1525: Behind the Scenes – Natelle Morgan-Brown

Introducing Behind the Scenes Conversations with 1525 collective at Nottingham Contemporary. 1525 collective is a group of 15 to 25 year-olds based at Nottingham Contemporary who meet weekly to discuss creative opportunities in and around Nottingham. One of our latest artistic endeavors has been creating this podcast for you at home. Here we interview members of staff at Nottingham Contemporary to discuss their roles, their responsibilities, their experiences, and their inspirations at the gallery. If you've never heard or visited Nottingham Contemporary before, or if you visit every other day, then this podcast is for you. So sit back, relax, and please enjoy Behind the Scenes Conversations with 1525 at Nottingham Contemporary.

1525: What do you do at Nottingham Contemporary?

Natelle: I'm the communities' programmer. Sometimes I say programme manager, just because it sounds better, but technically, I'm the community's programmer. So I guess essentially that means working with lots of different people in lots of different ways. So whoever identifies as part of a community, whether that's a specific community, some of my focus is kind of older people, so people 65 and over, or people from, kind of, diverse cultural backgrounds; that might be a community, or it might just be the community of Nottingham. So it really depends really. So what I tended to say, lots of people in lots of different ways.

1525: Regarding that, what is like your average work day and your tasks?

Natelle: Average work day? I'm not sure there is actually an average work day. So I work three days a week at Nottingham Contemporary. I guess it's kind of standard in this kind of sector in this kind of role that jobs are part-time. It's just kind of how the sector is set up at the moment, whether that's to do with funding, whether that's to do with, you know, length of projects or, you know, lots of different things, but yeah, like a lot of people in similar positions or even within creative or arts organizations are part-time. So I do Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday at the minute. I don't think that there's a kind of general day to be honest. I battle constantly with myself about trying to be efficient and trying to be effective, but also trying to be flexible to whatever is going to happen during that day. There are standard tasks, things like budgeting, things like, marketing. Emails takes up a lot of time - the bane of my life honestly - emails are, I think they should be burned. I think there's much of a efficient and creative and effective ways to communicate. Emails just remind me of a letter. Do you know what I mean? You don't normally expect an instant [00:03:00] response to your letter, do you? So yeah, emails take up a lot of my time, but I also understand that a lot of kind of community members or community leaders or partners, you know, that's the way to get in touch with them most of the time. At the moment. So we're having this conversation in July, 2021, which is year 250 of COVID-19. Is that right? Or what feels like year 250 of COVID-19. So yeah, at the minute we are using Monday. So Mondays, like many galleries and cultural organizations, we're closed on a Monday. Like lots of hair dresses we're closed on a Monday. So at the minute, a regular Monday looks like having a group in the gallery, which is fantastic to be kind of face-to-face with people. And then Tuesday and Wednesday are taken up with the tasks that I said. I guess, the majority of my time is really taken up with trying to plan activities and trying to have conversations with community groups and trying to figure out kind of opportunities and ways that we can be relevant, ways that we can support, and ways that we can kind of work together. So some of those community groups might be, Nottingham Refugee Forum, or like the ACNA Centre, or the Women's Centre. And yeah, like I said, there's there's lots of kind of generic general tasks like ordering materials and things like that.

1525: Very nice.

1525: Hi, Natelle. What was your background experience that got you into your current position?

