

An Arts Project based around Body Centred Listening and Therapeutic Art making with **Epilepsy West Lothian ( EWL ) Outreach Service** and **Life Support Partnerships ( LSP )**.

The intention is to offer an opportunity for people to slowdown a little and *pause . . .* in the midst of their life, to Listen inside themselves, *gently* ~ while making a fresh, curious, and sincerely playful connection with their inner experience. Participants will be invited to share any work produced, if they wish, throughout the length of project.

**We will maintain an informal space for people to:**

**Explore a sense of meaning** *'beneath their story'*.

**Express something of the quality of inner experience through Art making.**

**Produce a range of pieces of work displayed in the foyer of Bloom House,**

1. **Inside out** ~ **Symbols, Imagery and Objects . . . of Meaning.**
2. **The Wishing Tree** ~ **' Asking for ' and ' Letting go ' of things in our life.**
3. **Turning a corner** ~ **' Threads ' of life . . . . that have been *interrupted*.**
4. **Postcards to my future** ~ **How we would like things to be, from the inside.**

The project is intended to reduce anxiety, stress and increase energy, confidence, self-awareness, well-being and the quality of our connection to ourselves and others, while helping to inform the discovery of any realistic, achievable steps we may wish to take in order to move forward through everyday life.

**We will strengthen the understanding that:**

**we are more than our condition and always more than our story.**

We are the potential for growth and change, at our own pace, in our own way, guided from the inside out by the body's wisdom and our sense of what is right for us.

For more information about Life Support Partnerships or Listening through the Body Contact Tom Blnns at: 01415351924 / 07940224365 or visit my website ~ listed below.

## Lifelines ~ Phase 1: Summer 2011 ~ Making Initial Contact with People.

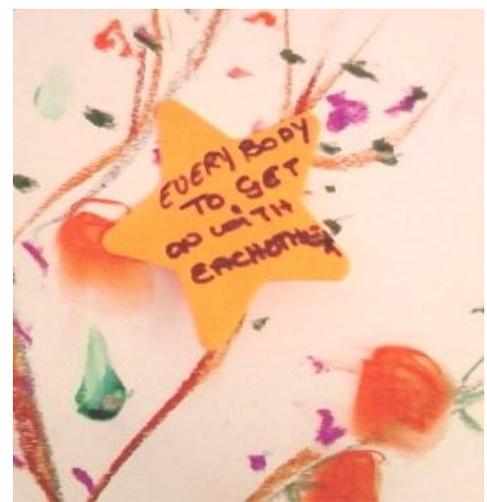
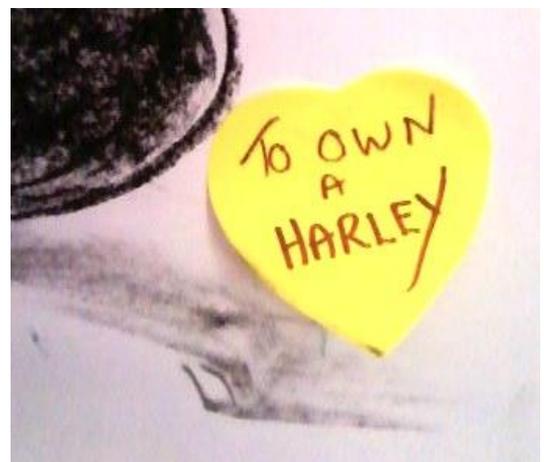
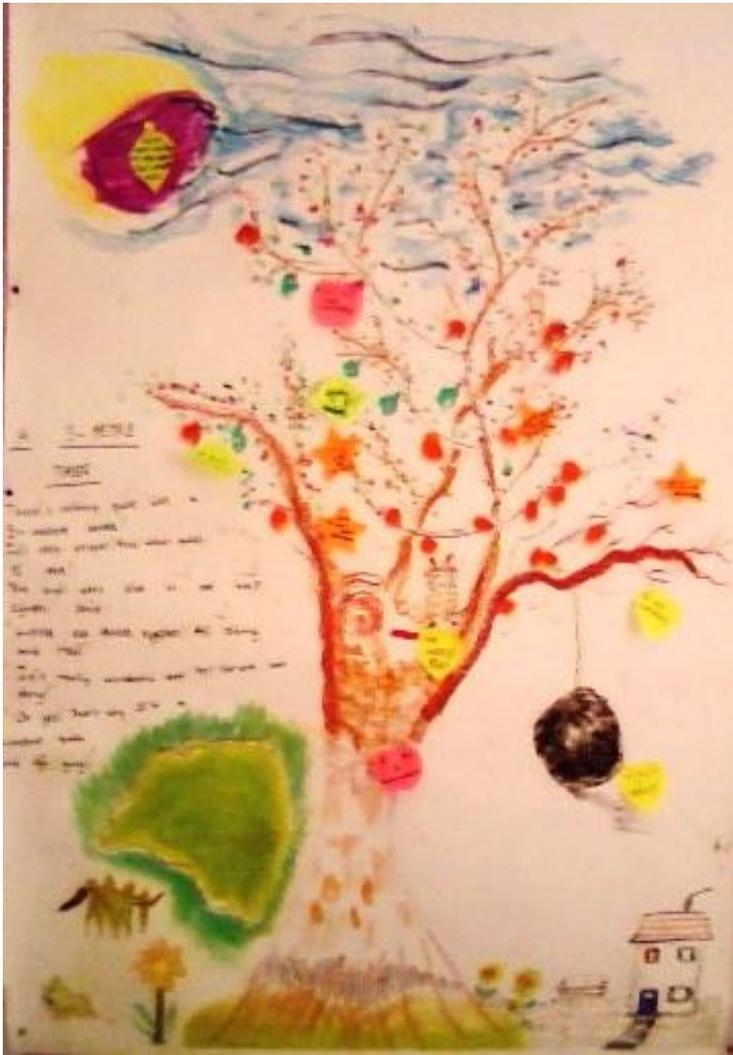
Early in 2011 Gina Freeman secured funding for an Arts based Initiative, to support the EWL outreach client base to raise levels of self awareness and reduce stress while working towards some playful pieces of Art work to be installed in Bloom House foyer. The intention was to share what EWL means to people, how epilepsy affects their lives and express their spirited determination that “ **Epilepsy will not be driving my bus !** “.

