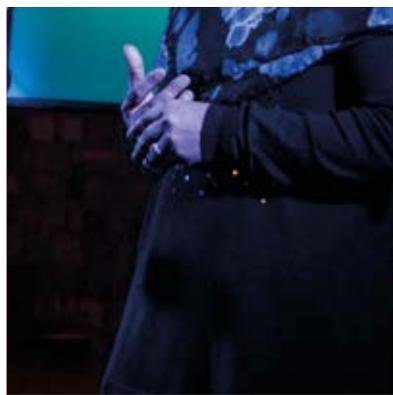
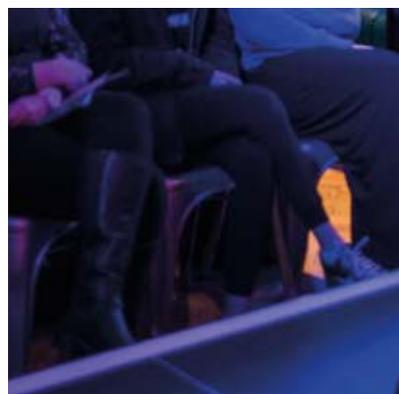


Revoluton Arts



Revoluton Case Study

# Imrana Mahmood and Firestarters



Images © Aleksandra Warchol



**“ I have lots of opportunities, so the world is my oyster right now...I think more than anything it's about having the confidence as a Creative Producer in bringing my dreams to fruition”**  
Imrana Mahmood

## About Firestarters

Firestarters was a Revoluton Arts incubation programme for small-scale creative projects. It aimed to both support individual members from Luton's diverse communities to develop their own creative projects through mentoring, professional development and resources, and connect Revoluton to grassroots activity going on in the town. Revoluton's Community Activist played a key role in devising and facilitating the programme.

## About Imrana

Imrana Mahmood was one of the three Firestarters commissioned. Imrana is a former secondary school teacher, and an active member of Dar Aminah, a Muslim women's organisation. Imrana was already leading the Dar Aminah book club, and was (despite having no arts programming experience) exploring how to bring 'Beyond Borders; the Art of Integration', photography exhibition by Peter Sanders to Luton, along with developing a programme of community and education workshops.

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## About Qalam

Revoluton's Community Activist introduced the idea of Firestarters to Imrana, as they had already been working together on 'Beyond Borders'. After exploring possible options she decided on a Creative Writing Collective for women. The application process included a written proposal along with submitting a three minute video, and Imrana was successful.

The next step was naming the group; Imrana and Shana Kiely, who would work with her on the project, explored options which would appeal to a diverse audience whilst also capturing the essence of the collective, they decided on Qalam, meaning 'pen' in Arabic, Persian, Sindhi and Urdu.

Members of the collective were recruited from Dar Aminah book club, though Shana's connections at the University of Bedfordshire, and via Facebook. Twelve women came to the launch of the group in July 2017 - a day long 'creative writing' walk around Luton and along the river Lea - and seven continued as active members of the group.

Birmingham based spoken word artist Amerah Saleh of Beatfreeks, provided creative mentoring to the group, advising on the process and taking part in the initial walk.

The group met every fortnight at the Hat Factory in Luton town centre, and the choice of venue was important for Imrana;

**"It's about, for me, redefining the arts scene and bringing audiences into existing spaces...I was very, very keen to do that, because I already run book club in the community.... I could do creative writing there, but why should I because actually it's about these existing spaces and the importance of making all people feel welcome, so I pushed to have a space at the Hat Factory".**

Members were at different stages in their writing; one had written a novel, whilst another was completely new to creative writing. The group provided mutual support and critique of each other's work (which could be any kind of writing) and then created pieces around specific topics; beginnings, barriers, bodies, belonging, and beyond forms.

A performance and presentation of the work of the group took place at Connors, the Hat Factory's Café Bar on 14 December 2017. An audience of 24 came along to the women only, pay what you want event.

## Audience feedback included:

**"Wonderful venue. Very professional lighting/ sound to indicate the importance of the event. A unique group of women with different life experiences coming together to perform their work"**

**"We need more creative/ artistic activities for wider societal social change. Opens your mind. Open minds needed in our times. Really high quality event. Thank you"**

**"Amazing! Well done to all involved"**

## Professional impacts on Imrana

### Visibility and credibility

"I was nominated for the 'People, Places, Portraits' project, so that is on the CPP website which obviously gives you a certain level of exposure and makes everything a bit more official. It was really important to have had support from Revoluton's Community Activist to apply for Arts Council funding [for 'Beyond Borders'] because it was about getting a foot through the door".

### Confidence

"I think by then Shana and I were really clear, I think - without blowing our own trumpets - we knew exactly what it was that we wanted to do in terms of starting off with a creative writing walk, then have these ongoing workshops."

## What's next ?

Imrana's professional practice developed as did her status amongst Luton's creative sector; she became involved in the other Firestarter projects, providing education support and facilitating workshops. She also co-facilitated a Long Table event at Marsh Farm as part of their 'United we stand, together we rise' launch, and was employed by NPO Nutkhut as poet and audience development consultant for 'The Emperor's Lost Gem' a schools and family event in Bury Park.

### She is now:

- Developing her cultural education work
- Continuing with her own creative writing
- Exploring opportunities to work with theatre

[www.imranamahmood.co.uk](http://www.imranamahmood.co.uk)

## Reflections and learning

### Offer generous and flexible support

Revoluton's Community Activist mentored Imrana in the development of her own project - 'Beyond Borders' - before she became involved in their Firestarters programme.

### Be clear about programme benefits

It's important for emerging creative practitioners to know what they will receive in terms of funding, training and support for projects - and what the expectations are in return.

### The value of social spaces

Connors Café bar at the Hat Factory provides a useful in between space - part informal, neutral and social, and part an established arts venue - making it the ideal location to welcome and inspire new audiences.

### Encourage connections

With a limited funded cultural infrastructure but a growing and increasingly confident creative community, maximising the connections between these individuals is vital. Imrana connected with an artist who was also doing work inspired by the River Lea, and she commented "I'm really glad that we made that connection, and I think that's another thing, which is really important in Luton. We need to start doing more to connect with projects that are already going on, because doing things in isolation will not have a meaningful and lasting impact."

**For phase two, Revoluton plan to further develop their informal 'Matrix Creative Café' networking events along with an online version 'The Matrix' - a platform for Luton creatives to profile their work, discuss projects, list events and collaborate.**