**Pleasurable Daring**

*The story of how T.S.Eliot Prize-winning poet Sharon Olds established a creative writing outreach programme more than thirty years ago.*

I arranged to meet Sharon Olds in the Feather's Hotel during this year's Ledbury Poetry Festival. When I got there, Olds was enjoying a traditional cream tea - sustenance, she said, for the reading she was about to give that evening to a sell-out audience. The interview took place in an outrageously spacious ballroom, the only room that was available on the day. We didn't dance together, but the more Olds spoke about this work and how much it meant to her, the more I had the feeling that some kind of magic was being woven in the air.

Olds has been teaching at New York University for the past 40 years. Early on, she was approached by an organisation called Very Special Arts, which was founded by Jean Kennedy Smith to enable people with disabilites to engage with the arts. They were already running theatre and visual arts in hospitals, but they wanted to add writing. Olds had already been invited more than once to do teaching in prison, but she was afraid of being locked up. "I said, bring them out, I'll be happy to teach somewhere else. They said, No Sharon, we're not bringing them out. So I was invited to work at a state hospital instead."

The people in Coler-Goldwater Hospital were paralysed to different degrees. Some, but not many, could walk and there were some people who could neither move nor speak. Olds went to the hospital every Tuesday afternoon and worked with staff in the recreational therapy department to record the patients' poems, memoirs and stories. I asked how Olds how this had been possible with people who were completely paralysed. "Someone who is both non-speaking and non-moving can almost always still move their eyes. I would hold an alphabet card and point first to the *a* then *b c d* and when I got to the letter of the first word of the first line of the poem or story that they were working on they would raise their eyes. That's a universal sign for yes in the world of physically challenged people."

Olds already had a travel schedule set up which meant that she was unable to do the workshops regularly and permanently. She invited various friends to come in and teach when she was away, and these friends included Alan Ginsberg, Carolyn Forché and Ruth Stone. Following on from this, Olds worked with the NYU creative writing programme and Jean Kennedy Smith to raise money to be able to pay students to become teachers. "Most students in graduate school accumulate debts from loans and they weren't able to afford to teach for free," she says.

What surprises me most is how long this programme has been running. When I ask Olds how she has managed this, she says "We just couldn't stand to let it lapse. We saw how extraordinary this programme was not only for the patients but also for the students who were working with people who've had some experience of life." There's no doubt that Old's determination and passion for the programme have ensured its longevity. She describes their fundraising approach as "using really true big sales methods of raising money. Jean Kennedy Smith contributed part from her foundation Very Special Arts, NYU and the hospital contributed their services too, but mostly we wrote letters by hand to people who we thought might have an interest in supporting it."

What has been established is a programme that runs for 10 weeks in the spring and ten weeks in autumn. There are three teachers in each 10 week programme, and "in this way we are able to spread around the riches of the engagement with the people at the hospital who are, many of them, extraordinarily strong and morally beautiful and humourous - funny, witty amazing people." When I ask Olds if these workshops are related to poetry therapy in any way, her answer is clear. "Oh no, not at all" she says. "I think it's often healing to speak up, speak out, have a chance to make something and gather together with people with a similar interest. It's not done for therapy though, it's done for the writing."

There have been various developments in the programme, which include running writing workshops at a women's prison and also workshops with children on oncology wards, "which meant that our graduate writing students were able to write with children, and sometimes with children and their parents. These were children who didn't survive, and the writing programme gave them a chance to write with their families - poems, stories, memoirs, and that was a very powerful and wonderful thing to do."

And then, one day, Olds had another idea. She suddenly thought about soldiers returning from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and whether or not it would be a good idea to run writing workshops for them too. These particular workshops have been going for just over three years, and in this last year Olds had a young man who went through the programme for returning Vets attend her graduate writing workshop at NYU. " You can imagine what a very wonderful feeling that was," she says.

Most of the students who teach on the outreach programme have already studied creative writing at NYU as undergraduates. This means that they know how a good workshop is run, and each month there is a Practicuum, a place where they can discuss what's going on in the workshops and raise any particular questions. "They're just like any other workshops," Olds says. "The people in it are honest with each other. They're not unkind. But they're not just positive either - although I guess we can say that any truthful suggestions for each other's writing are positive. I think that everyone who works in the programme feels a companionship, all of us together longing to write something which will be the best we can do."

The students are interviewed before being appointed as workshop teachers because just as Olds was unable to teach in a prison, there are a few who find being in a hospital difficult "to an extent that it impedes their spontaneous energy - being able to romp about and play in writing with the people who are there." The focus is always upon the writing and an awareness that "some of the people in the hospital just lack the physical means to get words on paper and so that's what the collaboration with our students enables to happen."

Olds says that once she saw how valuable the programme was, she couldn't bear to see it stop. It's this combination of determination and "incapableness of stopping", as well as the involvement of NYU, the hospital and Very Special Arts that has allowed the workshops to thrive. I ask Olds if the programme influenced her writing in any way. She thinks for a while then gives the following answer. "One thing I did notice in the beginning was that what was written there almost 100% was without self-pity. This gave me a way of thinking about self-pity as some kind of debilitating luxury for those who are not really in trouble, not really challenged, and that had a good effect on me."

Olds is also passionate about teaching: her students are very important to her and she loves working with young people. She says it keeps her in touch with changes in poetry, allows her to be a witness as well as a teacher. After forty years in this role, I ask if she has any particular advice for writers or people who teach writing. "Two things," she says. "First, take your vitamins. Take care of yourself, protect your mind and your heart from things that are going to be too much of a strain for you. I believe there's a lot of mental strength in writers and there's also a lot of hypersensitivity so it's really important to exercise, dance, walk, breathe. Our creative instrument is our whole self, starting with our health, and mental health as well, which means being able to speak kindly to yourself when you're on your own."

In addition to this, she suggests that it's good to share poems with other people who write. Feedback needs to be kind and useful, and she fosters this approach in her workshops by ensuring that no-one makes suggestions about each others' poems for the first couple of weeks. This gives everyone the chance to find out what each other's poetry is like and where each poet wants to take their work. Halfway into the semester, she says there's enough trust established for them to talk about what isn't working as well as what is. Her reason for working in this way is a deep understanding of the inhibition that can come about from the fear of failure and ridicule. Olds, then, carefully constructs her teaching in a way that encourages students to be honest as well as kind. This enables the writing to happen and, as Olds says, "any time any one of us is writing with a certain amount of pleasurable daring, we're really having fun with going as far as we can in our truth - and that's good for all of us."