

Interview: Natalie Carmichael

Natalie speaks with Fraser about her work in Cumnock

Fraser: You're a volunteering champion within Cumnock delivering a huge amount of activity locally. So just tell folk about the kind of broad range of sessions that you currently deliver and in Cumnock, please?

Natalie: So, we've got a quite a lot on a weekly basis, we have got a personal spiritual development class, which has got like two different lots. So, the smaller group is on Tuesday from half six till half nine and it can be anything up to 40 odd people attending that and a lot of that is like, mental health, like core values, personal growth, confidence building, all these kind of things, providing that safe space. And then we've got like, the creative art class, which is in Colour Splash, and we have a creative writing class on a Monday at the Cumnock Hospital, which was a morning session, they run for twelve-weeks and are referral based. We also have the kid's mindfulness, in the afternoon on a Friday at Barrhill which is kind of like create play, but kind of regulating emotions, identity, identifying like thoughts and feelings and things through play. Then we've got mindfulness in the afternoon, and mindfulness at night for teenagers and adults.

Fraser: And you managed to fit that all in one week?...every week?

Natalie: Yeah!

Fraser: That's incredible!

Natalie: Yup, and we have the well-being group, but it's not been on at the moment. But the well-being group, before COVID we had that, and that was every Friday morning. So, it was like a cup of tea, helping them to cook on a budget and making breakfast, then we would do a quiz. So that's restarting in February, we'll have that as well on a Friday morning.

Fraser: Oh, fantastic! Great to hear, and I can't wait to come along to some of those sessions. Well, I mean, I've been lucky enough to attend a good few of your sessions since the summer there and you kindly let me use my experience as a musician and educator to deliver some group drumming. Personally, this has been a fantastic way for me to meet local people and connect on a different level and start building a relationship with them. Obviously, I really appreciate you giving me the opportunity to do that. It's not an easy thing, like letting a stranger in, a dodgy looking Highlander.

Natalie: Not at all, they were just saying actually yesterday, we haven't seen Fraser he's one of the boys now. You are kind of adopted now in Cumnock.

Fraser: Well, I love working in Cumnock, absolutely loving it. But I mean, what strikes me most of the sessions that have attended is the safe, natural and trusting environment that

you create. I mean, it's not an easy thing to do. But it'd be great to hear a bit more about your approach and why you feel creating this environment is just so important?

Natalie: I think that people in the community have tried various groups and things like that across Cumnock for years, and some of them work and some of them don't. I think it's super important to create, as you say the safety, without those relationships, I think people have their barriers up and I think that delays their recovery. So, whether that's recovery from addiction, or mental health, or whether it's just creating relationships and friendships. If there's no trust, and there's not a safety in that space. I think without the badge, it lets those barriers drop, and like fear, I think some of those fears can stop recovery. I think by creating the spaces that we've got, then it enables, and creates that sense of community and relationship. There was somebody that said yesterday at one of the art groups, this is a family now for me. And that really struck a chord with me, because it's so much more than just the group for these people now. These places are becoming like a safe haven, becoming that place where they can go and they can say how they're feeling or they can go and they know that, even if they're having a really rubbish day, that they've got somewhere to go.

Fraser: The stories that folk are sharing are incredibly powerful. Yeah, and it just really does open your eyes just to the, I suppose the kind of broad range of challenges folk are facing on a daily basis. The fact that you can create that nurturing environment, I think just encourages people to open up and try and seek that peer support from folk. As you say, from their kind of 'extended family.' It's great now I am feeling like I'm kind of part of that family, which is important rather than somebody working in the area, rather than just somebody else with another badge, what does this guy want? You feel like you're more than that, a part of that extended family.