In June, I was invited by Gina to begin preliminary meetings with EWL clients and staff, in small informal groups, at Bloom House and Bathgate Volunteer Centre. At this stage the intention was simply to meet people and begin establishing rapport and trust through close Listening, while offering a chance for people to express something through Art making that reflected a sense of their inner experience and the quality of connection with a sense of meaning ~ beneath their thoughts, feelings and emotions. Even on the first day in Bloom House it was possible to clearly witness the stress reduction that a wee lump of green playdoh and some close Listening brought to one person who ( despite learning difficulties and a traumatic background ) has a strong connection inside himself and can articulate his inner sense of meaning.

He produced a rapid series of 3-D objects expressing his sense of 'home' and 'shelter' which had been made evident through very recent changes in his life circumstances. He has continued to articulate his inner experience, participated in preparing the finished pieces of timber for the ' Tree ' now installed in Bloom House and recently stood up and shared his story fearlessly, in front of hundreds of people. The timber elements were sourced from the Gal Gael Trust in Glasgow and are now the framework for whatever existing participants, staff or new visitors to Bloom House may wish to express and hang on *the Tree* to share with everyone.



We aim to work from 2-D to 3-D ~ and so, in preparation for producing work to be hung on the *Tree* in the Foyer, one of the group exercises was to draw a tree together and place a picture, symbol, word or phrase on it that expressed something of ourselves and also whatever we wanted to let go of ~ or ask to bring in to our lives. People were invited to keep this tree alive and continue adding to it if they wanted to. This piece of work is still on the wall today and still gathering 'leaves' from participants.



I received specialist training in Scotland and the Netherlands in a non-invasive way of **Listening through the body** called **Focusing**. I am a qualified Focusing Practitioner and a member of the **BFTA** ( British Focusing Teachers Association [www.focusing.org.uk](http://www.focusing.org.uk) ) The therapeutic effects of Listening and making Art in this way have been well researched for the past 50 yrs detailing how it supports Increased self-awareness and understanding of the way body and mind connect and how we can safely sense more deeply into that ~ if we wish to ~ or be more able to find some helpful 'distance'.

