course we are. At the end of the game the fans come out to say thank you. And that means a lot because they understand why we're there. We're there to help them, to assist them, to keep them safe. It needs to be a secure environment. Especially with what went on in Manchester with the bombing. We're all aware of that.

Before I started walking football I was manic really. I was in the pubs at night and you could only do socialising that way. I don't do that anymore. I don't need to do that anymore. Because my social network has changed. Now it's around the stewarding, the football. We used to play football on a Sunday morning as youngsters, as kids. And you finish a game and you go to the pub, right? Which is what you did, because you played for pub teams. Now we finish our games and we'll go for a coffee, or a tea, and we'll have a chat and a laugh. Someone will get some biscuits out. You can talk about anything. It usually revolves around football, but that's a positive change for me. Because you sit in a pub, and it's the same old conversations, same old faces.

Walking football is never boring. Every time you play is different. You might get beat 5-0. Then you might win 10-0. They mix the teams up. And when you've had a great game of football, it's a different conversation piece. He played well today. See that toe-poke he did? He's gonna break his toes one day. Everyone's included and that's the best part about it, doesn't matter how old you are. We have guys who are in their 40s but might have a disability. We have a guy in his 30s who had a stroke. We have a young lady who's got cerebral palsy. It's all inclusive, it doesn't matter who you are.

Once I'd retired I thought, well what can I do? I don't want to sit in the house. I don't want to sit watching television. I don't want to go to the pub every day. I need something more than that, something to give me fulfilment. I'm glad I've found that. Because it's not over when you retire. It's not over. No way!

## A Whole New World

If you'd ever said to me that I would end up dancing and writing, that I'd be doing that in my 60s, I would have just laughed. I always thought I was the most uncreative person you could find. I chose to study law because it was so non-creative. But now creativity has totally changed my life. I seem to collect new creative activities weekly! I'm a different human being.

It's just so totally different from the whole of my life that has gone before, which was basically being tied to a desk and going to meetings. I loved my career, absolutely loved my career, I found it incredibly fulfilling. But to suddenly find a different way of living has been life changing. It makes me rather resentful that I didn't discover it all sooner. I've come to the conclusion at this stage in my life, being 71, you've just got to do what gives you joy, what fulfils you. and what gives you pleasure insofar as you can, given there are an awful lot of things one has to do in life, and they're not going to be 100% joyful.

My creative activities are fundamental to my life. When I was working my job and my family filled my life. But when you retire, there's hopefully 30 years of life left, and you think, well, what am I going to do with it? To have found all these varied activities it's given me a whole new purpose, a whole new world to explore. It's been fundamental to me ageing successfully and happily.

The main thing I do is dancing, three or four times a week. In an ideal world, I would dance every day. But I don't think my little body can cope with it. I do all sorts – ballet-based, contemporary, Argentine Tango, and I just started a tap class. I've done flamenco, swing, even breakdancing and hip hop for the over 60s! I first got into dance when I was trying to get fit in my late 50s. I was going to my local gym, I was doing the treadmill and all that stuff, not enjoying it terribly much, and I saw this Latin dance class going on. And that was it. I saw this guy teaching a load of middle-aged women, not a single man to be seen. And I heard the music and I thought, ah, this looks so much more fun than walking on my treadmill going nowhere. I'll give it a whirl.

With my dance company I've danced at an arts theatre, festivals, and I danced with 700 other people in Trafalgar Square for part of Big Dance. Dancing is just the most beneficial activity that anybody can do, so much so that I'm writing a book about the benefits. It's a total transformation across physical health, mental health, and social wellbeing. It's given me goals and a purpose, which otherwise I wouldn't have had at this stage in life. Although, having said that, I do get a sense of purpose from other things, like my voluntary work. But it's related in a large measure to my creative activities, because I got involved in being a trustee of a dance company, and now Flourishing Lives, which is an arts coalition.

I also discovered writing in my 60s. I did a lot of writing during my career, but that was all for work. I never really thought about writing for pleasure, particularly non-fiction. I created something which later turned into a book, which I was amazed got published. That was a wonderful experience, completely new to me. I never thought I would enjoy writing that much because it's quite a lonely, solo occupation. I tend to like things involving other people. But writing has brought me all sorts of new interests, and I've met a whole new group of people who think in a completely different way to me. Sometimes I don't get it at all. But it's so refreshing to see some right-brained people, and how they approach life and what they bring to life, and how different they are. I've now got a whole new

circle of friends who are dancers or writers and networks that I never had before. It enriches one's life. I can't necessarily relate to everything that very creative people come up with. But I certainly find it very energising and stimulating.

I've also joined a sculpture course at the age of 70. I'm in my third term of that and I absolutely love it. I started doing a little bit in lockdown, just with clay, when we were all stuck in our homes. Afterwards I thought, well, I ought to be brave and go and do this course. I like to do dance-related sculptures. It's all related to trying to convey that joy of movement. I've also had a go at singing – singing for non-singers – which was wonderful in lockdown because I was muted and nobody could hear me sing. I could sing my heart out and absolutely loved it. But I just can't fit that in at the moment. And the final thing I'm doing, which is a small thing but I'm loving it, is I'm creating a collage of dance through time, showing the history of dance.