Natalie: So don't get me wrong, it doesn't mean the supports are not valid, but they are accessing it at an early-intervention stage. Accessing support before they need those services, because it's available on a different concept. So, they will come into me, and it doesn't mean that they'll get the support they need. That means that I can then contact advocacy services, or then we can contact Steven Wilson from NHS. It seems to be that steppingstone. So, it's not that I am saying it's like them and us and I'm against the support, I don't mean that at all. So, it's just that it allows that relationship with one partnership, I think.

Fraser: I think that's why the approach is so that, then so important, because you help people and encourage them to kind of lower those initial barriers, to build up confidence and trust. Then because you have trusting relationships with the likes of other kind of workers in the area, then you can help and I suppose connect the two as well, can't you? So it's incredibly important, getting the approach right in the first place. You know, it's obvious and clear that there's a huge demand for the work you deliver. It's kind of overwhelming the amount of folks that are needing this type of intervention and engagement with each other.

Why do you think there's so much demand locally for the type of activities that you deliver?

Natalie: I think there's a multitude of answers for that. I think people feel invisible, I think that their confidence is low, and it's a deprived area. Environment has got an awful lot to do

it and its a small town as well. So environment definitely has an impact on that. I think poverty has an impact, I think addiction has an impact, trauma has an impact, relationships or lack of has an impact. There's so much I think I could list actually why there is so much need. The services are there, and I know there's going to be a change in services and an overview, and I'm really excited about that. But services don't seem to be meeting some of these needs. A lot of these people will say have you been to social work, have you? Have you done this and done that? *They are no help (community feedback)*...I'm like, right, okay, and maybe that's not about the service, maybe it's about them not been ready to engage or ready to progress. I don't know.

But I think there's a lot of things that bring people through the door. I had people through self-harming, I've had people through suicidal. I've had people just for food but actually the food has just been one thing. But actually, when you asked the question, how are you? There's so much more to it than that, it's no really just about the food, there's so much more to it. It's about the domestic violence, it's about kids no having clothes, it's about no having gas or electricity, it's about no knowing where to go and get their benefits fixed, it's about their history of trauma.

So, it's all these things actually and I don't know if services, maybe just look at one thing and go right, I'm here to fix your money, I'm here to fix this. I'm here to support you with this. But actually, I think they need somewhere where they can just go in and it's like right, I'm here, somebody said I should come in and look for Natalie. That's not that I am better than anyone else, please don't think that. It's just that they have that comfort, and they know that right, there's going to be a network of support then linked up for them. So I think it's trauma, environment, poverty, lack of relationship, lack of job, everything brings folks through the door. I think it's a combination.

Fraser: And as you say, it's like that initial kind of thing, I can maybe get kind of food up at Barrhill but that is just the gateway to that deeper conversation, and that really important conversation.

Natalie: I started that just myself, it wasn't through the larder initially before Covid. It was in the Tuesday group we just brough donations of stuff in and it just kind of grew from there. You've no idea, someone can walk through the door, I've heard I can come and get a cup of tea and before we know where we are we're linking them up with a mental health group or getting them to connect with a recovery group. Like certainly some of the boys have ended up in, various aspects and there's been massive progress. So, I think that relationship can enable that sense to heal across the board.

Fraser: I suppose it can opens folks eyes to what is actually out there. Maybe they didn't realise?

Natalie: There's no a lot of knowledge no. Because we'll say this is here and we've got money advice there and folk will go What? If people are struggling with mental health or depression, and anxiety or addiction, and they're in recovery, they're afraid, they don't have the motivation. They don't know how. There are all these barriers that they don't know

how to go about doing that. They just need a wee bit of extra support, somebody to hold their hand.

Fraser: So, for me, there's something really quite special about building a sense of togetherness again, in the community, particularly after a period of restrictions due to the pandemic to take steps to aid recovery locally. So many people have been simply starved of this fundamental connection with one another. It is basic, it's primitive, we all need it.

