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## **“The Other Women Who Made Shakespeare: Identifying and Celebrating Women of the Trust” and “Hearing Community Voices: Soinéad Shakespeare”. An Impact Report and Reflection on My Summer in Stratford-upon-Avon.**

### **LiA Impact Report:**

This summer I developed two projects with Shakespeare’s Birthplace Trust (SBT) in Stratford-upon-Avon. “The Other Women Who Made Shakespeare: Identifying and Celebrating Women of the Trust” recognises the contributions of women to the Trust and aims to make research facilities accessible to young people. It is part of the multi-year project “The Women Who Made Shakespeare,” which celebrates the impact of the women in Shakespeare’s life, the female characters in his plays and the women who made him famous, through museum exhibitions and digital content. My role involved making the records of Mrs. Constance Wellstood’s work (a former Secretary of the Trust) more accessible to researchers. “Hearing Community Voices: Soinéad Shakespeare” provides a framework for minority languages in the community to be recorded by SBT. I created a collection of audio recordings of Muiris Síonóid’s *Rotha Mór an Ghrá: Soinéad Shakespeare* (2009) and recommended Irish language editions for accession. I also consulted local Irish language groups such as *Conradh na Gaeilge* Birmingham and Irish people living locally, who will be key collaborators in expanding the recordings and documenting the experience of the Irish in the West Midlands. I was the first Laidlaw Scholar to do a Leadership in Action project with SBT and would highly recommend them to Scholars interested in curation, archiving, education and community outreach. These projects required skills in project management, cross cultural communication, equity, diversity and inclusion,

collaboration and problem solving.

I was involved with several outreach workshops for communities across the West Midlands, including Birmingham, where 41% of the city's children were living in poverty in 2023/24 according to the [Health Foundation](#). Three workshops were run by a Birmingham University student with the Trust for a local girl's secondary school and members of Stratford Youth Hub who are not enrolled in formal education for mental health reasons. Participants were invited to view scrapbooks in the Collections and to engage with a craft exercise. I answered questions from the students about accessing research facilities. I also took part in a workshop where students could view translated editions of Shakespeare's works. I met with Ann McDermott, a former Trust volunteer who shared her experience as an Irish immigrant and established links with *Conradh na Gaeilge* Birmingham. I attended a conservation tour of Hall's Croft and visited the volunteers at Anne Hathaway's cottage to learn about their experience in promoting the women who lived there.

The translation workshop required cross cultural communication and empathy. Our aim was to show the girls that their perspectives were valued and respected. We prioritised their discussions and any context they could provide about the languages they spoke. Active listening was essential as I was responsible for documenting their answers. I delivered a brief presentation discussing the impact of colonialism on Irish with students, the use of Shakespeare's work in the British Empire's curricula and how bequests of translations give an insight into the legacy of the cultural and linguistic hierarchies that attempted to justify colonialism. These were sensitive topics and I had to be aware that some aspects of colonial history are either not taught in the UK or are viewed from a very different perspective. The students were from multilingual backgrounds and might have experienced the impacts of colonialism in other parts of the world and at different stages in history. Collaboration was a vital aspect in both projects. I learned from my supervisor about local current affairs and the experiences of Irish people in the community. We had weekly meetings which I would highly recommend to scholars on independent projects. Brainstorming and interim reports helped me to stay motivated when challenges occurred and

plans changed. Working with the Reading Room staff and the Trust's Outreach Officer also required team work, both for the logistical aspects and to provide different perspectives when answering questions from the participants.

I found flexibility was necessary when I encountered challenges that required problem solving skills. We were unable to schedule a workshop for my project during my time in Stratford as many organisations had limited holiday availability, which meant that I needed to engage with the community in a different way. We also hoped to interview Mrs. Wellstood's family but could not establish contact. The Trust was also implementing a strategic financial review which required tailoring my work to the capacity of the organisation. Here I found the simpler the concept, the most impact I could have on the community.

An important ethical aspect during my research was Mrs. Wellstood's privacy. While attempting to give more recognition to a historical figure, it was important to consider which aspects of her life were appropriate for me to bring attention to. I felt that I was biased as an Irish person who wanted to see more representation for Irish in the Collections. I turned to the community to ensure they had agency in their representation. I had to make sure that my recordings would not dilute their voices and experiences. After discussions with Ann McDermott, who created a video recording of one of the Sonnets in 2018, I decided that a collection would make the sonnets accessible to visually impaired people and could be expanded with community voices.

