Painting outside the lines

Carol Prendergast and Poonam Swan

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to share the empowering journey of Kim Noble, an artist who has Dissociative Identity Disorder, a condition formerly known as Multiple Personality Disorder.

Design/methodology/approach – An overview of the social inclusion aspects of Kim Noble’s artistic projects are explored via a detailed interview.

Findings – Far from being just a creative tool for self-expression, art is a powerful means of regaining control as a service user and of connecting members of the public who would not ordinarily unite.

Originality/value – Valuable for commissioners and service users to see how arts can promote recovery, all other material on this artist has concentrated only on her condition and not how art has promoted social inclusion.

Keywords Arts, Social inclusion, Dissociative identity disorder, Recovery, Creativity, Empowerment

Paper type Viewpoint

As members of a service user and carers group known as ResearchNet, Carol Prendergast and Poonam Swan want to share the story of the painter Kim Noble, a very interesting person with a very unusual condition. Kim has used her art in a highly creative and empowering way, and this paper describes the journey that she has taken along with her daughter Aimee. The profile of Kim below is based upon an interview with mother and daughter, and reflects both their opinions:

My work comes from my heart and it’s I suppose full of emotion. I know it’s not wonderful and people can find fault with it, but it’s about us and part of us is on that canvas.

These poetic words were eloquently expressed by the artist Kim Noble. There is perhaps no better person to illustrate the aims of social inclusion than this highly talented, extremely articulate woman, a woman who just happens to have DID. This stands for dissociative identity disorder, formerly known as multiple personality disorder.

Kim claims that her art has given her a connection with the other personalities that co-exist inside her body:

Art has brought us together – the other personalities and myself. I have got to know them through their artwork because I never physically see them.

However, art is not only used as a creative tool for self-expression. At one stage in her life, Kim ran an art group at Springfield Hospital as artist-in-residence. For Kim, it was all about “giving something back to the community”. Kim described an extremely relaxed scene where everyone was “sitting with music, tea and coffee”. Painting provided the people in this group with a focus and a coping strategy within a supportive environment (Figure 1).

Kim has found it beneficial to her own wellbeing to be on the helping end of recovery as well as on the receiving end. She describes the art group as “a really positive experience” and feels that group members were able to relate to her better because of her experience
as a service user. The group consisted of people with learning disabilities and or physical
disabilities as well as those with mental health problems. Therefore, the group consisted of
service users who would not normally work together and this unique combination of needs
and abilities proved to be very successful. Kim articulates how everyone helped each other
and how they all felt as part of a group that belonged.

Aimee, Kim’s daughter, also participated in her mother’s Art Group. Aimee is also involved
with a social enterprise called ‘Arts R Us’, which assists artists with DID in becoming
accepted in the art world. Even at a young age, Aimee learnt many lifelong skills. By virtue of
her experience, she is more sensitive and understanding towards others with disabilities.
Through Aimee’s encouragement, her peers at school are more aware of mental health
issues, and they too are learning to be more supportive to individuals with disabilities
(Figure 2).

Kim’s involvement in her artistic projects has made her feel integrated with the community in
several ways. First, getting out and showing her work in galleries has made her feel
physically in touch. Second, on an emotional level, giving something back by engaging in a
creative pursuit she hopes other people will enjoy has also made Kim feel connected.

When ResearchNet asked Kim what the highlight of her artistic career had been so far, she
replied that it had been “every little stage” that has helped her to move forward:

I try not to push it too much. I just think if I just get on and I just paint, which is what we enjoy, things
happen, you move forward.

However, Kim has faced barriers and challenges to her success just like anybody else. Kim
has hang-ups about not being a trained artist and feels that, in a similar way to being labelled
with a psychiatric past, she is now labelled as an outsider artist.
I didn’t know when we were painting, we’d be classed as an outsider artist. I just thought this is the painting. I like it, I hope everybody else does and see where it goes.

