



## CASE STUDY WHEELWORKS MULTIPLE REALITIES



**With 40 per cent of Belfast City Council's arts funding targeted at projects for children and young people, it's clear how much importance is placed on facilitating creative expression in the upcoming generation.**

This is a vital investment, not just in future individual lives, but for a healthier, more inclusive and engaged society overall.

Wheelworks' projects are always driven by young people, many of whom are approaching art for the very first time. Their Multiple Realities programme encourages young people to explore issues of identity – including sexuality, disability and ethnicity – using new digital technologies alongside more traditional art forms.

What's the Difference? was the theme adopted by the participants in Wheelworks' recent Multiple Realities collaboration with WAVE Trauma. The ten 11 to 16 year olds had experienced severe personal trauma, and the programme allowed them to devise and implement their own digital art project, taking them on a voyage of self-discovery on the way.

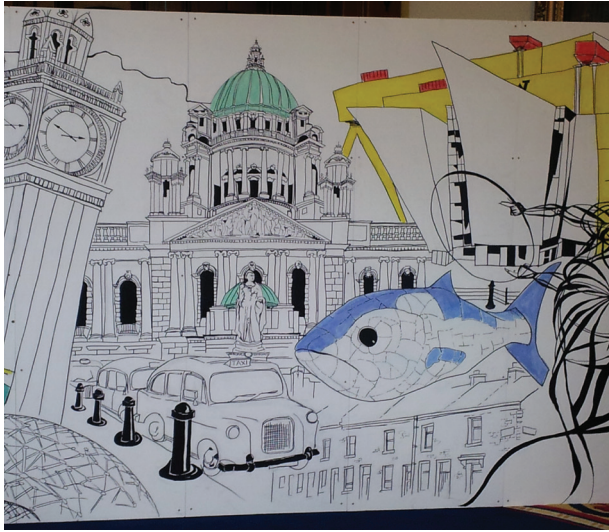
Wheelworks' Karen McIlvenny, the Multiple Realities programme coordinator, explains how careful planning and collaboration helped to create a hugely successful project.

"We always work through youth and community groups and generate projects for kids who wouldn't always have access to arts. But in this case it wasn't just about accessibility to arts – there were, of course, serious issues around it.

"These are young people who've experienced terrible things, some as recently as a couple of months ago. Suicide, sectarianism, alcoholism and even having parents murdered were all issues. These were often fresh in the young person's minds, so it's essential not just to have youth leaders there, but also counsellors on hand."

The project began with a confidence-building session to put the young people at ease with each other:

"Many of these kids are what might be called 'problematic' or 'lively' at school. An introductory session is so important to give them that initial belief in themselves."



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**One of the girls took her image back to where her father had been shot dead. It was just at the time of the elections too, and she had herself photographed there on the spot, among the election posters, holding up her own work.”**

The session also put the participants at ease with using new technology, though, Karen laughs, “The technology bit always comes easy for that generation.”

Wheelworks then got a visual artist and digital artist to sit with the young people as they worked out their own vision for the project. The idea for the theme and the medium – macro-photography, extremely close-up photography – came from an unexpected talking point.

“There was a discussion about burkhas, and that all you could see was a person’s eyes if they were wearing one. This then led on to the idea of filming up-close and the eyes being the windows of the soul.”

Once the young people had created a series of macro-photographic images, the artwork was printed on Corex – the same material used for election posters. They then took their work back into their communities and the spaces and places that were important to them.

Karen has seen firsthand how from reticent, even hostile beginnings, such a project can radically alter the relationship young people have with themselves, with each other and their communities. This is backed up by the testimonies of the participants.

“I believe in myself now and I can do good work,” one young person remarked. Another spoke about enjoying getting to know about “other people’s community and culture”. “I learned that I can do class things when I put my head to it,” enthused a third.

Does Karen think that this kind of work has a significant, long-term impact?

“Definitely. When we started, they claimed they haven’t an idea between them, and they initially clammed up. By the end, the artists could hardly keep up with all the suggestions coming! Many young people found their voice here, and many others will have a lifelong engagement with arts ahead of them. And that’s the real mark of success.”

**i** For more information, visit [www.wheelworks.org.uk](http://www.wheelworks.org.uk)

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