Overall, these projects aimed to implement inclusive curatorial and archival practices and to create a fair space for underrepresented communities. Although I adapted my outreach activities, actively listening and collaborating allowed me to serve community needs. Sharing my research with a diverse demographic has made me a more empathetic leader and researcher, which I intend to maintain as an external advisor to the Trust in the future. Reflecting on my biases and cultural humility also created productive conversations that facilitated real change in the Trust. Ultimately, we tackled sensitive issues associated with Shakespeare's legacy and used our diversity to make a difference together.

## **Reflective Report:**

Throughout my life I have benefitted from inspiring leaders in my local community who have facilitated my access to fields where I can pursue a career in the Arts and Humanities. The most impactful leaders in my life never sought a spotlight for themselves. They championed the communities they strove to help, placing them centre stage. Many of them never styled themselves as leaders or “global citizens.” Midwives, music teachers, statisticians, architects, doctors, quality controllers, artistic directors, ballet teachers. They were people from all walks of life who acted with equity, empathy, kindness, drive and purpose, uplifting those around them. It might sound obvious, but I was determined that my impact would not be motivated by self-gratification or partake in any kind of voluntourism that sought to merely add a line to a CV or a picture to post on social media. My primary motivation was to learn the skills I needed to give back to the sources of support I received and to work to open doors for anyone, but particularly young people who feel their access to the Arts is restricted, or that they have no outlet to advocate for themselves.

Eighteen months ago, I set out to discover how a passion for Shakespeare’s works and three years of training in the art of critical essay writing could be channelled into helping communities in need. I confronted many challenging prospects. Which community in need would I focus on? What if they disliked Shakespeare? What if they had no interest in critical essays? How would I translate my skillset to meet their needs? How could I create a functional initiative that would deliver tangible impact? I identified some key strengths I wanted to develop, namely project management skills and confidence in public speaking. I also started to brainstorm how I could practice these skills incrementally so that by the time I reached the planning stage for my LiA project, I could design, pitch and deliver a valuable project with conviction and professionalism.

I decided to focus on my public speaking skills first. I have always experienced performance anxiety participating in any form of public speaking. While my time in university resulted in the refinement of my written communication, I had neglected to nurture my public speaking and

presentation skills. As a ballet dancer and musician, I was very comfortable performing on stage as long as I did not have to speak. In our leadership development sessions, we were taught breathing and pacing techniques which I found extremely helpful. In the first summer of research, I had weekly meetings with my supervisor where I was encouraged to develop my analysis of the papers I was reading in conversation before I put pen to paper. While researching artists, playwrights, publishers and town council members who all facilitated resistance to art censorship either intentionally or unintentionally, I was reminded that leaders must align their words with their actions. Following my first summer of research, I collaborated with other Laidlaw scholars in my cohort to organise a seminar series where we could present our research to the wider college community. It was an opportunity to share our research achievements and learnings with each other and to practice the skills we gained in the development sessions before we embarked on the Leadership in Action experience. I found that it was extremely rewarding to create a platform for other people to discuss their work and when my turn came to speak, I was surprised to find that I actually enjoyed a public speaking activity for the first time in my life.

I considered my Leadership in Action placement in advance of my application to the programme. I chose to work in Stratford-upon-Avon as it is a centre for the world's leading Shakespeareans who play a major part in packaging the Shakespeare brand's complex legacy and it is a fulcrum of educational resources for communities throughout the West Midlands, the international visitors they welcome, and anyone with an interest in Shakespeare who can access the internet. These resources are invaluable, especially in many local areas with a growing, visible wealth gap. It was a visit to Stratford that was the catalyst for the research idea that I applied to the Laidlaw programme with, and throughout the research project process, the SBT online collections were a resource I used constantly. I really feel that the Trust and the community were the reason that I received the opportunity to take part in this programme and so it was important to me that I gave back to them. My favourite part of my time as a Laidlaw Scholar was empowering people to feel heard, valued and respected in workshops and meetings.

I realise now that the art censorship resistance I observed in my research project was transformed and reawakened in my efforts to restore recognition in the Collections to the Irish language. In the same way the murals in the Guild Chapel survived layers of whitewash, the Irish language still exists after a long-fought battle against colonialism and oppression. It is an outcome that celebrated figures in Stratford such as George Carew probably never imagined. Last summer I attended an event at the Dalkey Literary Festival in Dublin, a conversation between Fintan O'Toole and James Shapiro. They discussed whether Shakespeare can be used to reach people who otherwise close ranks against an outsider since the works have been embraced by so many different groups to bolster their political views. I remember Shapiro said that once you get inside the room, you can blow barriers apart. Art, languages, cultures and politics do not need to find an association with Shakespeare in order to be valued. However, I have channelled my passion for his work into projects that open doors and welcome people into a space where their languages and cultures are considered equal, valuable and beautiful. I intend to keep opening those doors in the future.

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