The intention is to carry an attitude of gentle attentiveness and engage in a sincere playful, curious exploration of whatever is sensed or noticed, inside and out ~ to gain a new flexibility of thinking when faced with our habitual difficulties or moments of increased stress ~ around a seizure for example or simply to get a good nights sleep.

Most people quickly get over their initial declarations of ' I can't draw ! ' to find themselves re-experiencing a playfulness from childhood and a permission to express whatever feels right for them, through Art making, that is primarily not about a finished image or object. Whatever is produced remains more about the inner connection made during the making and any symbolic meaning held for the person that can be tapped into and re-connected with freshly, as people pass through the Foyer.

This was beautifully articulated by one participant when, after some quiet reflection during a group session, she expanded on the drawings that she had made that day, to express the helpful energy she felt *inside* her body ~ by drawing a trampoline with people bouncing on it. The drawing is shown below with her permission.



The progression of drawing and Listening closely inside herself, that she found that day, is a good example of one of the important underlying principles of this way of working.

If we Listen closely and *follow* something ~ related to all the good stuff in our lives ~ then we can find a resource of energy connected to whatever is meaningful for us. To tap into this energy, she was naturally following the *principle* of the questions below.

**What do you NOT want ?**

**What would you like instead ?**

**How would it feel in your body if you already had it ?**

If we ask this question and are able to wait a little while for our body to answer . . . something can happen that often brings an immediate strengthening of our sense of internal physical wellbeing. We can experience useful therapeutic benefits, such as: anxiety and stress reduction, confidence building and re-framing our perspective on what is realistic and achievable in our own process of growth and change and any steps forward we may want to take.

There are also 3 wee questions that assist the practice of *Listening through the body* that I offered to people at appropriate moments, throughout the life of the project.

**What do you notice in your Body ?**

**Where do you sense that ?**

**What is it like ?**

From here, we can express something through simple Art making if we wish ~ or not. Sometimes Listening is all that is needed and wanted at that time. That is always ok !

In one of the outreach groups I met a mother and her daughter together. This was a great example of someone not initially interested in Art Making, though clearly in need of some extra individual Listening time. It is often helpful to use objects to help us 'hold' a clearer sense of something inside ourselves, particularly strong emotion such as grief.



On first meeting with her group the mother chose a *shell* as her object of personal significance from among those on the table. This connected her strongly with her memories and the grief she still carries in her life. During our next meetings I have had the opportunity for some one-to-one time with her and everyone else in the group. Listening itself is what was most needed and wanted at this point. She was able to use the time to articulate and sense a little clearer what the next realistic and achievable steps would be for her if she could feel like she had her old energy back. For her, this meant perhaps finding her old line dancing shoes again. Still, it is clear that everyday anxiety is what needs to be addressed first.

When I visit this group, Gina makes a second room available for us to work from. This has allowed a simple, yet very telling, development to occur. It lets the daughter have some ' *time out* ' to chat with Gina on her own and is proving healthy for both mother and daughter. It leaves me free to offer the mother and other group members some basic relaxation in the form of a very simple *Body Scan*. ( I have since made a spoken word CD of this exercise for people, to assist in relaxing at home before sleep ) People are invited to centre attention in the here and now and breathe into their body a little more deeply. Most people welcomed this exercise. One person remarked that " *the tightness in her forehead* " remaining from an operation 13 years ago, had clearly subsided and the sensation in her head, she felt as a ' band ', had softened.

Some people were initially resistant to anything that resembled other ' relaxation ' methods that consultants or psychologists had offered in the past and been unused. I was able to articulate that the intent is to be *wide awake relaxed* and that this was not meditation, hypnosis and everyone could leave their eyes open if they wished. The aim is simply to reduce immediate stress and offer a resource for people to call on, during moments when they need to feel a little more grounded.

One member of the Women's Group at Bloom House, offered a good case in point. After sharing what was uppermost one day ( *she was anxious, frustrated and angry* ) regarding an impending doctor's appointment, she noticed that she felt more ' *tingly* ' and warm in her feet when the exercise was over. Most other people all agreed. This basic form of stress reduction seems to be popular, so I have continued to offer it and build on it through the life of the Project. Once people turn their attention inside themselves they are invited to simply be *gentle and kind*, to whatever they notice. This serves to support a helpful, healthy, distance from being habitually swallowed up in the story of our thoughts, feelings and emotions.

