



That Richard E Grant’s portrayal of the former UK politician Michael Heseltine in the Margaret Thatcher biopic, *The Iron Lady*, was criticised by the man himself for getting the hair wrong. ‘I gather he has dyed his hair, so even that isn’t genuine,’ the famously leonine Heseltine told *The Daily Telegraph*. ‘As a historical event, no one who made the film has talked to me and I therefore work on the assumption that it won’t be accurate’

Changing minds

A small radio station is giving a therapeutic voice to psychiatric patients near Buenos Aires, reports Ed Stocker

Borda Hospital lies in the working-class neighbourhood of Barracas, on the southern fringes of Buenos Aires. From the outside it is an intimidating place, divided into separate brown-coloured blocks and badly in need of a facelift. Yet despite its inauspicious outward appearance, the psychiatric hospital is home to a world-renowned project that has shaken-up attitudes to mental health both in Argentina and overseas.

La Colifata radio station, which celebrated 20 years on air last year, broadcasts directly from the hospital’s gardens every Saturday. And it’s the patients who set the agenda. Sitting in the shade of the trees with donated antenna and recording equipment, they discuss everything from philosophy to tango alongside members of the community as the show is streamed live over the

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Alfredo Olivera La Colifata director

internet and across the local FM network.

Taking a break from the demanding job of running the radio, La Colifata’s director, Alfredo Olivera, and a former patient, Eduardo Codina, still involved with the station, chat to *The National* in one of the capital’s many leafy plazas. Entirely appropriately, we’ve decided to remain outside and talk in the warm sunshine.

“La Colifata always helps me and when I urgently need to speak to someone I can always count on somebody from the station giving a helping hand,” says Codina, talking through his thick white beard. “On a human level, it helps me connect with people who before looked at me in a different, distrustful way. So it’s a way of forming a dialogue with this community, showing that we’re humans too and that we’re on the same path.”

Codina still has mental health problems and prefers to touch only fleetingly on his difficult past, when he lived on the streets for 20 years with his mother, something that left scars he still bears. But there’s also no doubt that what he calls the “therapeutic radio station” has helped him leave hospital, earn a small salary selling CDs from the radio programmes and start to rebuild his life. Despite his problems, he’s an intelligent and eloquent interviewee.

Olivera began La Colifata (the word is slang for “madness” but has a respectful, affectionate connotation) two decades ago after visiting the hospital as a volunteer and realising that “the patients who were living there didn’t have any connection with the outside world”. In that moment, the idea for a radio station was born. The original set-up was basic, logging the thoughts of the patients, recorded on a Dictaphone and edited into clips that were played on a community radio station.

The recordings were a huge success, provoking a flurry of listener calls – the beginnings of La Colifata’s close interaction with local residents. Such was the positive reaction that Olivera decided to take the idea to Rock & Pop FM, a station that started to broadcast the segments. It was Rock & Pop that donated La Colifata’s first recording equipment, enabling it to broadcast directly from the hospital.

Twenty years on, the station has retained its audience. “With technological advances, it’s not hard to make radio,” says Olivera. “But what is difficult is making sure that people want to listen. And not just listen, but contribute ideas. La Colifata creates these opportunities; it allows people to talk about ideas that are often silenced, dedramatising them without denying that they exist. And through this, it opens up new ways of communicating.”

Olivera claims that La Colifata is the first radio station in the world to use radio as a way to reintegrate patients back into the community and break down the barriers of



Every Saturday, La Colifata has set up its equipment at Borda Hospital in Buenos Aires to broadcast conversations with mental patients. Photos courtesy La Colifata

prejudice and misunderstanding, which are especially high in Argentina, a country who has the highest percentage of its population in psychotherapy. The station has inspired similar projects around the world, including in Sweden, Mexico and Spain, and been visited by international musicians, including the Franco-Spanish globetrotter Manu Chao. He recorded a charity disc to raise funds for the station; entitled *Viva La Colifata*, it mixes patient conversations with his backing tracks.

Today, however, money is much less certain. In the past, 85 per cent of funding came from overseas charities, mostly in France and Spain, and through individual donations from Chao and the filmmaker Francis Ford Coppola. But for a year now, Olivera has been scraping by on minimal resources, despite a small grant from the Argentinian government of President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner.

