



**Creative Places,  
Edenderry**



## **Looking after the Artist/Facilitator**

### **Four Artists/Facilitators in Conversation with Creative Places, Edenderry Coordinator, Seonaid Murray**



**Comhairle Chontae Uíbh Fhailí**  
Offaly County Council



## **A Unique Snapshot from Four Different Practices/Perspectives**

**Grab a comfy chair and a cup of tea and have a read!**

**Welcome to our 4th Community Toolkit. Our Creative Places, Edenderry Coordinator, Seonaid Murray sat down to talk to four experienced Artists & Facilitators about their practice. The following includes their thoughts, advice for best preparing for, delivering and post facilitation of an Arts based workshop; how to 'ground' yourself in order to move on to the next workshop/event or to head home to decompress!**

### **Conversation Two:**

**Charmaine McMeekin, Dance Artist/Facilitator in Health and the Community, based in Belfast talks to Seonaid at the MAC, Belfast:**

**Seonaid:** Good afternoon! How would you describe your work?

**Charmaine:** Hi! I suppose you know, some day's how I describe myself changes depending on how my mood is - probably I would say I am a dance artist working in health and the community - so definitely the focus is on using dance and movement as a form of well being.

**Seonaid:** Brilliant! I know you work widely across the sector so how would you look after yourself before heading in to work with a group?

**Charmaine:** You have to practice what you preach in a way - so every morning I would do some form of physical activity whether that's pilates or yoga and a wee bit of breath work but just something so that when I get up I feel grounded and settled. It definitely changes my whole frame of mind when I do a bit of movement. Getting into my body and out of my thinking mind.

**Seonaid:** That's really interesting so would that be every day or just the days you are facilitating workshops?

**Charmaine:** Every day apart from a Sunday - like a Saturday I might do something different like a walk - but definitely during the week whenever I have a session I really like to move before I begin. Even if it is just 15 minutes and I have a wee mantra that I say - and then I'm like - ok, that's me ready.

**Seonaid:** That's interesting because when I was speaking with Stephen Beggs - who we have both worked with - he mentioned talking to himself too - so when you say Mantra do you mean that you say something into yourself?

**Charmaine:** I sit cross legged and I would say, 'The sun shines from the palm of my hands, I am the light and love of the sunrise, and I walk gently on this earth.' And I would say that 3 times out loud - for me it's kind of like - everything I do, I come (this might sound a bit cheesy) but genuinely with an open heart and love and I think when you come with that you can't be met with or by anything negative -

I'm not in complete control of the space but whatever happens I can manage -

**Seonaid:** Would you ever be nervous before a session/workshop?

**Charmaine:** Some sessions maybe I might get a wee bit nervous - if it is a new session and I'll maybe just take a wee minute in the car and sometimes I have found in recent years that I really can't have any music in the car. I can't have any sound in the car - \*laughs!\* Like, I would just have to have silence before a workshop sometimes!

**Seonaid:** I imagine that when you arrive at a workshop there can be an unexpected energy coming back at you?

**Charmaine:** Yes -

**Seonaid:** So, how would you plan for that? Because I know that I would sometimes feel that I am absorbing/soaking up the energy of the room - both positive and negative.....

**Charmaine:** I am definitely more tired than I used to be - and I think that is a result sometimes of soaking up a lot of different

**energies in a room - because sometimes I think you are giving out so much - that you give up yourself into that space and sometimes you forget to come back into yourself again - because you've got all of everybody else's stuff - just even taking a second to say, 'yes - I come back to myself' - is really useful. Recently, funny - I have been running - now, hilariously, I sound like I do loads - I do not indeed - it is literally, to clear my head. So like, I will go home and I will do some reporting straight away - which I shouldn't do really - I am trying to wait until the next morning - but if I come home and have a complete break from work and thoughts of work and go running - I come back a different person.**

**Seonaid: That sounds familiar to me - when I have been facilitating something - even if it's not music related but perhaps a meeting or something that is a little out of my comfort zone, I have definitely come home and said to my family and friends that I don't want to have to facilitate in my personal life!**