The label of outsider artist was created by French Jean Dubuffet to describe art created outside the boundaries of official culture. Kim feels more accepted by the general community than by the art world, but sitting on the edge of acceptance in the art world has only given her more purpose and drive. She feels that her role as a skilled artist is helping not only to set a positive example for her daughter Aimee, but is also giving back to the community by showing hope and inspiration to others (Figure 3).

Kim’s transition from being a service user to a group leader at Springfield Hospital helped her to feel increasingly connected with the wider community. The members of this community of mixed ability individuals (which included staff members, who importantly, needed to be willing to make art alongside the other group members) were united in their mission to appreciate art and to communicate with one another on an equal footing. Kim feels that making art together changed the power dynamics between staff and service users, describing this process as having the “labels were taken away”.

Figure 2 Kim and Aimee

Figure 3 Leave me alone by Abi
The gallery space was open to public visitors and the group were aware that they may visit during the time that the art group was running. This led to important interactions between visitors and group members who not only talked about the art work on the walls but the artwork they were making within the group.

Encouraging individuals who would not normally join forces in this way to work together, demonstrates not only Kim’s increasing level of social inclusion, but also her ability to make others feel valued and inspired enough to contribute within the community themselves. Some of the group members continued to make art even once the group had ended. The success of the art group demonstrates clearly that service users themselves can play a monumental role in the recovery of other service users, as well as in their own recovery.

The level of acceptance and social interest surrounding, Kim’s work has become wider and wider. She now cannot find the time in her diary to incorporate all the demands for her to feature in magazine, television shows and art exhibitions. Aimee feels that the quality of both their lives has improved through her mother’s art work – for example, they have had opportunities to travel to different countries. Kim feels more in control of her life now, even though it is busier than ever before. She is extremely driven and feels that she would get depressed if she did not paint for a period of time. However, despite her passion, motivation and not to mention a meticulous eye for detail, Kim describes herself as very lucky, and says that going public with her art was never a conscious decision (Figure 4).

Kim is clear that developing her artistic style and her many personalities has allowed her to relate to various members of the public, whether they be service users, members of the art world or doctors with an increasing level of confidence and resilience:

They’re all just humans.

However, Kim has had to fight her corner. She tells us how some members of the community are more accepting than others. Whilst some people still do not believe in DID, others have been inundating Kim with e-mails wishing her well and congratulating her on her success.

It seems that discovering, nurturing and channelling one’s energies into activities that give joy and a sense of purpose has formed part of Kim’s formula for success. It appears also, that consistent effort and determination, whilst not being fixated by the outcome or the bigger picture so to speak, can still lead to amazing results. Kim was recently invited onto The Oprah Winfrey show, has numerous artworks displayed on the internet and in galleries, and has a book due out, in 2011 titled, All of Me (Publisher: Piatkus, ISBN: 9780749955908).
Perhaps, if we dared to paint outside of the lines on the canvasses of our own lives, we too could unearth our hidden traits and talents, and perhaps discover for the first time, “all of us”:

Each of the three paintings in this article has been produced by a different personality. Their symbolic nature allows Aimee to know which personality has been present whilst her mother has been painting.

For more information on Kim Noble’s art work look at: www.developarts.co.uk

About the authors

Carol Prendergast is a wife and a mum to four children, and she loves spending time with her family. It is a busy house with lots going on but she would not have it any other way. Her ambition is to return to employment and she would like to be involved in developing a support group for families who have children with problems whilst they are on waiting lists to see professionals. Voluntary work with ResearchNet is helping to build up her confidence and she is learning about the other side of mental health.

Poonam Swan has recently completed her studies at Greenwich University. Joining ResearchNet and co-authoring her first article for the group has been a rewarding experience. She is finding the opportunity to unveil the ambitions and achievements of service users and carers to be extremely empowering. Poonam Swan is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: pswan10@hotmail.com

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