



Amanda's pencil portrait of Dominic Murphy.

PARTICIPATION | SUSAN DELGADO

Art of the matter

Involvement with an innovatory project has provided creative inspiration for looked-after children and young people – and in one case, far more

Amanda Murphy says she used to think there was no future in her art – but now she's not so sure.

What has changed her mind is her involvement with Flourish, an art project that provides a showcase for looked-after children (see panel, right).

By chance Amanda, now 24, went to its inaugural show. Inspired by what she saw, she immediately wanted to get involved – and to encourage others to do the same.

She was struck by the fact that Flourish engaged children and young people from her background: 'Even when I was in care I never heard of anything like that; it seemed to be the first of its kind.'

Although she has 'A' level art, she had taken her art studies no further (she has a degree in English). But when she submitted work to last year's show, she was amazed by the reaction: 'The response was, how was it I wasn't studying art; how come you didn't do art at college?'

While she is standing by her decision not to make art a career, Amanda has been encouraged to develop her creative talents further: 'Since Flourish, I've

been more into it [art]; it gave me the confidence to do more.'

Amanda is now on the board of Flourish, working to give the project a long-term future and greater financial stability, and also helping to develop its marketing strategy.

Having been in care for six years from the age of 13, she believes a creative outlet can be invaluable for children and young people living what can be difficult lives. 'I wouldn't use the word therapeutic, [but] doing art helped me to clear my mind.' She says her experience of the care system led her to doubt whether it was truly child centred. In particular, she found that all too often as soon as she had built up a relationship with her social worker, they were moved on to another post.

She thinks that children who lack confidence are too quick to dismiss their own talents and can be overcome by feelings of negativity: 'They think "I'm not going to do anything because I'm not that good at it". [But] the whole importance is to express yourself in any way you can.' ■

A Flourishing concern

Flourish is open to children and young people up to the age of 25; this year the youngest exhibitor is eight. An open submission show rather than a competition, selection for this year's exhibition takes place this month. The show itself will take place in Bournemouth in October alongside the annual conference of the Association of Directors of Social Services.

Now in its second year, Flourish was developed by Newham children and young people's services in east London in response to the comments of young looked-after artists who wanted to show their work. The aim of the show is to support and encourage their creativity.

Many of last year's exhibitors have sold their work. One is holding a solo exhibition next month and another has won a university place to study illustration. Last year, a number of bursaries were awarded to encourage entrants to continue their studies.

Some of this year's entries are from Culture Vultures, a photographic art project involving children and young people from the London borough of Richmond in the exploration of culture and leisure there – now, in the past and in the future. Twenty-eight looked-after children and young people were among the 60-plus who have taken part. Led by artist Othello De'Souza-Hartley, participants selected a leisure activity, grounded in a timescale of their choosing, and then planned and choreographed their own photo shoots.

In *Strictly Ballroom* (see picture, page 9) the inspiration was the Octagon Room in Richmond's 18th century architectural landmark, Orleans House. The work is designed to evoke images of the entertaining and partying that has taken place there over the centuries.

The Culture Vultures project also includes an animated film, *What We Say Matters*, made by children and young people about the local implementation of *Every Child Matters*.

Flourish is sponsored by PricewaterhouseCoopers. Works from Flourish will be on show at YoungMinds' annual lecture in London on 31 July. www.flourish-art.org