\*Both laugh!\* I have maybe pushed myself too hard during the day when that happens! What Pitfalls would you look out for when you are working? For example, you might not be having a good day but you have to facilitate a workshop or you go into a space and something unexpected happens - do you have a mechanism for how to manage that? Charmaine: You can never rest on your laurels, even if you know a group inside out. One group I have worked with for 2 years on a Wednesday afternoon for example, all fantastic people - all living independently - but are living with Dementia. You just need to be prepared that anything can happen in that space and what I've really learnt actually is to let go - and try not to control the environment too much - I would plan a session but - I would keep it loose - I think letting go and releasing grip of a session - I think that's what it's about - being in the moment - being fully prepared - like you and I should have a toolbox now that we should be able to pull from - being prepared but

meeting people where they are at - and then you have to be on your toes - with whatever is in front of you, so letting go - holding space but having the freedom within it to be flexible to people's needs and I think if you come with that - I think that helps you manage a space better. So it's learning to breathe through any wee things that you might find - somebody might come in late - for example off the bus from a day centre - stop the session for maybe like 10 minutes so then you're like - 'how do you facilitate that?!' Even just by singing for a while - so yeah - it's about meeting people where they are at and letting go I think -

**Seonaid:** I have seen you come into a space to work and you are warm, friendly and welcoming. You sometimes have bright coloured scarves or whatever you have planned! It is interesting to hear you talking about it.



There can be different noises in the room - or lots of things happening - but you seem to be able to focus on the moment which is quite a skill - to not let outside noise affect you ....

**Charmaine:** Yeah definitely - you're holding that space for everyone - and I think that's really important - it's really interesting talking about it because you don't actually think that you are doing those things but it is only when you are asked the questions that you realise - this is what we actually do do - but your brain never stops working in a session. Like this morning, it was my last session with a group and I wanted to lift their energy - I was doing one song and in my brain I was like - 'next, what's next - what am I going to do next?!' What I had planned - I thought mmmm mmmm - I am going to have to change that up a bit - so it is even just that - all calm on the front and you are doing lovely and then in your head you are constantly observing.....

**Seonaid:** That's interesting too - I was freelancing on Saturday - with a lovely group of children with a mix of learning disabilities and sensory needs. The music was happening, all going along well and then a child came over with a toy lion and I said, 'Oh great', and I started to sing, 'Old Macdonald' - and this child got quite angry because she was saying, 'you are lazy! There is no lion on a farm!' And so it is how you navigate that in the moment, it is unexpected! We sang something else and the little girl just wanted to sing 'Jingle Bells' and then it was all fine! \*Both laugh!\*

**Charmaine:** Totally!

**Seonaid:** You have talked a lot about how you would prepare for a workshop and look after yourself during the workshop - do you have any advice for after the workshop?

**Charmaine:** Kind of - you know what I like to do now before a session - being there a wee bit earlier and talking to everybody - and then at the end make sure I go round everybody again and have a conversation. I think after Covid, people are still getting back to being in spaces with each other but also for me - you are getting to know people but you are also letting them know who you are. You have transitioned from the facilitator at the top of the room or whatever to this 'awwk, Charmaine - yes, ok let's have a wee yarn with her.' I love getting to know people in that way because then you build trust with people.

**Seonaid:** I like that too - both as a freelancer myself but also in this role as Creative Places, Edenderry Coordinator, that we make sure that time is built in for tea and coffee. At the start and also at the end. Maybe we could come on to talk about that a bit - because you need to make sure that you build that extra time into your fee.

Do you/have you always had that in place or as time has gone on have you got better at putting the finance side of things in place?

**Charmaine:** It's really funny because I have been doing this job a long time - I am still self employed and there is still an element of me which is fearful of finances. April is kind of a vague time because it is the end of the financial year - so I am allowing myself time - giving myself space - but I am not good at having space in the diary. In the past I maybe wouldn't have charged as much or I would have said, 'no it's ok' - and now I'm like, 'well no actually that's not right' - for example some places are not big organisations and are sometimes not great at paying on time and I would let that slip for a while because I didn't want to appear that I needed the money - would you believe that? And I wouldn't go and ask - So now - no way - I would not let that slip and I put on my invoice it needs to be paid within the month.

and then I will go after it - but that is because I value myself and my work a little bit more than I did - a lot more actually.

**Seonaid:** What about making sure you don't experience burn out? I have definitely found myself chasing my tail in the past and had to sit myself down and give myself a rest! It is very hard to do that and something else you said that really resonated with me was that there is sometimes someone else who could take the job instead of you and might even do it better or be better suited.....