“La Colifata is in danger of not being able to continue if it doesn’t

find a regular and stable source of income,” laments Olivera. The fate of Borda Hospital is also in doubt, having been threatened with closure in 2008 and badly in need of investment to prop up its crumbling infrastructure. “Back in April, the hospital went three months without gas. Patients didn’t have access to hot-water showers or hot food, which had to come from other hospitals and was cold by the time it arrived.”

Unless the national government stumps up the funds, La Colifata’s days may be numbered. The loss to the world would be significant – and the future of people like Codina in danger. He says: “If it hadn’t been for the psychological help of the radio station, giving me the chance to say what I thought in front of a microphone, I don’t think I would have been able to move forward with my life.”

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Alfredo Olivera, the director of La Colifata, believes the station benefits both the patients and the listeners by giving them insights into mental ill health.

Jailbirds spread their virtual wings and hope to fly on the outside

It was not until after Shadeed had been sentenced to 27 years to life in a California prison for assault with a deadly weapon that he wrote his first blog entry.

“If anyone is reading this, please bear with me. I’m new to this. And I’m in prison,” he wrote on November 1.

It’s an unconventional place to start a blog. But Shadeed, 29, is one of seven men from San Francisco’s San Quentin State Prison selected for an innovative programme that is giving prisoners a voice online, with some help from the nearby technology hub of Silicon Valley.

The name of the programme is The Last Mile, and its stated goal is to create a bridge between the penal system and the technology sector,

teaching verbal and written communication, presentation skills, computer proficiency and business formation and operation.

The seven participants range in age from 29 to 43 and have been jailed for crimes including robbery, assault and homicide. David, 29, was sentenced to 15 years behind bars for killing another young man at the age of 15. He’s now on the verge of being free for the first time since he was a teenager. He is grateful for the opportunity to hone new skills he can take into the outside world.

“With these tools, I hope to achieve success upon parole and a more fluid transition back into society,” he wrote on his blogger profile. “I also hope to gain the power

to motivate others and show them that change is possible as long as you have an open mind, the desire to change and the courage to do something about it.”

San Quentin is well-known for its progressive values, which emphasise rehabilitation and a dedicated volunteer base. The team behind The Last Mile is Chris Redlitz, Beverly Parenti and Kathleen “Action” Jackson, as Shadeed calls her. They are volunteers with experience across teaching and technology lines. The trio meet the men regularly, working with them to brainstorm business plans right down to the logos they want to use to represent themselves.

The seven participants were selected from thousands of prisoners

based on recommendations, their existing credentials and their aptitude. At the end of the programme, they will be suitably trained for a paid internship within Silicon Valley’s technology industry.

“This might as well be the penitentiary version of *The Apprentice*, as far as I’m concerned,” Shadeed joked in a recent post. “How is this not a reality show?”

In addition to blogging, the prisoners are communicating with the outside world through Twitter. The tweets aren’t live – they have to pass them along to a volunteer with internet access – but they provide quick observations from daily life in the prison.

From Tariq, a 44-year-old convicted of burglary: “Hung on the yard

today. Sunshine and blue skies. Probably a more beautiful day from the other side of the fence, but not by much.”

From Phil, who is completing university courses while incarcerated: “West Block is filthy! I’m not there, but I’ve heard it is bad. No power, mould, smells like urine, water everywhere. Call OSHA!” (The Occupational Health and Safety Administration, a department of the American government.)

The Last Mile has only just begun a six-month trial term, but it is starting to catch the attention of mainstream America. Shadeed’s blog is being picked up by the popular website and newsletter *The Daily Love*, which has a stable of writers who publish positive thoughts and

messages from across the web. The Last Mile also has plans for a video documentary that will tell the men’s stories.

Judging by the online response, the American public is eager to hear more insight from Shadeed and his fellow participants about what happens to people when they go behind bars.

“I am sure you will have much to share that will touch us and show us to be grateful for our situation regardless of where we stand,” posted a woman named Tina. “I could not tell you are a beginner in this blogging path, looking forward to hearing your messages!”

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