What I love about dancing is it engages the brain, you're actually having to focus and learn steps while you're moving. It's such a good thing for cognition. It's like sculpture, it's a form of meditation, because you are so *in* it. The hour of the dance class, or the two hours of my sculpture, I'm just *there*, you can't think about anything else. You can't worry about anything else. It's the music and the movement together. Doing it with other people brings a whole different experience to it. Research has shown that there is something very beneficial about moving together with other people.

When I broke my toe last year and I couldn't dance for three months, I suddenly realised the lack, from not being able to dance. Dancing is integral to how I am as a person now. It sort of completes me. The other thing that's so wonderful about dancing is touch – the physical experience of dancing with somebody else. The high point of that is Tango and the embrace. Being in a Tango embrace, even with a total stranger, there's absolutely nothing like it. Some say it's all sex, but it isn't! It's just that connection with another human being and the touch and the dancing together. I could never have realised what it can do. And when you get it, it's like a drug. Often, I'm dancing around my bedroom, I've got some music on, and I just love it. I would recommend dance to anybody, whichever way it grabs you. Whether you want to do it on your own, or with a partner, there's so many different styles of dance and music that can appeal.

Dancing has been transformative because I was never a fit person, I was never a person who did exercise or anything. I never really realised the benefits of feeling better and feeling more in tune with your body. It was the first time I actually discovered the joy of feeling fitter, healthier, and stronger. That social connection is also so important. It brings you in touch with new people, new ideas, new experiences. Connecting with others who have a similar love of the same experience gives one a lot of happiness.

Writing has also given me huge joy. It's led me to being asked to write on ageing well and on various aspects of ageing. That's very fulfilling because I'm helping others and I'm able to share my experience and what I've learnt and researched. It gives you a reason to be, which everybody says is the secret to ageing well. It gives me a purpose and a reason to get out of bed in the morning, and certainly dancing and sculpting do this as well.

In London we're so lucky because there's just so much on offer. Every time I look at the courses at Morley College or City Lit, I think I'd love to do that. A couple of days ago I was listening to Dr Michael Mosley, and he was saying how beneficial Tai Chi was. I did do a couple of terms of Tai Chi and Chi Gong and quite enjoyed it. Then just this morning, I was looking at where all the Open Age Tai Chi

classes were and then I thought, you just have no more time, you can't do it all. Do not add another Tai Chi class to the Tango and the contemporary and the tap and the sculpture and the writing! So, I think Tai Chi will have to wait.

## Doing It Differently

I think creativity is a really interesting word because you immediately think of artistic endeavour. But the meaning of creativity is to create something new. If you expand that thought process, that doesn't necessarily mean a physical object. It could be creating order out of chaos. In its widest sense, I spent my career in governance being creative, by bringing clarity to very complex systems and often in a way you could say had some artistic endeavour in it. But if we take the more traditional view of creativity, the idea of artistic endeavour, then at the moment, the two creative things that I do are gardening and ceramic design.

I did art at school. But couldn't really see how I could forge a career in art. I wasn't really good enough to be a commercial artist, and I definitely wasn't teaching material. I chose a different route career-wise, but I always promised myself that when I retired, I would go back to doing something creative. I actually thought I would go and do an art degree. But obviously, times have moved on and that's more challenging financially. So I was looking around for things to do and this ceramic course came up at a local college. It was one of many options. And since I've signed up for that, I've now signed up to do a glass fusion course as well. I haven't started that yet, but I'm quite looking forward to it.

I enjoy gardening because it's about creating a palette of colour, and watching things grow. Although there's work involved, it's like you're observing creativity. Whereas with ceramic design, I've found that really engrossing because it's very tactile. And it's very immersive. The morning disappears and I haven't spoken to anybody, haven't had a drink, nothing. You're just absolutely immersed in creating something out of a lump of mud. And that's very rewarding.

Because the course is not just pottery – it's ceramic design – this takes you on the whole journey from a concept to production. I get to explore options, look at influences in the world and other artists. That's been a real cultural change for me, because I'm used to seeing a problem, knowing what the end result is, and working backwards to a solution. But it's not like that with ceramic design. On my first assignment, we were given a design brief. The concept was 'structures'. In my mind, I knew what I was going to make, and then started to try and retrofit the design to that. And of course, it doesn't work like that. One of the things I've learnt about creativity is that the journey is as important as the destination. From 'structures' I immediately thought buildings. But then you start to explore across nature, architecture, and it's a huge area to think about. I ended up a million miles away from what I first thought of, moving from animals into seascapes and the structures of the ocean.