## Lifelines ~ Phase 2: Autumn 2011 ~ Building a deeper Trust with people.

Even at this stage, before any finished Art work had been installed in the foyer, the heart of the project was clear. Gina had ensured that there were always both formal and informal opportunities for people to receive some one-to-one attention. I worked informally with people ~ often just listening without any Art making agenda. Some of the most memorable moments during the project have occurred spontaneously and without planning. I had established enough trust with people for them to find themselves accessing memories and helpful energy they had lost touch with inside. We were then able to ' mark ' these places symbolically inside ~ so that they can be accessed again and tapped into as a helpful internal resource.

The *attitude* at the heart of my training and of this project as a whole is simply one of:

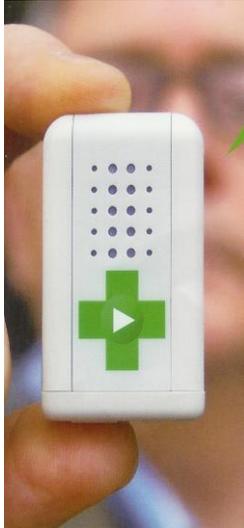
**“Apart from all this stuff that’s going on in my life, I am ok as I am ! . . . right ?“**

This is both an assertion and a question, *posed to the body*, with a gap or opening for an answer to form from inside ~ allowing a little breathing space from our busy minds. Underpinning this attitude is a working principle of ' **Following and Being With** ' that informs the activities that clients and staff are invited to participate in and supports an intention to slow down a little and go hunting for a few ' Gaps ' in the patterns of everyday life. Below is a snapshot of an early exercise in the Garden at Bloom House intended to help develop a sense of this attitude ~ trusting how something unfolds.



As this new attitude of *attending to how something unfolds* is experienced consistently, over time, something helpful can take root. When we ask a question in any context and then sit back a little to *allow a space* for someone to respond, or not ~ we offer something invaluable: a new confidence, to work things out . . . just as we need to.

## Push Don't Panic ~ Poetry



There are some natural poets in the groups able to produce a piece of writing in the blink of an eye. Other people work differently creating something at their own pace. One element of the project has involved recording the voices of people who wish to share something of their story ~ a piece of poetry ~ a song ~ some music ~ or something that reflects the intention of the *Push Don't Panic* device, shown above.

Sam Docherty has supported the project with a Press Don't Panic button to experiment with and record some of the poetry people have produced. These devices have a small built in speaker and allow someone to record instructions for anyone attending to them, should they have a seizure.

They have inspired me to incorporate something similar in the project that could be hung on the *Tree* for anyone visiting Bloom House to explore and be able to hear a poem, story, piece of music or something someone wanted to share or be recorded.

Sam and Linda, who run PDP would also like to make a short film to document the use of their device for artistic purposes. This could work well in many ways ~ one possible route to take would be an animation allowing camera shy people to be involved.

When I first spoke to Sam, he commented that the essential information usually recorded on his PDP buttons is actually poetry in itself as it is condensed down into just a minute or two of what is most relevant to communicate to a stranger or passer by.

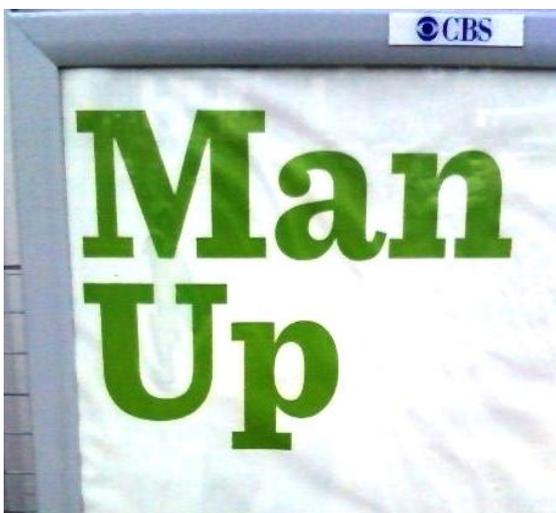
As I spent more time with people, I gained a clearer sense of their predicaments and found myself inspired to contribute a piece of poetry that articulated my sense of this. I have included it with this report.

