

INTERVIEW BY HARRIET LOWE, COMMUNICATIONS & RESEARCH OFFICER



## BANU ADAM ARTS 2 HEAL

**Banu is the founder of Arts 2 Heal in Blackburn. Arts 2 Heal received a grant from the Baring Foundation in 2021 to engage the local South Asian community in creativity for wellbeing and to develop community arts and mental health champions.**

You can learn more about Arts 2 Heal at [www.arts2heal.org](http://www.arts2heal.org)

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### **You founded Arts 2 Heal – what led you there?**

My background is in education and in a previous life I studied art. Initially my career didn’t bring these together, but later on I thought ok, I have an opportunity to do that. I did a Master’s in Arts & Health Practice and then worked for a couple of charities. But I often felt the paperwork was taking over and we weren’t really responding to the needs of the participants. It was then, really, that I thought let’s break away and see if we can start an organisation that meets people’s needs and has the members on board and involved as much as possible. I gave it a go and the response has been overwhelming. It’s snowballed. Arts 2 Heal been open for six years now. Because it’s a small charity, we can make changes quite quickly; we can adapt and take feedback. Initially it was just a trial and I thought we’d see how it goes. But it seems to have worked. And we’ve kept it in line with what the community wants.

### **What does Arts 2 Heal set out to do?**

We’re based in Blackburn where I’ve lived myself for 25 years. I wanted to keep Arts 2 Heal real. The trustees are from the local community as well. Arts 2 Heal is about getting involved in art and feeling the benefits

to wellbeing. Our emphasis has always been: just enjoy creating and let’s see how you feel about it. It’s never been about creating a piece at the end or developing particular arts skills, although that does happen along the way.

Early on, we quickly realised that we did need a team but we didn’t have the funding to employ staff. We also wanted to help people develop skills that they would find valuable. So, we thought how about helping members to develop skills and then providing opportunities for them to practise these skills and develop them further. Participants become peer mentors and then volunteers. It’s important to recognise that people come with a work history, with lots of life and transferable skills, whatever health problems they might now be experiencing. Often what we do is gently facilitate these to come to the surface and build confidence. Our volunteers are now predominantly former participants. About 80% of our committee members are also former participants. This strengthens the charity and people also passionately want to give back.

This last year has been really great for the charity. We are volunteer-led and won a Queen’s Award for Voluntary Service. We also reached around 1,500 people this year.

We get referrals from support workers, social prescribing link workers, partner organisations and mental health teams. Word of mouth is also effective! But the key thing is that our location is brilliant. We are on the edge of the town, on the edge of the South Asian community who pass our way to get into town, and just by the train and bus station. We have a shop front with all the artwork displayed. We have an open door and what's fantastic is that our volunteers, as soon as they see someone at the door hovering or a bit hesitant, are straight there to welcome them in. We don't have a formal sign-in policy – all the things that can be barriers we try to remove them all. And it works.

### **What do you hope to achieve with the Baring Foundation grant?**

With the Baring Foundation funding, we are focusing on engaging the South Asian community in particular. There are barriers to arts and mental health in the community. There is a fear of talking about mental health and of seeking mental health support and there is a natural instinct to go and see a spiritual leader but perhaps not to seek medical help. We are in a position where we can signpost people. Members who come to workshops are good at discussing what is going on with them in a natural way – we can provide a space for that and show people that there are a range of options available to support them.

Many community members have never used a paintbrush; they've seen their children do it when they bring art home from school, but never had an opportunity themselves. It's really important to make what we do accessible to people from socio-economically deprived backgrounds. So we've done a few projects upcycling ordinary materials which have been quite popular. We have been experimenting with using coffee instead of watercolours – all you need is one brush and coffee! The artwork we did was amazing! We want to make art accessible to people on a budget who don't have the money to spend on resources they might not use.

In the first phase of the project, we have been running a lot of workshops, some pop-ups, some with partners, saying to people to just come and join in, and trying out lots of different types of art. In the second phase, we will focus on introducing different mediums, and then we will help individual members to focus on a particular medium and then, with support from existing volunteers, start to deliver workshops themselves to small groups. They will become our community champions who will go out into the community – whether that is to a small mosque group, friendship circle or even birthday party – to do taster sessions. It's going to be very exciting!

The Baring Foundation funding is enabling us to be really flexible and try out different things, responding to what people are enjoying. As an example, we did a lantern-making workshop recently to coincide with a lantern festival in Blackburn. A little group there got talking about making kites out of willow which is popular in India and Pakistan. So, we've invited them back to come back to teach another group how to make these.

### **What do you most enjoy about your work?**

For me personally, it's that moment when you give somebody that first experience of art that they weren't expecting. We did a session with a group of refugees and asylum seekers recently – many hadn't painted before. We did batik with them and the response was overwhelming. It's the interaction and the immediate feedback you get.

### **What are you most excited about for 2022?**

It's going to be really exciting seeing our new members developing. You might assume that if people haven't done art before, they might not be good at it. But they are – they come in and do amazing things! And we will soon have 15 new community champions from the South Asian community who will be ready to deliver their own workshops in the community.

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