

UNIVERSITY LIAISON

EAA Report Maggie Teuten

EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF ARCHAEOLOGY CONFERENCE – September 2023

Exeter u3a represented at Belfast EAA (European Association of Archaeology) Conference held in the Queens University attended by participants from around the world.

As **u3a** members I, with others initially responded to an invitation via our University Liaison link, to attend the Care project which began with an initial two day community workshop funded by the Wellcome Trust looking at the experience of unfunded carers.

“Unfunded carers (also known as family carers, informal carers, or caregivers outside the UK) are people who care for family members or friends with long-term illnesses. There are more than 10 million carers in the UK, and the unpaid labour is estimated to be worth £160 billion per year, just shy of what it costs to run the NHS. Although carers make a significant personal, social and economic contribution it often comes at the expense of their own wellbeing. More than 6 decade of research shows that compared to the general population unpaid carers experience poorer physical and mental health, social isolation, financial insecurity, and over time lose their identity and status.

Despite all this evidence though, efforts to improve things for carers have been minimal and ineffective, at least in part because they've predominantly been informed by psychological and medical epidemiologies.” Associate Professor Siobhan O'Dwyer University of Birmingham and Dr Catriona McKenzie Senior Lecturer in Human Osteoarchaeology (University of Exeter) had a hunch that an approach informed by the humanities could offer a viable alternative. In particular, they thought that archaeological evidence to reframe care – from an invisible, highly stigmatised, and low status activity to the very thing that makes us human – could be an innovative way to empower carers.

“The initial workshop engaged contemporary carers and key community, arts, and advocacy organisations including (Devon Carers. U3A, Exeter Phoenix, and the Royal Albert Memorial Museum), and there was clear demand from these carers and organisations for representations of care that span time and culture. Carers said that understanding archaeological, historical and cultural context of their role would be “immensely useful”, helping British carers connect with the rest of the world, promoting positive carer identities, and facilitating an exploration of alternative approaches to care.”

With the help of a small additional grant from the Wellcome Trust scholars from archaeology, history, anthropology together with contemporary care researchers, carers, and partner organisations were brought together, to develop a CARE network and, undertake scoping research for a grant application to fund the research project.

“The CARE network held three further workshops, focusing on archaeological, historical and anthropological, approaches to understanding care, and how these could inform work with contemporary carers.

A public event followed which included short presentations, Q&A, and interactions with skeletons-and invited carers from across the community to attend and give feedback on our ideas,” you might have been there. We, as carers were involved at every stage of the process, as equal members of the team.

At the time that all this began despite both my elderly parents living with forms of dementia and my substantive role in caring for them, I did not identify myself as a carer as I was unable to offer what I thought of as 'care' for them both in my home, which had in three previous generations been the pattern of care in my family. Through the project I was able to recognise myself as a carer, to reflect on the loss of identity inherent in the role, and the distinct stages of care giving. The project provided an opportunity for talking about care, whilst gaining an understanding of caring over time and place. The project structure and quality facilitation created a safe space for academics and representatives of partner organisations to connect with their own experiences of caring through connecting with each other. The bonds made formed the foundation of the work, building trust for future sessions and facilitated collaborative working. Through the project the emphasis was giving people dignity, bringing them along on the journey, and giving them permission and

space to step back from their caring role and consider it in a broader context.

“A partnership with English artist Leo Jamelli to produce a piece of public art that would represent the experiences of contemporary carers and convey the long history of care across time. We chose to do this because humans have always art to record and communicate their experiences. Because great art transcends language, culture, and politics; starts conversations; is memorable; is shared and is recognised as a legitimate form of 'impact' by UK funding councils.”

From a carers perspective the artist working with us on the project was carefully chosen and was a delight to work with. We as carers felt safe with him and trusted him with our stories, partly because he has lived experience of caring, and could really see the value of our stories.

The artwork when finally projected upon the remains of St Catherine's Chapel; damaged through age and war but still representing a history of care said “THIS IS CARING” and really conveyed the weight, both literal and emotional of holding up and physically supporting another person.

The art work was powerful to the point of bringing one to tears because it successfully encapsulated in one single image what it means to care and that those who are vulnerable in our communities, potentially all of us, cannot survive alone.

Looking back through the eyes of archaeology, history, anthropology. literature and art as we did shows that it has always been so. All of this and more was represented without words and allowed those passing by to see the objective reality of caring expressing the experience in a way that so many words could not.

The learnings from the project so far recognise that although interdisciplinary approaches to research are challenging in that it takes more time than single disciplinary projects; but if focus is given to the building of strong relationships they can be deeply rewarding and provide more nuanced understanding of a given project.

The arts are a fantastic way to foreground research and to facilitate engagement with audiences that you might not reach otherwise. We benefited enormously from including arts-based organisations in our partners from the beginning.

“Co-production with contemporary carers had enormous value in both considering the research that they would like to engage with and in how that information should be shared.”

Maggie Teuten