

My Koestler Story: Erika

A Journey From Award Winner To Mentee

“Prison takes more than your freedom away from you. It can affect your decision making process, your confidence and your whole sense of being. The Koestler Awards bring a little bit of purpose to your existence behind bars, and a connection with the outside world.”

It is hard to express how valuable the Koestler Awards are, not just to my journey, but to so many others who have submitted their work into the Awards Scheme.

The first year I was in HMP Holloway I found out about the Koestler Awards too late to enter. However, this gave me motivation to produce work for the following year's awards. I spent a long time waiting and scavenging art materials to produce some work and was rewarded with a Gold Award, a Bronze and a First-Time Entrant Award. The fact that I then sold my painting was a great boost to my confidence.

The second year that I entered I won more awards and some of my work was selected to be exhibited in Koestler Arts' annual exhibition in London's Southbank Centre. This was a huge honour and I was so proud to have my work seen and appreciated by so many people in such a prestigious venue.

I was also extremely privileged to be accepted onto the Koestler mentoring scheme following my release from custody. Matched with a mentor, I visited galleries and discussed my own practice and how I might utilise my skills in the future in the workplace. This was a great bridge in my effort to rebuild my confidence and seek meaningful work for my future.

In my third year of entering the awards I again was fortunate enough to have some of my works exhibited in the annual London Exhibition, one of which was a collection of postcards which I had drawn, one every day of my incarceration, to document my story. This exposure has resulted in many freelance commissions, including the recent Koestler Awards Story poster which visually explains the awards process, as well as many opportunities to do event illustrations within the prison establishment for a number of prison charities.

The experience that I have gained from working with Koestler Arts over these past few years, as entrant, ROTL volunteer, staff member and mentee, has been invaluable for my journey from prisoner to a working, contributing member of the community.