Along with Gina and some members of the Women's group, I was happy to attend an open evening of local writers in the Howden Park Arts Centre in Livingston where we had all taken a walk together previously after visiting an installation in the building. There was a ' memory tree ' there and some people added something to it. The experience that day was very informal and helped to crystallize an understanding of how the finished piece of work for the foyer in Bloom House would function.

One of the group members was going to share some of their poetry. I shared my work too and realised how many steps we had all taken together. Here are a few lines . . .

' We're all just leaves  
on one big tree,  
so hear this call to leave me be.  
Just be with me,  
keep me company,  
while I come back to my body. '

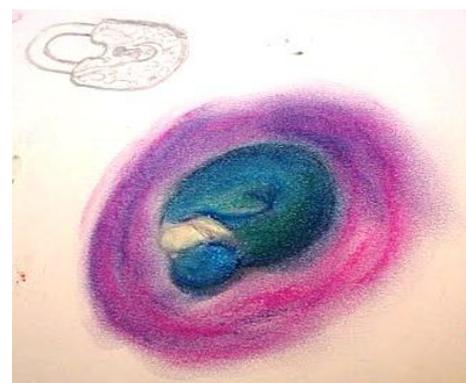
New people joined some of the groups and others left ~ there seemed to be a real sense of supportiveness and resilience in everyone involved and a willingness to take part in any activities offered, particularly among the women. The men's group was proving a slightly tougher nut to crack as they seemed much more drawn to retaining the habits and everyday patterns of behaviour that serve to " distract the mind " from the thoughts and feelings associated with their condition.



We all feel a pressure to conform and ' *man up* ' sometimes ~ so in the final stages of the project we are hoping to incorporate some of things that the men's group already like to do and make a new game to play together . . . ' **Man-up-oly** ' with a board, characters, rules and strategy that is both fun and reflect the realities of their lives, negotiating the benefits system, the NHS and the daily necessity of balancing their medication.

## Lifelines ~ Phase 3: Spring 2011 ~ Finding a good Stopping Place

This is an important principle when Listening inside ourselves and as the preparation of the timber pieces for the ' Tree ' in the Foyer was completed and hung, we reached the final phase of the project.



As new people joined some of the groups and others left ~ the supportiveness among everyone was tangible and both independent of the project and also enriched by it.

The timber pieces were left bare in the foyer for a few weeks, allowing people to appreciate and explore them. Then ~ key holes were cut into the ' Tree ' and keys collected from people to insert into the timber and allow things to be hung from them and threads to be attached to them to ' lift ' the symbols of difficulties and wishes onwards and upwards. Over the next few years it will gradually become more and more inhabited with objects, ' leaves ' made from felt, containing messages of hope, sculpted objects, colourful threads of wool, ribbon, string and other materials representing the ' Lifelines ' that run through the twists and turns of our experience.

To coincide with Epilepsy week ~ I obtained the leftover balloons from the ' Aye Write ' Festival at the Mitchell Library and brought them to Bloom House on my bicycle on the train from Queen Street. I can wholeheartedly recommend this activity to anyone !



The Balloons were only temporarily installed on the Tree for a few days ~ and it is clear that the ' Tree ' will not remain static and will be ' alive ' in some sense and changing with the seasons, activities and people that work in and pass through Bloom house.

On the first day of the project, someone made prints of their hands and this has inspired the form for the final pieces of Art work that will ' lift ' the Tree in the Foyer. Each participant and any staff members or new people arriving at Bloom House to participate in activities ~ is invited to make a print of their hands or feet ! and include a symbol of themselves . . . all to be ' knitted ' together like the threads of the supportive connections in our lives that express the meaning in . . . '**many hands make light work**'.

Below are some pieces from the children that I worked with and Purple Balloon day.





This project has offered staff and clients the chance to sense deeper into them selves and make a strong connection inside ~ practice basic relaxation and stress reduction and share something, through simple art making, that expresses the range of resourceful and colourful personalities, who all share an appreciation of the support that Bloom House itself offers to them.

In conclusion ~ it is always a privilege to glimpse the landscape of meaning within another person. I am grateful to Gina and all the people I have met here throughout the project. They have welcomed me openly and been willing to share much of their inner life with myself and each other. I feel fortunate to have been part of something that will take on a life of its own when I am long gone. Here are some more images of the work that people produced in a spirit of playful curiosity and kindness inside.

