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PARLEY

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The Personal behind The Professional – as a key driver of our craft

Parley is a new company in the early stages of development, formed by me Victoria McCorkell. I've never shared a detailed personal or professional account anywhere before, I don't even have a linkedin account.

This article evolved from a presentation I was asked to consider on the "The Personal behind The Professional; as a key driver behind our craft", something we don't share often in our industry, perhaps self indulgent, scary, risky, not intelligent enough or completely irrelevant.

I disagree.

I've worked with people and practitioners who frequently share their experiences and so I feel it's time I shared my own story in and into the arts, or as much as I'd like to share.

I've worked and trained in the sector for over 18 years, my path begins much earlier with GCSE Art and an art teacher who encouraged my relationship with the department so much that on occasion he allowed me to skive off PE to concentrate on the subject that interested me most.

Or maybe it started at age 8, making creative learning spaces in the basement of our flats. My friends were active participants, they worked in collaboration and brought ideas forward about the type of activity they'd like to see or lead. They offered 50p a week for a regular stash of creative procrastination materials such as Mandy, Beano, Cola Cubes, Sweetie Cigarettes and the essential box of arts supplies for "real work".

Perhaps my 'flight in' could be traced further back, born in Northern Ireland in the late 70s and returning every year to visit family on both sides of a conflict. British soldiers with guns at checkpoints, street murals etched into my memory. How much I'd seen, heard, questioned and tried to make sense of at a young age. I was political and concerned with justice, stories, movement, cultures and people coming together for as long as I can remember.

My family are very 'typically Irish', or what some people say Irish people are like. I can say that because they're my family and I was born there. They partied until the sun came up, loved, loved, some had lots of children, some did not; they cared mainly about family and community. They shared stories, danced, sang songs, songs about Margaret Thatcher, someone called Danny and a Rover who was wild, so wild nobody actually knows where he came from. There was always a song. I sang too, and sometimes this tiny shiny instrument would take centre stage, they invented it, 'The Spoons' two spoons played with dynamism and speed, always in time. I was surrounded by a raw and rich culture.

Back to leaving school... when I chose Performing Arts at college it came as a shock to Mr Eade, he looked at me with confused eyes as he smoked his smelly cigar. As a leaving gift he gave me a piece of art he'd made for me, I still remember an overwhelming sense of gratitude and the very first seed of doubt whether I should have chosen Art at A Level, had I passed GCSE Maths.

College included Dance, Music, Drama, and Maths, followed by a BA (Hons) in Drama and Theatre studies. 60% theory so certainly not all Yoga and Tai Chi warmups. I learnt a lot here about genre, political theatre, contemporary art, costume, stage production, and playwrights pushing boundaries.

At 19 I moved to London, London remains one of four best decisions in my life and I lived there longer than anywhere else.

I've missed out a big life event at the age of 11 and most of my teenage years, let's just say going to university let alone an art gallery, museum or theatre wasn't such a thing in the area I grew up.

I graduated in 2000.

From Middlesex University in the days where you didn't have to pay for education or leave with huge debt or urgency to get a brilliant industry job immediately. I had the luxury of time to figure out what I wanted to do. I dabbled in fringe theatre, worked as a drama facilitator and involved myself in community work. I wanted to become a Drama and Movement therapist or Drama Teacher. On the advice of Central School of Speech and Drama I spent years working in health, education, and community settings in a variety of roles; support worker, outreach worker, group facilitator, project leader, learning mentor, careers adviser and assistant speech and language therapist.

After this time I didn't want to become an Art Therapist but a natural alignment using creativity to support engagement, learning and development had evolved.

My first full time arts job came in 2004, I remember getting a glossy white MacBook and told I'd be responsible for the Arts Mentoring Programme for disabled artists and young people. Within 12 months I'd strategically developed an Artist Development Service including a Young Artist Development Programme (first of its kind in the country I'm told), an Arts Mentoring Scheme, Professional Development Planning Service, Artist Networking and Development Events, Arts Award, Arts in Schools, and inclusive projects working in partnership with larger cultural organisations. It's a shame the intensive learning and development work didn't continue after I left the organisation, back then there wasn't an abundance of inclusive opportunities across the sector and encouraging genuine jumping off points and lasting pathways beyond our services was tough, and more was needed.

Much has shifted since 2009 and it's great to see.

Throughout my career I've often been positioned within smaller arts organisations, working in the heart of communities or within education in roles such as arts programme designer, manager, producer, facilitator, freelancer, or in partnership with larger cultural venues. My work is underpinned by encouraging equal exposure and access to the arts, engagement, education, learning and development, working with people and respecting their choices.

I've worked across art forms designing and managing projects from initial concept through to exit strategy, often in collaboration. I have managed and hosted events, created arts learning resources, delivered training, produced longer term arts programmes on housing estates, older people's accommodation; commissioned artists, submitted qualitative and quantitative evaluation reports, funding bids, funding bids, and once carried 18 meters of cable and two speakers across London to rig up a pop up cinema for a young people's red carpet film preview night. I got shingles the very next day.

For 13 months I gained experience working in the Arts and Heritage Team for a local authority, a very strong, collaborative cultural scene with forward thinking artists, people and leaders behind it, but I struggle when sometimes within larger institutions the systems and structures impact the ease of design and flow for relational and project touch points. I also missed being on the ground working directly with artist and communities, without their ideas, engagement, involvement, talent and commitment our projects and initiatives are nothing and our ecology poorer.

Audiences too, the arc of engagement takes longer for many people and I believe people should be more central to their own relationship with and into the arts for "our" cultural ecology and its future.

I trained as a coach eleven years ago and adopted coaching practices and principles in my work. I like that a coaching mindset can place artists and audiences central to their own development and encourage a “led by” approach.

In 2012 whilst working full time as an Arts Programme Manager I studied a MA in Arts and Cultural Policy and Management, specialising in Arts Education in Theory and Practice. I was lucky to have lectures at some of the biggest galleries, museums and theatre education departments in the country. I could go on for some time about the MA and how important it felt to underpin years of practice with deep rooted theory. I could discuss Bourdieu, Dewey, Kant to name just a few, the history of arts education, the importance of arts education, arts pedagogy, pedagogy in a digital age, educational resources, lifelong learning, arts and health, arts and regeneration, arts policy and that one module “the inside out of cultural institutions” which hurt my brain, but I’m probably running the risk of over talking myself when actually a key point to this story is at times, I felt I shouldn’t be there, I’m sure many people feel this way in our sector, we should stop it.

Recently the lecturer who awarded me distinctions said she was surprised I hadn’t pursued a PhD! It’s the second time she’s said this since I graduated. I know she rates my thinking and practice, but saying those words, to me, really landed.

I’m not sure whether a PhD is on my agenda right now.

Working on the ground has taught me in equal value just as much as any course I graduated from. I hugely value qualitative and quantitative research and education, my MA remains the 3rd of 4 best decisions in my life but I feel we can underestimate experience and practice based insight and intelligence. The names of sociologist, anthropologist and philosophers, the names of the theories I may not have known before the MA, but you kind of know without knowing you know, just from years of life, observation, enquiry, empathy and working directly with people.

Right now I’m consolidating my practice into a new company Parley, whilst juggling a part time job, managing a 43k heritage lottery project and working as a coach and mentor. In time, all of my work will come under “Parley”.

Throughout the last 8 months I’ve concentrated on my own CPD, returned to theory and practice papers, business development and had formal and informal conversations with directors from leading cultural organisations and directors of learning and education, all of them so generous and encouraging.

Be bolder, be braver, you already are.