**Charmaine:** It's definitely about - and I think this doesn't fit with the way society runs - you know - as facilitators or artists - you sit outside the norm and you have to be able to become comfortable with that - all of my friends have 'normal' jobs - but when I was asking friends for advice recently about possibly turning down some work, they were going, 'what would you do that for?' 'that's really good money' - but I was sort of saying to them, 'you need to know when your time is up' - when you think I'm tired - I just felt

I was repeating the same stuff - and that's not good for anybody - it needs to be/I need to be value for money. And I don't think people in society think like that - I think people sit in jobs for 20 years and I am sure they are fed up you know - so I am not saying that I am any better but if you want to be self employed and in this job there has to be an element of risk that you have to embrace - do you know what I mean?

**Seonaid:** Definitely, I work for Creative Lives, this project is run by Creative Lives and it is about promoting everyday creativity - but not everyone works within creativity or within the creative space - so I think there is something about what we do that you tend to then be running around using all of your energy - not to take away from someone who is doing a job where they are maybe more static - correct me if I am wrong but you are sometimes quite lonely - because you are on the road - that can be fun but it can also be demanding or draining

and then perhaps you are not working on your own creativity? Would you say at the end of the day, when you have facilitated a few sessions - do you have any way of feeding your own creativity?

**Charmaine:** I just feel - I said to my husband last night, 'I have workshop fatigue actually!' So I do less creative stuff myself, well that's not true - creativity comes in many forms - so I suppose - I would do a lot of dancing and movement in the house myself - like just even if I am preparing for something - and I'll be like - 'aww this is class.' When I was working in the Royal Hospital Children's Ward last week in Belfast, I was working with a wee girl - and d'ya know what - it was so wonderful - but then it was so funny because we were doing lovely contemporary dance stuff and it made me think 'aww Jesus I miss this - as well' - so there is an element - that I would like to do more - so I suppose - Creativity - Gardening - going out into the garden - I sound like I'm in my 40's now! - being in the garden - I love that - and that's creative - in

my brain I am choreographing bits - you know when you are doing the garden and the way it looks?! Small & large & all & putting that all together and all!

**Seonaid:** I picked the Saxophone up on Saturday, I think I was telling you earlier - and it sounded terrible! And I thought, I need to practice - but also I was tired and I had been doing a lot and then I had this freelance workshop and I really didn't feel like doing it but then I am so glad I did -

**Charmaine:** Good -

**Seonaid:** I met some amazing kids during the workshop and I came out with a really good energy - do you have that sometimes? You don't really feel like it but you are re-energised by the workshop yourself?

**Charmaine:** Aww, absolutely - you know what Seonaid, you wouldn't do this job if you didn't love it - it's 99% amazing! People are such a joy and you get to see human nature/human beings at their finest - you know. Seonaid, I think that I can't describe what I do because when you are in a space



something magic happens - that you can't even describe and it is about that energy and that kind of connection with humans that is just amazing - people invite you into their world for whatever length of time. I am doing a project at the moment and the group are going to perform - the eldest is 82 and they are dancing 2 dance pieces! When I first met them - they told me, 'no, Charmaine, no they just really like visual art - and they wouldn't really be into this' - which made me nervous - so I went in and do you know what, they are the most joyous, vibrant people when they are invited to dance and I would be high as a kite when I leave there - and there is something about that transference of energy - through creativity I think and I do feed off that - that buzz, that energy - no doubt - and I think all of it - you carry that creativity forward into the rest of your life...

**Seonaid:** That's what I feel - I distinguished quite early on - I was learning Saxophone and I enjoyed it but the feeling of encouraging other people who maybe

haven't had that opportunity to play or sing or dance was indescribable - and it's mutual - you are enjoying facilitating something and the person/group is gaining something too - the energy feels really good - I was also thinking about what lessons that you've maybe learnt along the way - you've talked about some already.....

