

## Transcription of New Ways Forward conversation with Brenda

**Amelie:** What has it been like to be a part of Artists First?

**Brenda:** It's been lovely. I wouldn't have missed it for the world.

**Amelie:** And why is that? Has it been important to be part of the group - make your own art ?

**Brenda:** Everything. Everything that I've done. It's been good. I'd like to carry on if I could.

**Amelie:** I read a little bit about you on the Artists First website Brenda, and read that making your art makes you feel powerful...

**Brenda:** It does, yes. Strong.

**Amelie:** Are there any particular artworks that you've made which really stand out to you - which you've really enjoyed?

**Brenda:** Give me some names and I'll be able to tell you ...

**Andy:** Brenda do you remember doing the painting of the Ice-Cream van and the story behind that. What did you used to do in order to get to the ice-cream van?

**Brenda:** I reached up to it didn't I !

**Andy:** And what did you used to wear? You wrote a poem about the ice-cream van too didn't you? I can't remember which sister it was, but you used to pinch her high-heeled shoes even though you were only little. It was jeans and high heels that you used to wear to get your ice-cream!

**Brenda:** So I could reach, and she could reach !

**Andy:** Do you remember a bit about your painting *The Wrong Flowers*? Can you say a bit about that? *The Wrong Flowers* was a painting and a poem and in the end you also made a film.

**Brenda:** Yes .

**Andy:** Your film is now held by the British Film Institute up in London. So it's on their website and people can see it.

**Brenda:** That's important to me. My family and friends could see it.

**Andy:** Your family has always supported you through making your art haven't they.

**Brenda:** When I was in the girl guides, they would come and see me too and say how proud they were.

**Andy:** Amelie won't know this, but there was a film made many many years ago about Marlborough House\* . You're in that house as part of the girl guides. You and Brenda Carr, who used to be part of Artists First ...

**Amelie:** So my next question Brenda was have there been any particular highlights? I know Andy's mentioned St Ives and the painting weekends ...

**Brenda:** Oh yes, St Ives !! used to love it there. I think Jane's Dad left it to her.

**Andy:** That's exactly right, so her Dad left her Fish Street which is the cottage you stayed in. Who went down with you on these painting weekends?

**Brenda:** It was me and Jane ...

**Andy:** And Mike McGreevy ...

**Brenda:** And did Sarah McGreevy come with us?

**Andy:** Yes.

**Brenda:** And Pam Reynolds\*.

**Andy:** Yes - that would've been in the really early days. Do you remember how many times you went down to St Ives?

**Brenda:** Several times. I never wanted to leave there. When you go on holiday, you never want to leave. You just get stuck to the place.

**Andy:** So where did you do your art when you were down there Brenda?

**Brenda:** In the countryside.

**Andy:** So you'd go out into the countryside?

**Brenda:** Yes - like a farm. Mike McGreevy said something about a farm. And I think it was to do with him.

**Andy:** Yes - Mike was an artist and he helped start Artists First right when we were back at the Portway Centre.

**Brenda:** He always got involved with us. Whatever it was, he was there. He wanted to support us.

**Andy:** He gave a lot of support didn't he ! You mentioned the beach just now - so did you go drawing on the beach ?

**Brenda:** They set it up.

**Andy:** So you'd take drawing boards and things like that?

**Brenda:** Yes. It looked nice. I wanted to carry on doing it.

**Andy:** Do you ever remember a famous artist in St Ives with learning difficulties - a man called Brian Pierce. Do you ever remember meeting Brian?

**Brenda:** I believe I do.

**Andy:** Was that in Porthmere Studios?

**Brenda:** Yes.

**Andy:** The studios right down on the beach. I thought you'd met him there.

**Brenda:** He had a friendly smile.

**Andy:** And Kathy Stewart ( a past member of Artists First) really loved his work didn't she. They both liked doing the boats. She really loved St Ives.

**Brenda:** I remember the cat ... she sat on the cat !

\*Everyone laughs\*

**Andy:** Was that in the pub?

**Brenda:** Yes.

**Andy:** And she nearly speared the barman playing darts.

**Brenda:** We never thought that was going to happen !

**Andy:** She was an accident waiting to happen wasn't she, our Kath !

**Brenda:** She just felt she always had to be joining in.

**Andy:** Bren, you were involved in so many exhibitions. Linking your poetry and your paintings - do you remember a lovely exhibition at the FaithHouse Gallery in Holton Lee called *Into The Fire*. For each one of your paintings, there was a poem written. Can you remember?

