



I was asked to write a blog about the wonderful life of a Cultural Connector by the lovely Chenine Bhatena at a social after the Arts & Cultural Forum event from last month, which I am happy to do.

The Cultural Connector network is run by Creative Barking and Dagenham (CBD), which is a six year project of The Art's Council's 'Creative People and Places' Fund. It has been exciting to be a part of the programme against a backdrop of unprecedented regeneration, extensive demographic shift and London 2012. Seeing as I'm writing this post Brexit, I believe what I say next will take on more significance; the Arts and Cultural representation in the community is very important for the social cohesion of a multi cultural community, especially as diverse as Barking and Dagenham, for it encourages appreciation of different forms of communication and participation that you just cannot get by other means.

I've been involved in arts projects in the community before encountering the Cultural Connectors., including a successful admission to the Eastern Edge Film Fund - Film London and performances at council events. I had even heard of Studio 3 Arts, although it seemed to be a little unapproachable to me at the time. I actually joined the Cultural Connectors about year ago whilst enquiring about the WELL performance at the Sanofi Factory in Dagenaham East for my daughter Lexi, who dances. It was literally a Cultural Connector (Khushnood Ahmed) who invited me to join the network. My wife Catia did a bit of research and recommended that I take up the opportunity and after a quick briefing from the mighty Helen Ball and a few forms and I was in. Seemed a bit too easy, until I realised what they were trying to do: unite the whole of Barking and Dageham's creative people into one network. Across the hall is Studio 3 Arts! Now, there are plenty of opportunities once you are in which I have not even had the time to maximise but what has been getting my attention is the how far into the adminstration process that you get to observe and be involved with, and how positive and friendly everyone is. #Inclusivity.

For someone like me whose formal qualification in Art and Culture doesn't extend as far as the industry standard, it cannot be underestimated how much being in this environment has inspired, educated and assisted me with Arts and Culture, being surrounded by likeminded creatives and professionals who for all intents and purposes are basically looking out for one another. Focusing on money and profitability can sometimes be a creativity killer but the network is more focused on contributing to the community and its future which is great motivation to unite on.

Practically,. the programme has given me experience participating in steering groups for events, allowed me onto panels for approving people, projects proposals and event sites, been kept informed of creative events before they've happened, visited places like the Barbican, visited City Hall to take part in aforementioned Arts and Cultural Forum (invited by Miriam Nelken - CBD), performed one of my songs alongside my wife, 7 year old daughter and professional musicians as part of a community music concert at the local theatre (Broadway Theatre, Barking), joined an Art Class (run by Miro Tomarkin - CC) and witness Cllr Darren Rodwell, leader of the LBBD council getting his hair styled blue for Dagfest!

Now when it came up to early 2016 and everyone started celebrating that CBD would be given another 3 years funding up until 2019, I began to realise that this was not a permanent fixture but more of a research project and that put things into perspective that the element that makes this project so special (i.e. the networking) also happens to be the most important element for when the project inevitable ceases to be supported by the Creative People and Places fund. The network that emerges will determine what will be able to be continued. The great thing about the network is that it has been extending far past the confines of the members of the Cultural Connectors facebook group but into everyone else's networks. Usually, this can take tremendous effort and time to happen but with the Cultural Connectors this happens organically and a lot of the times without effort at all.

I conclude by saying that I recognise that something special is going on in my borough, positive change against a global background that appears to be negative change. I know that CBD has had a major part to play in that. I see a new kind of community begin built around me, with many people daring to dream for the future, and I like it.

I have mentioned as many names as possible because I am grateful for their contribution to this experience and I will in turn be doing the same.

Danny Baxter

Cultural Connector, CBD

XIAN FORCE SHOWREEL

<https://youtu.be/LbCcuHmsOGY>