Natelle: Great question. Because, I think, and I'm sure you guys, if you don't have the experience, which I'm sure you know, you do, but if you don't, I'm sure you can at least see there's lots of different kinds of routes into, this kind of sector or these kinds of roles. Whether you're thinking about kind of cultural venues or, art venues, or whether you're talking about kind of community assets or like project management - there's lots of different ways in, [00:05:00] I think. I did my GCSEs. I went to a Catholic school. I did my GCSEs. I went to a Catholic school, and I'm telling you that because my Mum I'm not Catholic, but my Mum purposely wanted us to go to a Catholic school because she felt like it was a bit stricter, we might have a, you know, a better education than going to a, kind of, city school. I did relatively well at my GCSEs. But you know, it's difficult, isn't it? When you're a young person and life is a bit crazy at home as mine was, crazy home life. But I did quite well in my GCSEs. But I had no idea where I was going or what I wanted to do. And I didn't really have that many kind of adults, mentors or people to sort of direct or guide me, and I definitely didn't know anybody, you know, to kind of look at in this kind of role or in this kind of sector. I guess the only introduction to, like, cultural venues in the city - so I'm from Nottingham - was, so we used to go on trips, on like summer trips, with the Women's Centre. So we used to go to like, I mean, some museums, but not very often. We normally would go to like a picnic in the park or something like that. But there's small times, or the few times that we did go to galleries and museums, I just remember it being really exciting. One of the places that we used to go to was the Nottingham Playhouse, and we used to go to the pantomime all the time. I just remember thinking, God, this is amazing, you know, look at all this glitter, all these colors and you know, all these people that kind of work in a place like this. So I think I always had it in the back of my mind, but I didn't really know what I wanted to do. And somebody, I can't remember who it was, I think it was my college tutor, or it might've been my drama tutor at school, just said, you know, "do something that you enjoy, and/or do something that you're good at". So, yeah, I just tried to kind of follow that really. So I continued and did like dance GCSE. I went to university to study Contemporary Art, which was a whole mind blowing experience. You know, from kind of single parent, mixed heritage, you know, Nottingham born and bred, lived in a council house, and then to go and be doing Contemporary Art was quite far removed from anything that my family had, you know, done before. It's not something that they accessed or even knew about. So sometimes I would come home and share like crazy stories about what lectures I'd done or, you know, what tasks or, or projects had been set, and they were very dubious to the point where my Mum threatened to take me out of university because she thought you're not learning anything, you know, you're paying quite a lot of money it sounds like, and you're not really learning anything. But I persisted. And all the way through kind of college and university, I was volunteering and/or working. So maybe, maybe you guys might be a different [00:08:00] generation, but we had something called EMA. So Education Maintenance Allowance when I was a kid, which just allowed you to buy a bus pass or your lunches and things like that. So if it wasn't for that bus pass, I wouldn't have been able to go to those volunteering opportunities, and I wouldn't have been able to, to go to part-time work. So when I volunteered, I volunteered in places like schools, I volunteered at Surface Gallery. Not really knowing what I was doing. Just kind of a bumbling, a bit like a bumblebee from place to place, just trying to follow this advice of either do something that I enjoy or do something that I'm good at. So yeah, when I graduated in Contemporary Performance and Live Art - I went to Trent just because I don't think I had the perspective to move out of Nottingham and I definitely didn't have the money or the networks to move out of Nottingham - so I stayed in Nottingham and graduated. And honestly, when I finished, it felt like someone had just kind of pushed me out the door and shut the door and said, okay, right, go find a real job. And then I had a sudden . Panic that I'm not qualified to do anything. What am I actually qualified to do? I'm qualified to think creatively, but what, you know, how I couldn't understand how that would be very helpful. Then afterwards, yeah, I did quite a lot of volunteering, et cetera. I went traveling and then when I came back to Nottingham and the UK, like a lot of people, you know, kind of, people who are recently graduated and don't necessarily have like a plan or access to apprenticeships or, you know, kind of, a job waiting in the wings, I just did a regular job. So I worked various jobs. I worked as a HR advisor for an energy company. I did evening and weekend work as a youth worker for the local county council. And I think that was my, I don't want to say saving grace because they didn't save me, I sort of, you know, I would like to think that I, kind of, pushed through and made a path for myself. But yeah, when I was doing part-time youth work alongside kind of full-time work, I just thought, wow, this is amazing. To get paid to facilitate sessions, to be creative, to be [00:10:00] able to be a mentor to young people. Sometimes it was kind of old school youth work that, you know, you'd play football or you'd do like ping pong and stuff like that. But of course that was all wrapped around having purposeful conversations with young people. I just felt like I'd found like my groove, you know. Something that was creative, something that felt helpful and something that I felt like I could have done with when I was a young person. So I kind of followed that forward and followed that on a kind of project management trajectory into a museums and galleries. So I've worked in Leicester. I've worked in Nottingham. I've worked in kind of Papplewick, in the county. So a few different kinds of galleries and museums, but I think I was following the people. So people being either community or young people and the project management, as opposed to following a career in the creative sector or in museums and galleries. So yeah, I find myself here and I've been at Nottingham Contemporary for maybe about three, four years now.

1525: That was really inspiring. What do you love most about your job?

