

Power and the People

Policing Dialogues A PROJECT OF WHAT'S THE STORY? COLLECTIVE



A meeting between members of what's the Story? Collective, Rialto Youth Project and An Garda Síochána at The LAB



From the seeds of powerlessness a collective with its roots in art and youth work took the brave step to share intensely personal moments with the public. It was a move that gained an unexpected momentum and proved to be politically and socially challenging. Fiona Whelan charts its journey.

I walked up the stairs of St. Andrew's community centre one morning to the usual busy workspace of Rialto Youth Project (RYP). There was a distinctive buzz in the air. At the main table, a group of local junior leaders were sorting a pile of malaria tablets and prescriptions and making final arrangements for a trip to Tanzania to help build facilities for a community there. Another group of volunteers were huddled over a computer, booking flights for two young women heading to Paris to participate in Hemispheres – European Youth Action training. Over on the couch a younger member of What's the Story? Collective was explaining to a youth worker about the training being developed for gardai as part of the recent exhibition Policing Dialogues. It struck me then just how deeply engaged in issues of youth justice RYP actually is.

A SPACE FOR BIG IDEAS

All of the projects mentioned above focus on justice, human rights or citizenship – and, importantly, all are collaborations between RYP and other individuals or organisations. This is a core value of RYP – to engage outside of itself, beyond youth work and into other sectors that can bring something valuable to its work.

As an artist working closely with youth workers and young people at RYP for seven years, I am testament to the project's openness to difference.

The ethos and approach to community youth work and the commitment to young people's personal development and growth, are things I've come to prize about this place.

I have also observed a professional sector, full of passionate and opinionated individuals – all angry with the systematic oppression and marginalisation of young working class people. However, it quickly became clear to that the sheer volume of work that staff faced to address local needs meant there was limited capacity to address the

broader political and social issues.

This past year, there seems to have been a conscious shift to committing time and resources to such projects – and to collaborating with other people who are able to go the distance with RYP to achieve this. RYP will soon be running a residential for young adults focused on developing a social justice training programme.

ADDRESSING POWERLESSNESS

One example of a project that has a real social justice dimension is the recent work of What's the Story? Collective. The collective, which I was part of establishing, is made up of youth workers, young adults, volunteer youth leaders and myself, an artist. We formed in 2008 to push the boundaries of collaboration. The collective brought together people interested in issues of power, sharing personal stories and making art. We spent much of the early days discussing power, analysing our power relationships as a group and discussing structures that have power in our lives. A turning point was when each member recorded a personal story of a moment when they felt powerful or powerless. After a few months of transcribing and editing, we had 60 anonymous stories that would become the bedrock of all the future work we would do.

I recall a night in the Rent Office in Dolphin House when I placed this pile of stories in the middle of the room. Over the course of many hours each of us picked up a story and read it to the group. Although most stories spoke of degradation, shame, anger and a real sense of powerlessness, something very powerful was born that night by sharing mostly unheard and hidden experiences in a way that was safe, anonymous and respectful.

PRIVATE STORIES, PUBLIC ART

From late 2008, we held our first event locally with an invited audience of 60 people. This event was built on the powerful experience the group had shared and this time involved guests participating in reading and responding to the stories. The stories were re-enacted by actors for a film we made which travelled to a number of community and art sites. Slowly and carefully, the stories were being placed in the public domain.

In 2009, we began to ask ourselves: Who is this work for? Can it have more value than for each of us and those we know? Can we bring about social change? Upon analysis, our attention was drawn to the fact that a quarter of the 60 stories spoke

“At the end of the day, we still need the Gardai, like if your gaf is after getting broken into or if someone has been murdered, you still need them. But we never look at them that way. We look at them as being the pricks that come in here, raid gafs and completely intervene in people’s lives. But I suppose when they are not here, what are they doing? Are they out there trying to get someone who is after robbing someone’s gaf or trying to catch somebody who is after murdering somebody? And in here, I understand why people want them. They want safety for their children. That’s understandable.

When they are kicking in my door it’s a different story.”

of powerlessness relating to experiences with Gardaí. We believed that this was no coincidence. An overwhelming common experience of young people feeling unjustly treated by gardaí was evident.

So in early 2009, we began a process that would engage us for the next two years. We approached the Chief Superintendent of the South Central District of An Garda Síochána and began to negotiate a reading event for that July. This time, garda members would read some of our stories highlighting young people’s experiences with their institution. For some members of the collective, sitting opposite a sea of uniforms, hearing gardaí read stories that dealt with abuses carried out by that same uniform, was a cathartic moment. The primary aim was to feel heard by gardaí and to experience a small, temporary shift in power. The event gave us a taste of the potential learning that could be gained from using these stories in this way. We began to realise the importance and potential impact of positioning our work in a more public arena. This led to the development of **Policing Dialogues**.

POLICING DIALOGUES RESIDENCY

Policing Dialogues was a six-week exhibition/residency during September and October 2010 at The LAB, Dublin City Council’s art space on Foley St, Dublin 1. It included a public exhibition of film and installation based on young people’s experiences of power and policing. However, we were not interested in just placing our work in a gallery and walking away. We wanted this work to open up an exchange of opinions and outlooks. We intended to delve deeper into the issue of policing. Central to the exhibition we ran an extensive programme of workshops, dialogues and meetings. This included sessions with young people from across the south inner city. There was a two-day facilitated dialogue between the collective and the gardaí, as well as a public conversation, critical seminar and many student visits. The residency became a space for learning. It was time for all views to be aired, shared, respected, challenged and taken seriously.

We had a practical goal in mind. A core group of us met every Monday evening in the closed gallery. The ambition was to create training for gardaí at a local level, which could in part be delivered by young adults. It would aim to bring about more constructive interactions between both groups. Gardaí participated in these weekly meetings. Our discussions were informed by the information gathered throughout the residency. Young people’s anonymous stories, as well as experiences, shared at workshops were placed centrally in addition to those of participating gardaí. They work on the ground in the south inner city and had valuable insight into this complex issue.

A POWERFUL RESULT

The exhibition attracted attention from the art and youth work sector – but it also reached interested sociologists, criminologists, a wider public and the national media. It was quickly branded by The Pat Kenny Show as ‘an anti-garda rant’ and the stories were compared to ‘something you would find on the back of a toilet door’. But we gained the incredible support of Vincent Browne who dedicated an entire episode of his Tonight show to our project.

The broad significance of this project is perhaps due to the fact that the work is both intensely personal for so many people, but also politically and socially challenging. It was born of private experiences that gained power over time and became public. That it is rooted in a specific local context but has a universal and global theme. Perhaps its real power is it that the project has roots in both art and youth work. It has given time to working across sectors, to understand the core values and characteristics of both professions. Through constant negotiation and commitment, it has found a way of drawing on the specific qualities of both practices and creating work that neither practice could achieve alone. ■