

Local arts charity shortlisted for national award

An arts charity in Kentish Town has achieved national recognition for its innovative work during the pandemic.

The Free Space Project, based in Kentish Town Health Centre, has been shortlisted for two General Practice Awards, the most prestigious accolades for primary care professionals in the UK. The nominations honour an initiative which saw art materials hand-delivered to shielding patients across Camden in summer 2020.

“This is the first time we’ve been recognised within the clinical world,” said Antonia Attwood, artistic director for the charity, which aims to relieve mental and physical suffering through creative projects. “It’s really exciting to be able to say that what we do is worthwhile, that it’s actually improving people’s lives and the clinicians see that.”

The charity’s ‘Freedom to Be’ project invited shielding patients to creatively respond to their experiences of the pandemic across an eight-week programme. Watercolours, disposable cameras and clay were among the materials packaged up in boxes alongside activity sheets.

“It literally saved people’s lives,” said Ms Attwood. “Without it they would have been unseen and unheard and left to do nothing but deteriorate.”

Lisa Weger-Dennis, 64, was one of the 2.2 million individuals in the UK who were advised to shield in March 2020. She said the project was “a really major lifeline.” Having previously worked on sets and wardrobes for music videos and films, she found herself restricted by her health. Though she has been “more or less housebound” for the past ten years, coronavirus brought a new intensity to her isolation. She said: “I was feeling like I had lost myself and the project reconnected me to who I am as an artist.”

Thirty-five per cent of shielding individuals reported that their mental health worsened during the pandemic, according to the ONS. To counter this risk, the charity hosted a Zoom class every week for those who could access it, allowing Ms Weger-Dennis to discover “a kind of community in the cyber world.” She said: “I gained friends and confidence and ideas while no longer feeling so alone.”

The charity also made sure it reached shielding patients without internet access, visiting homes to oversee activities outdoors from a safe distance. “It made a huge difference,” said Ms Attwood. “Not only having a creative outlet to process their emotions, but to see a face and

know they were cared about. To know that we wanted to support them and there was somebody fighting their corner.”

Ms Weger-Dennis said she is “ecstatic” about the award nominations. “They deserve every ounce of it. Put them on a pedestal.”

The winners of the General Practice Awards will be announced on 10 December.