

Restoring relationships through reminiscence

What an incredible two days at the European Reminiscence Network (ERN) conference in Dublin (2-3 May), where experts from 15 countries came together to share what they were doing and learn from each other. It seemed particularly timely, given our rather depressing Brexit limbo, to celebrate the richness of collaboration across so many countries in Europe and beyond.

Kate White, a family carer who is a participant in the Remembering Yesterday Caring Today (RYCT) projects showcased at the conference, sums it up nicely: "I have been to many conferences, but this was just the best! I loved the variety of presentations, singing, dancing, theatre, art, the walks and the enthusiasm and team work with which Karen Meenan from Making Hay Theatre and Pam Schweitzer from European Reminiscence Network curated it all."

A wide breadth of presentations showed how much we have in common in our efforts to find imaginative ways of living well with dementia and that we have much to offer to one another by way of ideas and inspiration. The focus was on restoring relationships and emotional wellbeing to the heart of dementia care, refreshingly far removed from the dominant discourse of illness, deterioration, fear and segregation.

We heard about a hospital reminiscence project in the Czech Republic, a Catalan initiative to bring reminiscence into everyday life, an intergenerational arts project in Canada, a Finnish

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Sally Knocker reports on the European Reminiscence Network's recent conference in Dublin, Ireland

workshop dramatizing childhood memories, and Swedish and Danish reminiscence theatre projects, among many other things.

Pam Schweitzer, who helped organise the conference and originated RYCT, shared the story of the creation of memory boxes which are now being used by drama students at the University of Greenwich to create performances which bring to life and honour the individual stories they contain. An Irish "Butterfly" care home, which uses Dementia Care Matters' Butterfly Model, told us how life story and personal memories are integral to the whole day in the home.

Among other presentations were an atmospheric French film "J'existe encore" (I still exist), a composition of still photographs and voices from those affected by dementia,

and a photography exhibition of large-scale portraits of older people called "Nobody photographs me anymore" by local photographer Kate Byrne.

My particular highlights were seeing the re-enactment of a sick sheep called Scooby Doo being born in the Finnish childhood memories workshop, a choreographed "train journey" across Sweden with each stopping point characterised by a gesture, movement or a song linked to an individual memory, and a beautiful rendition of "Danny Boy" by the Forget Me Nots, including a poignant solo in Gaelic.

Large oaks from small acorns

Many initiatives at this conference had little funding and remind us that from small acorns large oaks grow if we have the tenacity to make it

Top right 'Take off your cornflakes' and top left 'A play with me in it' - both performed at the conference. Above left Annemarie Bolder from Netherlands launches her new reminiscence app, and (above right) organiser Pam Schweitzer speaking at the conference

happen. But there were also difficult realities to face. Some participants were unable to come because new management had withdrawn support and most who did come had to fund themselves.

What is more, UK projects will no longer be able to draw on EU funding to develop RYCT projects further. While the ERN has been extraordinarily successful there is more to be done to give it a solid foundation and it has relied a lot on the charisma and drive of its founder Pam Schweitzer as well as those like Karen Meenan in Ireland who gave hours of their own time to bring us all together.

One thing is certain - the next conference will have a tough act to follow. ■