In terms of how it's changed me, it's made me really slow down, enjoy, and think about the journey as much as the destination. It's potentially been a problem for me in retirement, because that's not the way I'm used to working. And now I've got all of this time ahead of me. It's about enjoying the here and now and not thinking so much about what's going to happen next week, next month, next year. But I feel as busy as ever. I wonder whether that's because things expand, to fill the available time now. Maybe I do things slower and enjoy things more.

Retirement has altered my view of the way I do things. Inevitably, as you get older, you wonder how many years you've got ahead of you. And there is a potential danger in trying to cram as much in as you can. But I think creativity is about slowing down and enjoying some of that time. People talk a lot about mindfulness these days, and I'm not 100% sure what mindfulness means. But my experience of ceramics, it has made me stop and think about what I'm doing, and enjoy what I'm doing more. That helps you to process your life a little bit better, in terms of your mental health and wellbeing. This concept of understanding that the journey is as important as the destination, has been really key to

that for me. And that inevitably spills over into the rest of my life. Things like looking after my grandchildren, I do a lot of creative stuff with them. I enjoy being in the present with them, as opposed to thinking, I've got a task to do, to look after them and take care of them. That change stems a bit from this idea of creativity.

I was very driven before I retired, I've been driven throughout my career, and that is a way you get into working. There's tasks to do and you do them. I'm a completer, a finisher. Get the task, do the task, finish the task, move on to the next task. And that's a lifetime of learning to operate in that way. In retirement, you have the opportunity to do it differently. Creative activities have helped me do that. Doing things different is very important to me because I am quite a creative person, intuitively. What it's taught me to do is to let go of control a little bit. And when you let go of control, then actually you see more opportunities. So in seeing more opportunities, you think, oh, I'll have a go at that. And by just having a go at anything that comes along, I think it will expand my horizons.

## The light

I come from Bengal and our poet, Rabindranath Tagore, was the first Asian man to win the Nobel Prize for literature. He was a great philosopher too. In Bengal he's kind of hero worshiped. In a way, we find all answers to our problems or questions in his poetry and his work. We are living in a multicultural world, so I try to engage people through creativity, to translate my culture, and why we are different. People do love it. I write poems in Bengali and sometimes I try to translate them.

One important thing about creativity is it keeps you active and it keeps you thinking. Because we have to keep our brain working. It's very important at our age. It is more important now than when we were working, because we've never had time to relax, or to take a pen and write a poem, or to paint – at least I didn't have the time. My life was very busy. But I'm fortunate, I had very good colleagues. We are still in touch today.

I used to work with the council for over 30 years, part time job, then I became the county coordinator for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). The job grew for me. And what I wanted to do is promote multiculturalism. So, in 2005 we formed Udayan. At Udayan we use creativity to promote multiculturalism. But a very low profile. When we have time, we do it. But when we do it, we are all invigorated. We raised funding when there was a big flood which came and washed-out Bengal, Kolkata, and Bangladesh.

I thought we'll do this group because I have two children – and there were other children growing up – so that they know their cultural background, which is very important. My whole life, I had to bring up my daughters. I lost my husband quite early. So that was a challenge.

On the 27<sup>th</sup> of May we have an Udayan event. Some of us can sing. And my grandchildren will be dancing. It will be good. There will be a lot of people and we invited another professional dancing group. And the people here, they will be singing, and we translate and try to project that on the website. It energises people. And many people like the Lord Mayor, the Councilors, and the MPs have come to our events. But we haven't been doing much since Covid, 2017 was our last live performance. That took place in Lady Margaret Hall.

Outside of Udayan, I go to an art group at The Oxford Museum. I'm no good at it, but it's just to keep myself occupied. I never had time to do something like this before. I was also part of a small research group. They are a very kind, creative group and they have a lot of energy. We share experiences. My art group is something new I wanted to do. I go because I enjoy it, when I get time. I did a recording for Beth at the Oxford Playhouse, a poem for Tea Talks. They made a little film out of it. I'm doing more creative things than I realise. It keeps you busy. And it also takes your mind off from your illness and darkness. It is searching for the light. You are partly healed.

Alive and Kicking is another group I'm part of. There are people there who are older than me. They're role models, coming there with their Zimmer frame, walking down. A couple of people fell down, one is in this care home. Sometimes I visit them. They're great people, campaigning for the buses in Jericho, all sorts of things. And one is my very good and dear colleague who passed away.

Mentally, I think I feel better. I also try to help people because I used to work in the Language dept, ESOL. So, in a way, if there's a letter to write to people, maybe they need taking to Barton, or the hospital, things like that. Nobody asked me, but they know if they want it there is a system in which I

have done it. And that is helping each other. It feels better. I don't know if it's creative, but it gives me joy.

People are happy if you visit them in a care home, or a hospital, or in a group. You know, they feel popular. Sometimes I tell stories, sometimes we share our experiences, songs, maybe some bingo. We are all a good bunch of people, with good heart. We all need to think positive. Life is not easy. It has ups and downs. Light and darkness. If you say for instance, I painted something, it might not be like Picasso, but if I like it, or people like it, it's not too bad. Maybe I can try to do some more.