So yeah, we can get on to chatting in a bit the Sunday Soothers now, so let's just quickly chat about those. Back in August, you and I met with Alan Thomas, from Shire housing, a local anchor organization, who also happens to be a yoga instructor. And we explored the idea of combining our practices to offer kind of retreat style days to support those and most needs of the community. Sunday Soothers, as they were named, were funded through the Community Recovery Fund, we're going to deliver four of these between October 2021, and March 2022. So, it'd be great to hear just from yourself about how you feel, these Sunday Soother events have been going.

Natalie: So, I think it's been an amazing opportunity Fraser. Because really, all these kinds of things cost money, usually, for people. And people don't have the money in my community, they just don't have it. It's the difference between eaten that night, or putting gas in the meter, or going to a yoga class or got a mindfulness class or going to a drumming sessions or whatever it is. And they just, it's not a priority for them. And I don't think they realize the benefit. So I think people coming along, they've realized how beneficial it is, it's been amazing to see all different people across the board and the community, all different ages, people from recovery, people with mental health, people who are lonely and isolated, elderly people who maybe don't get out and see anybody, coming together really, in one space and having the opportunity to practice and learn, and actually realize that this could benefit their life. So, the feedback, I'm getting this phenomenon, and they're like It's no going to end after for, is it? I'm like, well, we don't know what's gonna happen. But they've been super, like, grateful, really grateful. I think it's been really beneficial for the community. All those retreats and things that people can go on, I wanted to make it readily available. The feeling and the relationships that you guys created like yourself, and Alan was super important as well, the value base, because if we don't have that, and we can connect them, people wouldn't respond, and healing wouldn't begin.

Fraser: Yeah, it's getting the right team involved, isn't it? So, I kind of feel the three of us that are kind of delivering the activities have a similar approach, which is incredibly important. And then we have the likes of Fiona Bain, from What Matters to You, and some volunteers that are helping to kind of lead on the kitchen side of things. Because part of this this day, is a healthy meal. It's incredibly important to build a sense of togetherness around food as well, I think it's such a kind of basic thing.

Natalie: I think that's been really beneficial. And some of them would say I've never had in front of people before like, and I'm like were you ok? Absolutely! I'm like this is wonderful. It's like, if you actually sat down with a wee checklist, it's ticking so many boxes that you just wouldn't realise.

Fraser: Yeah, and it's encouraging different forms of chat as well. Yeah, it's providing that space for a healthy meal.

Natalie: Yeah, and new friendships, new connections in the community that didn't exist and it's moving. It's removing stigma as well. And preconceived ideas are that people that these labels have fallen away, that they see a person is just a person that has somebody with mental health, or just somebody who's old, or just somebody who's and recovering from those seen Oh, it's just so and so it's just Jack the lad, instead of that's who they are. And that's amazing to see as well. So, it's not just about recovery is changing attitudes.

Fraser: Yeah, and people seem to people seem to be having a ball on these days, it's hilarious, some of that some of the chat, some really great kind of characters coming along. Talking about food as well, again, tapping into local business. We have Jonathan from the Coffee Mill, who's been just fantastic. I mean, yeah, he's delivered kind of the food for each of these events that can healthy meals. So, I think that that's been an important step as well, including local business and trying to kind of feel like it's more than just the kind of same people all the time, you're encouraging other people to get involved.

Natalie: I'm glad you mentioned that Fraser actually because, as a result of this, people who wouldn't go out to a cafe, have actually been going into Jonathan's for something to eat. Were as see before, they would never have gone in there, because they weren't the kind of person that would have been able to go in there and not get looked at. They have been and I'm like, there's something shifting there too, which is good.

Fraser: Well, yeah, I'm just going to add at this stage then back in December, the recovery group MUMO, Jonathan shut his shop completely at half past four, I think it was, and we had our Christmas meal. It was incredible as some of these guys never could have sat down and had a Christmas meal together, you know. So that was just fantastic. And I was so glad that the restrictions at that time still allowed us to kind of do that, obviously at a distance but a fantastic night.