**Brenda:** Not quite.

**Andy:** Well, if you remember Brenda what we're going to do - we're going to bring together all your artwork and paintings so that everything is in one place. And Amelie has been talking to a really special place in Surrey that keep really important artwork. Do you want to say a bit about that Amelie?

**Amelie:** Yes, absolutely. So this is an organisation called The National Disability Arts Collection & Archive Brenda and they collect really important art from artists with learning difficulties. They're coming to visit us next month. We're going to be able to show them some of the artwork over the past 30 years.

**Brenda:** That sounds lovely.

**Amelie:** We're really excited to show them the artwork and maybe see whether they'd like to meet some of the artists. But it shows just how important your artwork has been and how strong your contribution has been.

**Brenda:** Thank you.

**Amelie:** Well, it's our pleasure - it's your work !

**Brenda:** I can't thank you enough.

**Andy:** It's something that you've deserved for a long time Brenda. One of the things that people won't necessarily know about you is how much support you've given to all the artists in the group. Not everybody can speak up like you can ...

**Brenda:** I like to do things, if I can. It helps other people out like you've said.

**Andy:** A lot of the time, when we've had to give talks and say how hard it can be being an artist with learning difficulties - you (and going back, Roy,) - you'd often stand up together and read the words of other people .

**Brenda:** Was Alan Marshall there too?

**Andy:** Alan was there in the early days.

**Brenda:** I thought he was.

**Andy:** Alan used to go on the St Ives painting weekends too. He liked being at the pub - he liked a beer or three !

**Brenda:** You're not supposed to have too much beer. We had to keep him away from there!

\*Everyone laughs\*

**Andy:** It was all good fun though, wasn't it ! And in the early days, people went on to do really important things. You met a very famous artist called Mark Quinn. It was in a place called Hoxton up in London and we went up. You told him about *The Wrong Flowers* and talked about your love of the purple iris. Do you remember he showed you one that he had frozen in his studio and it was quite fantastic. Do you remember you came up to Tate Liverpool and did the residency? You were down in St Ives on all the paintings weekends. You've shown work in Bankside up in London.

**Brenda:** That's made me feel really happy.

**Andy:** Well you've worked really hard Brenda. Bren, just so people know, can I ask how old you are?

**Brenda:** Eighty something ...

**Andy:** Eighty-six.

**Brenda:** I was born 1935.

**Andy:** I think when you came to the Portway Centre you came from Snowden Centre. You were in your thirties or forties when you came to the Portway Centre. So being an artist, being a painter, being a poet - you were also part of *The Portway Players* which later became Firebird Theatre. Has that been the main thing you've done in your life - making art.

**Brenda:** I think I've done other things too.

**Andy:** You've done other things with lots of groups haven't you. I think what we'll try and do is *Brenda Cooke : My Life In Art*.

**Amelie:** So your poetry - I wanted to ask can you remember whether your painting or your poetry came first, or whether you started doing them both at the same time?

**Brenda:** The same time.

**Amelie :** That's such a strong combination isn't it - poems and artwork.

**Andy:** I think you're right Brenda. You were part of Artists First and the Rushland Poets. Before that it was the Greystoke Poets.

**Brenda:** That's right.

**Andy:** Was that an elderly persons home, Greystoke?

**Brenda:** Yes, and Jackie Long\*.

**Andy:** Jackie was involved yes. Joan Goodyear was involved. Roy Tanner\*. Joan did poetry and painting the same as you. You mentioned Pam Reynolds too - you were close friends.

**Brenda:** We lived together - me and Pam. With Dorothy Tudor\*. She looked after us - we had a holiday too together.

**Andy:** Well thanks so much Brenda for talking to us.

**Brenda:** I enjoyed it so much - coming out here.

**Andy:** Do you want me to sing a song now!?

**Brenda:** I wouldn't bother!

\*Everyone laughs\*

\*Marlborough House - a centre for children with learning difficulties that opened in 1958.

\*Pam Reynolds - Pam was a friend and member of Artists First.

\*Roy Tanner - member of Artists First.

\*Jackie Long - Jackie Long was a member of Artists First.

\*Dorothy Tudor - provided restbite care at Cygnet Hospital Kewstoke.