

THIS IS CROYDON

OUR STORIES

Photo: Chris O'Donovan for Croydon Council.

MARY JEAN-CHARLES

NEW ADDINGTON WRITING GROUP PARTICIPANT PART OF CROYDON LOVES YOU

During *This is Croydon*, London Borough of Culture, the **Croydon Loves You** microgrants scheme funded individuals and community organisations to run creative projects to boost health and wellbeing. The successful scheme has continued and grown as part of the year's legacy, with £85,000 funding in 2024 and £185,000 in 2025.

IN NUMBERS

Croydon Loves You microgrants scheme

During London Borough
of Culture:

£10,000 supported creative
projects to boost wellbeing

12 microgrants were awarded

New Addington Creative Writing Group, run by Mo Lishomwa at New Addington Family Centre, was one of the original 12 microgrant recipients. We spoke to participant, Mary, who is a carer for a local family. Mary shares her thoughts on finding her voice and taking her creativity beyond the writing group.

Were you much of a writer before joining the group?

The only background I had in creative writing was from when I was 12. There was a competition in a newspaper, and I actually did win it. Since then, my writing has come from 20 years in a legal practice. Also, as a child carer, I put a curriculum together and teach the children.



Mary writing at New Addington Family Centre: Chris O'Donovan

What sparked the return to creative writing?

I go to the Food Stop in New Addington, and one of the women there said "Oh look, there's a writing group for you". It's a chance for me to get out as well. With the caring, I don't see anybody except the person I'm caring for, which can be hard.

What kind of things have you done at the group?

I've been doing poetry. I've got 30 poems ready for a book, and I completed an IT course to learn how to present them. I look forward to inserting the illustrations myself before publishing.

Each week, different facilitators present their own experiences to write about. Domestic violence and red flags, relaxation, walking with Soulful Steppers, growing food with Good Food Matters, Tai Chi and mindfulness are a few examples. From this, we acquire a wealth of information to enhance our literacy, language, grammar, tone, rhythm and wellbeing - how we express our feelings and thoughts so others can understand us. I've become more aware of my dreams, values and fears through these writing experiences.

Did you know poetry was something you wanted to develop?

I think I just wanted to do different things in life. It doesn't necessarily have to be a poem. We had a session where we did recipes, writing about food. You can write about anything, really. I can write what I want.

Tell us more about that creative freedom.

It's a chance for everybody to air their views on different things, which maybe wouldn't otherwise happen. Sometimes emotions come into it, depending on the topic.

It sounds like an empowering environment. Has it had an impact on you?

Throughout my life I was always shut away, so I didn't really have - I was not allowed to have - a voice. And my voice was bad. I had elocution lessons for years so that I could pronounce words properly. I would never go out and speak to anybody. So, it's given me confidence. My voice has got louder. When I first started, I didn't speak much, but now... it has been a real boost.

It has also given me the chance to do something for myself while caring. Now, instead of sitting and watching the television with them, I can do my writing. I've never done anything for myself before. So, it's really changed a lot.

Are there particular things that prompt this confidence boost?

Sometimes visiting speakers read snippets of their work. It helps us think more positively about ourselves. A lot of women have negative feelings, and the sessions help change their mindset. That's what it's done for me. The writing group keeps your spirits up.

Do you find the group dynamic supportive?

Mo runs it, and she has confidence in me. She will put me forward. For example, there was a Local Community Partnership meeting, and she encouraged me to do a poem. So yeah, to know that somebody has confidence in me is good. I've met new friends as well - it's mostly the same people who come every week.

That's fantastic - has attending the writing group led to anything else?

Through the writing group, I go to other events, like open mic nights. There's one in Croydon Clocktower. It has also enabled me to develop artistic skills using mosaics and art.

I wasn't doing anything like that before; it came at the right time. I think I'd have had a nervous breakdown otherwise, getting no rest, no breaks. It saved me, it saved my brain. I'm just a changed person. I've learnt there are people out there who care - who make me feel wanted and part of their communities.

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