Natelle: It's a good question. I'm mean, cause I think it's really important. I think most of the time people don't have the time to think about what they like about their job or whether they even like their job. So, yeah, I guess following on from what I've just shared, my favourite part of the job is the actual doing of it. So the kind of the meat on the bone. So the meeting people, the having conversations with people and being able to kind of create spaces that people can feel welcomed into, and then above and beyond that, you know, feel empowered in places where people can kind of socialize and do things together. Obviously we're at a time where loneliness is a real kind of epidemic through all generations. So to be able to know that and understand that and to understand in my mind that I'm trying to work towards connecting people and creating kind of social connections. I think that would probably be the best for me. I do like the level of kind of autonomy that I get in the role. Being able to kind of, I guess, listen to people, to, you know, people in Nottingham community groups say that they want and need and be able to, to pivot to that without necessarily having to jump through too many hoops from management.

1525: So what aspect of your job has come as the biggest surprise to you in your career?

Natelle: I would say, so the thing that surprises me is what we're able to achieve with very little resources. When I say resources, I'm referring to things like money and budget. I'm referring to time in this current climate. I'm also referring to, like, tech and I.T. equipment. It's not easy and I'm always constantly surprised by what people achieve. It's not - I'm talking about the, the team, my team, I'm not talking about myself, I'm talking about the teams. But also in the wider sector. So particularly from the perspective of a learning / engagment team within a museum or gallery. They really do a lot of hard work, you know, they make, it's like, I don't know about you guys, but when my Mum used to cook for us, when we were kids, you know, we would go in the cupboards and be like, ah, there's nothing, there's nothing here, there's nothing to eat. And she would go in the kitchen and come out half an hour later with something, you know, miraculous. I feel like the learning engagement teams, that's what they do. They, they make something out of nothing and it's, it's usually magical.

1525: My God, Natelle, that's an incredible metaphor.

Natelle: It's true. It's very true.

1525: I want that on a t-shirt or something. I don't know. That was, that was great.

1525: What do you think needs to be tackled more within the arts?

Natelle: I like how you phrase the question, so tackled more as opposed to what, what needs to be tackled because, yeah there's, you can, you can pull many threads here, I think. But personally, I feel like a lot of the issues that need resolving, they all kind of filter back down to a lack of funding or lack of finances. You know, you're not able to, to get good people on board if you don't have finances and retain those good people if you're not able to, you know, to pay them. Or, you know, even if you're expecting them to do overtime and, you know what I mean? You're not going to hold onto your staff or you're not gonna be able to do training or you're not going to be able to, kind of, creative away days, go and see different places and research and look at case studies and things if you're not able to, to have the time in the team or the time in the diary to be able to do that because you're constantly sort of chasing what you think are your priorities about groups or about, you know, hiring out spaces and things like that. [00:15:00] So, although there's, I probably think there's many, many things that, that need to be tackled more within the arts, we can't do any of that without funding. I guess what goes hand in hand with that is like backing and support strategically from the government. Like I'm not super politically aware, but I know that they don't, they don't think too favorably or kindly about the arts and the creative sectors and, you know, about the capabilities for the industries to create revenue. But I do know that when, you know, when you look at the stats we create a lot of money, there's a lot of money, a lot of revenue that's created, but it just doesn't seem to be filtering down. Yeah. Funding, I would say is a, is an endemic issue. There's not, there's not enough of it. It's hard to access and what you're expected to do to be able to access it, it's kind of, it is jumping through hoops. It continually changes, you know, they, they change their mind with the direction of the wind in terms of what their priorities are.

1525: You said earlier that you kind of had to find your own way with everything. So what is one piece of advice you would have given your younger self if you could do that?

Natelle: I mean, I'd love to say something quite inspiring or like a little bit spiritual or something, you know, something a bit intriguing. But actually I think for me as a young person, as I said earlier, just to have a kind of a tangible bit of advice that's relatively straight straightforward that you can kind of cling on to be like, oh, this is how this works. So to that effect, I would probably, something that's quite flat, but I think I would have found really helpful when I was when I was younger or even now if I didn't know it. It's to do with going into interviews. I think my tip or my piece of advice to my younger self would be to write down the questions as the interviewer asks them, just because it allows you, it just gives you a fraction of a second to take a breath and just to, to take stock. And then you can refer back to the question in your own handwriting that you've written, and stop yourself from going on a tangent. I think once you've written down the question, my advice would be just to immediately write down those things that pop up into your mind in answer to those questions, because I often found, and I would sometimes beat myself up after interviews. You know, immediately some great examples or things that I wanted to share or say would pop up, and then by the time I'd finished that first bullet point, I would have forgotten because you've got a panel of four people staring at you and you know, you're sweating and you really want the job.

Natelle: So yeah, I would say something really practical, get your interview skills down because you know, they're the kind of, the bones of it, and then you can build on top of it.

1525: That's really helpful. Thank you so much, Natelle.