

My Koestler Story: Thomas

Koestler Arts gave me something to live for

I hated poetry at school. It may well have spoken volumes to many people but I wasn't one of them. I had filed it under Tedium Majora.

My offending behaviour stemmed from mental health and long suppressed self-confidence issues that for a variety of reasons I was too embarrassed to address. Prior to my incarceration I spent four months in a mental health institute where I began to write poetry as a cathartic process.

When my prison journey began, I continued to write poems. It helped me to deal with where I was and the reasons why. It helped me to communicate with my family and friends. It even became a source of entertainment for me to reflect on some of the other people I encountered.

With immense trepidation I showed a couple of them to my cell mate. Buoyed by their reaction, yet still very apprehensive, I showed some of them to the education officer on the wing. She immediately suggested I enter them into the Koestler Awards.

The net result was that one of my poems, Dirty Laundry, not only won an award but was also selected for display at the 2016 'We Are All Human' exhibition at London's Southbank Centre with Benjamin Zephaniah at the helm. Oh, and was also included in the first ever Koestler poetry anthology, Koestler Voices: New Poetry from Prisons Vol. 1. This was a huge boost for my self-confidence.

My father came to the exhibition and saw a visitor copying out my poem into a card for his father who was immured at the time. He was able to say with great pride, 'My son wrote that.' My dad died last summer, but even at my lowest ebb, he still demonstrated faith and pride in me. It fills me with pride that I was able to touch someone else emotionally. But it wasn't just that visitor whom I had affected. A few days before Christmas 2016, I received a total of 43 feedback cards from people who were kind enough to take the time to fill out a postcard with their reaction to my creative offering.

Those feedback cards were a massive contributory factor to me still being alive and writing this piece now. I have kept every one of them.

After writing the poem, I was awarded a Koestler Mentoring scholarship and a mentor to help me develop my art.

I was presented with my award at the British Library. It was very humbling to be presented with the prize at such a prestigious venue, it made me feel ten feet tall (and for someone who is 5' 5" that is a big deal!)

I met with my mentor three or four times during my time 'away' and then a further seven or eight times in London. She helped me to consider other forms of poetry and move away from my comfort zone!

Now, I have three books planned - at least two of which will be education based and for charity. I continue to receive high praise for my creative work, not just from friends and family but also those who do not know me well but have read some of my poetry.

Simply put, from an emotional wellbeing perspective, the impact Koestler Arts has had on my life cannot be overstated.

Thomas' Poem

Dirty Laundry

We all arrive soiled, some more than others, the source of lost pride for so many fathers and mothers.

The wash programme selected by the judge and jury;

But so often injustice - the cause of much fury.

Locked inside the drum, the cycle begins, The theory is simple - to wash away sins.

Clean once more, the rinse cycle starts.

Time has been served, a cleansing of hearts.

Freshly laundered, the washing is aired.

Inside for so long, many are scared.

The final task; it is time for pressing.

Iron out the creases, the fresh start is a blessing.