

The art of helping hundreds in need

MENTAL HEALTH CHARITY OFFERS THE CHANCE FOR VULNERABLE PEOPLE TO LEARN NEW SKILLS

By **LINDSAY BURNS**

IN A corner of South London there is a little charity making a huge difference to people with mental health issues.

CoolTan Arts in Walworth Road, Walworth, gives often isolated and vulnerable people a creative outlet and the chance to learn new skills.

The charity, which operates on a small budget, runs computer design, craft, media and art courses for clients.

CoolTan is run by people with disabilities, for people with disabilities, and helps hundreds of people every year.

The charity has been nominated for a Community Project award in the *South London Press* Our Heroes Awards.

The paper's campaign celebrates the achievements of South Londoners and culminates in a gala ceremony at the headquarters of sponsors Shell in November.

High demand

Michelle Bahahrier, who founded the charity, said: "People choose to come here rather than being sent here.

"There is a high demand – last year we turned away 253 people and had 450 on our books.

"People feel their lives will change by coming here and they feel empowered because it's been their choice."

The charity desperately needs new premises and Ms Bahahrier said she has watched in despair as Southwark council sold off public buildings.

She said: "Even though we have only got an outdoor portable toilet



FOUNDING FIGURE: Michelle Bahahrier

to serve us and our premises aren't that great, people are still choosing to come here and we're still oversubscribed."

Richard Muzira, who did computer animation and video editing courses at the charity, said

that CoolTan Arts had improved his life.

Mr Muzira, from Walworth, who has mental health problems, said: "My life changed so much in terms of how I'm coping with my issues.

"It gives me something else to focus on other than myself.

"There are loads of other day centres but nothing like this, with focused activities that engage you creatively."

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