

Dominika (a trainee solicitor)

What attracted you to the Star and Shadow?

I'm a trainee solicitor and I've lived in Heaton for a few years now. I've always liked volunteering and then my career took over for a bit. And then at some point, I think it might have been February this year, I saw that there was an art club and a knitting group.

So, I came in and sat with the knitters. I do crochet, which is not really knitting, but I've really enjoyed it. Knitting group is every two weeks and art group is every week, so I've been swapping in between.

Did you do a volunteer induction or did you just come straight to the knitting group?

Firstly actually, I just came to the Star and Shadow to have a cup of coffee. Then, I went to the market and brought my mum, she really liked it.

Then, I knew there was a gardening space at the back and I'm a keen gardener - I look after a few gardens and have my own allotment - so I was trying to find out what's happening with the garden. No one really knew; it had been a quiet spot for a while because the guy who was leading it was busy doing a PhD.

I came to see a film as well, which was Nine Inches of Soil, which is a film about agriculture and what's going wrong and climate change and what we can do to improve it. I'm really passionate about growing food so I decided that we have to make the garden more active and let people learn more about gardening. For example, I noticed they didn't have a compost bin, so I thought, okay, we'll need to get a compost bin.

Then I did my volunteering training. Because of work, I couldn't go to any of the pre-booked ones, so I actually spoke to Joe, one of the volunteers here, and I said, is there any chance we could just have a one-on-one so I can get it out the way and start putting on events. And so we did that.

You've clearly had an interesting and quite focused route into the Star and Shadow. Currently, most inductions are for large groups but yours was a one-on-one induction. I'm curious, do you think it would be a good idea to make one-to-one inductions more of a regular feature? Was it obvious that this was an option?

No, it was tough. I missed about three inductions because I just wasn't able to make them. I'm in a hiking group as well - I've got so many of the commitments - it was just hard to fit in. I knew I wanted to start leading the gardening group, because people didn't really know how to get involved, so when I spoke to them about this, they just said they were really keen and were happy to put it on for a day that suited me. Another girl came to it and I think she had some additional needs. I probably have ADHD, so I needed to take breaks. So it was just me and her and the two people doing the induction. It was a long induction but it was tailored to us and we could take breaks. While it was probably a bit more work for Joe and the other lady, it really met our needs.

And so, did you request a longer induction with breaks because of the knowledge of having different needs?

No, I didn't but the other girl did. She thought she would be more suited to a smaller group. I thought that was brilliant. Also, because I wanted to start programming groups straight away, I have led groups before, it made sense for me to be able to ask more questions and become a programmer straight away. Since that day, I've been programming things every week.

So, the thing that drew you in was the art and knitting groups, but what has kept you here?

I'm just frugal at the moment because I'm trying to buy a house and like I say I've got so many hobbies. I just wanted something that had a community feel and didn't cost the earth. So many art groups in town are about twenty pounds. Here, I'll have a coffee and a cake and spend two pounds rather than spend twenty-five pounds.

And it's just brilliant here. I feel really calm. There's a real sense of belonging and you can just be yourself. I'm kind of empowered to, and I know Joe will love me saying this, to lead a group and get people involved, to share knowledge especially with the gardening. I've shared a lot of knowledge about composting and regenerative growing.

I need to come along to the gardening group, glean some of this knowledge.

Well, it's today, from two o'clock. It's brilliant and we're getting a lot of people involved who've never gardened before.

So, how do you describe the Star and Shadow to someone who knows nothing about it?

I always say it's a huge community project. It's like a community centre on steroids.

That's brilliant.

Because I mean, I know it's a cinema, but I've only been to see two films here. Whereas for me, it's so much more than a cinema, it is really lovely community centre.

And how would you sum up what the Star and Shadow means to you?

I say I just feel really welcome here. I can be myself. I always meet lovely people. Whenever you speak to someone, people are really open.

It sounds like you are already doing loads, but is there anything that isn't currently available you'd like to see? or something that you can envision being different?

I think we could probably do some kind of exercise class or a dance class. My Art Club friend said as well, we could probably do an art tutorial like a Bob Ross style class in the cinema and have the bar on. So, I think we, we might try to plan that in.

Amazing, I'll definitely come to that.

I think it'll be really popular. I know, it's a thing other places are doing but again, we can make it more affordable.

Exercise and dance classes can be very pricey - and a little bit intimidating too. Putting them on here is a great way to make them more accessible.

If it's affordable, everyone feels welcome. Some of these places when they're charging about twenty pounds, they'll only get a certain class of people coming. They're not opening it up to everyone because of the cost of it.

I love Community Kitchen as well. I'm vegan and I love that I could just come here and eat, and not have to worry. Community Kitchen's brilliant. I always come and I just pay like I would in a restaurant, you know, because I can do that, of course some people can't. But the food's brilliant, and if I would pay fifteen pounds for it in town, I'll pay fifteen pounds here.

You've shared so much, and have great ideas for future projects... but out of interest, what does happen at art club?

Literally, people just turn up for art club, take what they want and start painting. Then, it's just like an organic conversation which goes from what did you have for tea last night, to politics, to Feminism... we have all sorts of chats in there.

Sounds fun. Well, thank you so much for your time, I'll let you go get ready for gardening group, and I'm definitely going to borrow your 'Community Centre on steroids' quote.

No problem. I am so passionate about this place. I think it's really brilliant.