

Ellen's World



Ellen brings her musical skills and a limitless imagination to Parity for Disability.

On a bright morning at St Martin's Church, Camberley, a group music session is taking place. Parity student Ellen, surrounded by instruments, is directing two keyworkers.

"You sing A," Ellen says to Darren. Darren takes a breath and holds a note. Ellen then instructs Chris to sing a 'D'. Another student watches, and then decides to sing a note himself. The three keep holding the notes as long as they can while Ellen smiles with delight.

The notes she's asking for aren't random. Ellen is musically gifted and among her skills, she has perfect pitch, the ability to identify any musical note without 'hunting' for the correct sound or having another tone for reference.

Having limited movement makes playing an instrument difficult for Ellen, but she enjoys telling others which notes and chords to play. She loves sixties music, and taught Darren and Chris the guitar chords for *House of the Rising Sun*.

In this particular music session, the notes that Darren and Chris are humming are making one of Ellen's favourite sounds, the noise of a hand dryer. Many of the musical sounds that we hear day to day mean a great deal to Ellen.

"Ellen is able to remember the different notes for the sound of each hand dryer or fan that she's ever used," says Jenny, who oversees Parity's music therapy programme. "Understanding Ellen's music is about being able to tune into her world, into what she gets from it and what it means to her."

Ellen has accessed Parity's various services throughout her life. Though she didn't wish to go into detail for this article, she used Parity's music therapy service for six years as a child and recently began accessing it again as an adult. As a teen, Ellen used the Teenagers' Activity Scheme during the holidays, where staff supported her in her choice of activities, including indulging her love of listening to hand dryers. Now an adult, Ellen uses the Camberley day service one and a half days a week.

Staff know Ellen well and whenever working and communicating with her, try to see things from Ellen's point of view.



Ellen will often make references to songs alongside the things she does, sees and feels. Ellen spotted this bridge during a trip out and asked Ian to cross the Bridge Over Troubled Water with her.



Ellen plays the guitar with Darren.

“The way to make progress is to enter Ellen’s world,” says Ian, Ellen’s main keyworker. “She’s a very complex and interesting young lady.”

Music spills into the artwork that Ellen creates, as in her piece *Balamory didn’t see Gerry Rafferty*. Rafferty is one of her favourite musicians. Ellen’s art expresses her thoughts and feelings about day to day life.

Supported by Ian, she chooses the materials and tools, such as which type of paper, and which pen or brush. Ian supports her hand over hand as she creates, with Ellen always leading.

Features of Ellen’s work include surreal images like a melting plaster, or an eye crying exactly 21 tears. She uses words as well as images and shapes.

Ian encourages another aspect of Ellen’s great imagination, her fascination with machinery. Besides hand dryers, she’s intrigued by other mechanical things, like large clocks, the generator on an ice cream van or the sound of a train.



Balamory Didn't See Gerry Rafferty

Ellen’s pictures above and below are made with paper collaged onto canvas.



The Emotional Rain Drain



Ellen creates an art project with Ian.

All Ellen's outings and activities support her interests. One trip involved visiting Abinger Hammer in Surrey where Ellen watched the historic clock striking the hour. Ellen created a recent art project after Ian showed her paintings by Keith Tyson, an artist who's also interested in mechanics and systems.

With such a powerful imagination, perhaps it's not surprising that Ellen likes role play, and one of her favourite situations is getting an item fixed. A keyworker will make the imaginary phone call and then pretend to be the repair man.

"She may get you to act out all manner of scenarios," says Ian, adding that Ellen likes to pretend to get inside things such as speakers or violins. "This can help with tasks that Ellen finds mundane. When putting on Ellen's coat you can pretend Ellen's getting inside a violin for example. The key to Ellen is to use your imagination."



Ellen watches the clock at Abinger Hammer strike the hour.