So just kind of getting towards the end then, I don't want to take up too much of your time. So thinking about the work that you've delivered, obviously, a huge amount of work that you've delivered in 2021, are there any stories of change that you'd be willing to share, that demonstrates the can the impact of the activities that you're delivering

Natalie: There are loads of stories, I could write you a book, you know that. But I could give you a couple. Like one person in particular who was really isolated, male, struggling with addiction, really isolated, didn't really go out with friends or anything like that got talked into come to one of the groups. Came to one of the groups and, as a result of that...had to be dragged there I think by the way. As a result of that, made that friendship relationship and now goes to the art group, now goes to the music group, now goes out litter picking in with me if it needs done, out to fix the Woodroad park something needs painted, and is singing and dancing in a group. Whereas they would have sat with their head down colouring in, with their head down and didn't want to speak to anybody. So massive transformation, I'm not saying that is us, I'm saying that's him. But we've provided the conditions to help him find himself again. An opening as well to come in and say I'm having a

rubbish day. He said I can't believe I am saying this because I would never have used that language, I would never have told anybody, I would have just gone and got a bag of heroin. And I was like, would you and he was like Aye, but do you know what? I set my alarm and I got up because I knew it was coming here. And I'm like do you know what, that so make is making a difference, that's transformation and that's what it's all about. And it's given somebody hope, because I asked, I asked that person, what is it that's changed that? He says, having a sense of belonging and having friends, and no one will let you down. Because if I let myself down, I'm letting everybody down. So, it's given him hope, he says it's given hope. So that's just one story and that's just one person. But that one person has got another five friends who have equally done the same and one of them actually has started to help facilitate groups, and started taking a bit of an active role, which he would never have done in his life. So, it's just beautiful to see that little butterfly, total change. But you've got other girls who can self-harm to or suicide or head down, like, like fluffy fleece done with their hood up. And when they wouldn't look at anybody for months, but the consistency, kept coming through the door, the support, the food support, help them with their money advice, help them make connections and the group. Now they're walking and head up and physically better. They suffered obviously, with various health conditions, no using their stick, because the Mental Health's better. So therefore, there's a transformation physically and that's like, you can't measure that, you just can't measure that.

Fraser: Yeah, I think they must be so rewarding to see that change and folk, you know.

Natalie: It's quite emotional, it's actually quite emotional, because I was thinking about it when you sent me the questions through. I think I just live it Fraser, because see when the question was given to me, I was like, oh my God, I've got her and her and him and him. I started writing it down, just briefly for me and I'm like, do you know there's not one person hasn't come through that door that I haven't seen some kind of transformation.

There was on girl during the COVID, who asked for a food parcel on the phone. I kept in touch - how are you? - How are you doing? every week. She's now attending all the groups and she actually stood up in front of 35 people in the group. This is a lady who shakes with anxiety, took panic attacks, had no friends, wouldn't go out the door, physically disabled as well. She stood up in front of 35 people in my class and read a poem that she herself wrote about class and what it's done for her. There wasn't a dry eye in the whole room, she was shaking, but she did it. I gently held her and said come on you can do that, and she got up and she did it herself. These are massive. You think well it's just reading a poem.

Fraser: For some people they'd be like, yeah, well you know, it's not that big a deal but for these for these folks, it's massive.

Natalie: This was a lady who wouldn't go into a shop and do her shopping, she was getting somebody else to do that because she was so scared.

Fraser: Listen that's down to you offering that really positive nurturing environment that people can really connect with and to kind of feel that of sense of trust. You know, I think that's incredible and testament to all the incredible work that you do. So, yeah, amazing. Just amazing.

Here listen, thanks so much for agreeing to contribute towards this annual update and it's always a real pleasure to talk to you and listen, I look forward to working with you more than 2022 Okay.

Natalie: Take care.

Fraser: Thanks so much now, thank you.

Natalie: Bye