

# FOUNDATION VOICE

The Arsenal Foundation has helped to fund New Art Studio, a therapeutic art studio for refugees and asylum seekers based in London. Amir, 53, tells us how the therapy has helped him to rebuild his life

## ARSENAL ACTS

I came to the UK from Iran as an asylum seeker in 1999, a journey that began when my art led to trouble with government officials. Despite all the challenges, including a period of imprisonment and torture, I've shown resilience and a commitment for my art and for my freedom.

"The collapse of my marriage triggered lots of unresolved trauma, and I had a mental breakdown. I stopped painting and ended up living on the streets of London. A lovely person called Sam from Shelter tried to engage me to start making art, but I couldn't. My psychologist also wanted me to paint, but I couldn't. I would still go to places where it was suggested to me that I engage with painting, but I felt like I was being treated like a child. There was a lot of bureaucracy, and I felt like a patient in a hospital. It just wasn't good for my mental health. When Sam asked me to try New Art Studio, I was already so disappointed by my previous experiences and the lack of human relations in those groups that I wasn't sure how to feel about going there. Still, I did, because my mental health was deteriorating, and I wanted to please Sam.

After my first session, I couldn't wait to return. The warmth and respect shown by the group facilitators, Jasmin and Ruanna, gave me a sense of belonging. The acceptance and support from everyone else in the group made me feel like I was part of a family. I loved seeing different ways of making art and talking to people in the

group. I could also relate to others in the group who had similar struggles. I realised I put my whole life in danger and risked everything to protect my art and freedom.

I can't wait for every Monday to start. I usually arrive first. The session begins at 11.30am and ends at 4.30pm. I make myself a hot drink, have something to eat and start my day.

Outside of painting I volunteer with a charity, cooking and preparing nutritious food to serve vulnerable people who can't afford it. I also take photographs, and sometimes I do leather work, glass casting and stained glass and graphic design, as I'm trained in those fields, but it's hard to find a job.

It was very difficult to adapt to a new life here in the beginning. I started my life here from zero. But the UK saved my life and gave me freedom that I didn't have. I'm proud to be part of this society and happy my children will grow up here.

I would love to be a full-time artist and to make a living from it. I would love to have a solo exhibition and invite lots of people. I would also like to meet someone with whom I could share my life. I dream of having a quiet life and an art studio.

Since coming to New Art Studio, I have started to have hope. Having a space to paint and being with other talented artists means so much to me. I've met people with whom I can share my story and who can understand the struggles of being a refugee. I'm learning about different art techniques, and I feel inspired by others.



For more information visit [newartstudio.org.uk](http://newartstudio.org.uk)

A Amir was inspired to paint Ian Wright after seeing him talking about his teacher on television



I have stopped self-harming, I'm taking less medication and I have started painting again, which is the best medicine for my mental health.

I'm guilty of saying that I support Liverpool, but Arsenal is my second-favourite team! The club had many great French footballers, and I loved the team that Arsène Wenger created.

I love Arsenal more because it supports New Art Studio. There are few places in London where human relationships are the

top priority. On a private tour with Samir from Arsenal in the Community, I learned about the club's roots and values, and that Arsenal supports many other groups and vulnerable people.

I painted an Ian Wright portrait for this page because I saw the documentary where Ian hugged and cried when he saw his old teacher, and it made me deeply emotional. It's so important to have people in your life who believe in you – it can change your life."

B Amir at work at New Art Studio. Painting has helped him rebuild his life after fleeing Iran and suffering a breakdown