**Charmaine:** Oh God yes, absolutely, I think this year - it's about learning to say no - you know in a very constructive way - I don't want to let anybody down by saying no. Probably learning to say no a wee bit more, I really need to work on this - so it's a lesson but it's a work in progress - of creating space - whether it's to be creative or to take time to think, well do I actually want to do this? I feel like I really crave change at the moment and there needs to be some form of change happening within what I am doing - and I don't know what that looks like but it needs to change - the lesson I am learning is create the space and when you create the space things will

enter. And I think, as a freelancer - you see all of these people around you getting promoted and the joy of those things or those milestones - there is never that - I get so many opportunities don't get me wrong but just want something else to elevate what I am doing - do you know what I mean?

**Seonaid:** Definitely - my Uncle is a plumber and....

**Charmaine:** That's good to know! Ha! Ha!

**Seonaid:** And he said that years ago, he worked with Voluntary Service, Belfast and he said he had to stop that because it was too emotionally draining - he couldn't take that soaking up of energy that we were talking about - he just wants to go in, fix the problem and that's it, job done! \*Both Laugh!\* You definitely deserve recognition for what you do.....

**Charmaine:** Totally - Aye - people are very good - my God - like it's funny, I don't absorb compliments at all - that will not affect how I behave - I wouldn't become

complacent but I am grateful - even from Covid, I think my work has really changed and people got to see my work online more - my level of work and the rate that I get paid has gone up. Completely changed.

**Seonaid:** And would you say - there is more of an appreciation of your work - since Covid?

**Charmaine:** Yes - definitely. Even in my street - my neighbour said to me one day during Covid, 'Charmaine - you could do some dancing in the street' - and I was like, 'nah!' and then she said it to me again and then I thought - d'ya know what I will - this was before my work went online - and I don't really enjoy social media so I wasn't going to promote myself that way because that's just not who I am! So we danced in my street 2 days a week - the neighbours came out and and we all danced and do you know what Seonaid, that was just - my God I loved it! Then we ended up, one of my neighbours was a community

facilitator years ago and she gave us bunting and we all painted and drew bunting and then she put it all together - and it was just lovely and it was pure creativity - I might have been facilitating but it was very creative for me, it was brilliant and it really showed me the benefits - it's dance and movement - it's not brain surgery - it's not going to solve all the problems of the world - but it has a place - and it is important.

**Seonaid:** It's so uplifting - and the work that you did when you came to Creative Places, Edenderry is still being talked about!

**Charmaine:** Loved it!

**Seonaid:** I know that you know the value of your work but never forget how powerful that is - it's been brilliant - I suppose the only other thing I was thinking - time flies - was; you've talked about it already - but would there be a piece of advice or good advice that you have been given along the way that you would like to share?

**Charmaine:** Yeah - I think so - ultimately, I think it comes back to this; if you value yourself as a person but also in your job - placing a value on you will link to everything - the work that you take, how much you charge, all of that, so if you value yourself you will make the right decision. So it is about value - value you, value the work you do and your place in society because you are making a difference - all of us are - even just the people we meet and smile at - but you are doing that in a bigger way in terms of the groups that you are meeting - you know - just being with people - I think - working with you guys - I think Seonaid because you are delivering the project and you are managing it all and you come from that background with the perspective of the self employed Artist/Facilitator, that's why working for Creative Lives is such a joy - and so easy and just like brilliant because I think you understand the whole process of it all and

you let and you give space for that creativity to nurture and grow and that's lovely....

**Seonaid:** I'll pay you after - I wasn't asking for a compliment!

**Charmaine:** Aaaaaaagh! \*Laughs!\*

**Seonaid:** I think we have probably covered everything - any final thoughts?

**Charmaine:** I think ultimately the thing is - take time in whatever you do - give yourself time and space - whether it's to walk for ten minutes out in nature or just to clear your head - a wee bit of movement helps - a wee bit of stretching - a wee bit of breathing - or even have a wee ritual maybe - that kind of makes you feel really good - before and after a workshop or in the morning - and the evening or before bed? Benchmark the day. Anything else? And also - do be aware of the signs and triggers within yourself if you feel burn out coming because it is very real and it definitely happens - so looking out and being aware of your body letting you know

that - so whether that is fatigue - whether you forget your words, whatever it is - be very conscious and mindful of yourself and what you are doing and take notice and think, 'right, it's time to either take a walk or take a break' or something that suits yourself - find things that nurture you - it's a small thing but do it!

**Seonaid:** That is really helpful and really valuable.....

**Charmaine:** Good

**Seonaid:** Thank you!