

Sites and Signs of Remembrance interviews

Caribbean Over-50s Association (COFA) group interview March 2007

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Participants:

Erica Atkins
Joyce Gibbs
Carmen Ward
Veronica Shirfield
Cynthia Davies
Shirley Clarke
Irma Reid

Erica came from Jamaica to Surrey in 1958 to study teaching at the Montessori College.

Erica Atkins (from Jamaica)

I had been to boarding school as a girl in Jamaica. The headmistress knew of this college in Surrey– the Montessori Training College – and in 1958, when I was 18, she arranged for me to study teaching there. I brought a big trunk over with my clothes. The headmistress said, “When you’re getting your clothes ready to go, don’t choose bright colours like reds and greens”.

Although I was the only black person there, I didn’t have any problems. Everybody was friendly to me and wanted to get to know me. So I didn’t have a bad experience. I went out with the other students during school holidays; they invited me to their homes because I couldn’t get to my home. So they would take it in turns. I made friends with the other students and, this is interesting actually, I did discover in St Peter’s hospital in Chertsey there was a few Caribbean students there who were doing nursing. So that was very convenient because I used to go there to have my hair done. Otherwise, I didn’t see many people from the Caribbean.

Shirley Clarke

All the television, when you did see a television, was black suits and black and white and grey and also it was never colours. But not only that, when you came out, if you were wearing something bright, people used to look at you very funny; especially if you had flowers. They would think that you were wearing your curtains or furniture fabric.

Irma Reid

My sister and I, when we came over to work in a hospital, you had to have a medical by Doctor Boss as she was the doctor in charge of the hospital. We went and she had to examine us so we had to strip off and of course I had the brightest yellow knickers on, Christiane had the brightest orange knickers on. And she saw Christiane first and when came to me she said, “Oh, I just saw your sister. You’re both wearing bright knickers”.

Erica

The church always comes into it doesn’t it. I used to go to a church and there was a lady in the church who, at the first Christmas holidays, invited me to stay at her house, so that was good. It was in Cranley in Surrey so everybody was white.

First of all, all my experience was with white people. And then actually the first time I wanted to mix with people from the Caribbean was when I came to Woolwich... about eight years ago; because all my

experience, all the time, seemed to be just with white people. Because when I left college I then went to teach. It was in Stoke Newington. Then a few black people were beginning to emerge. Then I went to teach at a school in Surrey because I married my husband who was white. We went to live in Canterbury and I needed to work in that area. And this is very interesting because that is a white area as well and you'd think it would be very difficult for a black person to get a post in a white school. But it wasn't difficult. I went for an interview and there were white people there and I got the job. And, of course, all the children in my class were white. And I think I did very well in that school.

Then myself and my husband had to move to Lytham St Anne's in Lancashire, northern England and you know that is a predominantly white area. So that has been my experience always the only black person in a white community with a white family, in-laws, etc. When I brought up my children they were the only black children in the school. And at the same time I was the only black teacher in the schools. Because I consider myself a good teacher I was very much in demand. And when I had a class of all white children and it was time to change years; when at the end of the year, you have another class, another set of children all these white people wanted their children to come into my class. Because, of course, black people we know how to teach, don't we?

Even in Jamaica there were a lot of whites; the headmistress was white, in the boarding school where the white people sent their children. I was always mixing with white people. So when I came to live in Woolwich, a very multi-cultural area, it was a different experience for me. I would make special efforts to meet up with and get to know black people. I am conscious of the fact that all my life I had dealt just with white people; even in my job, everything.

Regarding my children, Louise was very unhappy because she was the only black girl in her school. Jane turned out to be a child prodigy; she was a very good violinist so she was sent to the Yehudi Menuhin School so she went into an all-white situation as well. so that seemed to be the story of my life. Louise has married a white doctor, and she's a nurse. Jane, being mixed race, has married someone mixed race.

Joyce Gibbs

I come from Guyana. It was British Guyana then. I was in the civil service working in Whitehall for about thirty-three years. We didn't have a lot of black people in the civil service when I joined; perhaps one in each department. You could count them on your fingers. We had racial issues in the Civil Service. For example you were promoted up to a certain level. Even though you could often be substituting for someone in a higher position, when the board comes up, you never got that job. And then you would find that you were scattered about. Like one department in the same industry you would find one black person, and then you'd go round and you'd find another one. This caused a lot of rivalry between the black people. It wasn't an easy thing to handle.

I also lived in some places where I was the only black person. For instance I lived in Enfield then I lived in Hampstead, not West Hampstead, but the Hampstead near Belsize Park, where they were mostly white. They were sort of different from the white people in Woolwich. They were more educated you'd find – professionals.

And then I moved to Blackheath where I had a friend. At the time there were not lots of black people either but still there was a difference. They were more middle class but not professionals. I didn't have a problem with friends who were white people. Then again I didn't have a lot of black friends either. I did have some, from home. It didn't matter to me because I was also accustomed to mixing with white people you see. When I came over here there were not a lot of black people where I was in Luton anyway. Mostly the people there were Indians and it was a difference. Moving across to Enfield I found at the time the population was very white. I had some very good white friends in Surrey where I used to go and spend Christmas and things like that, for the simple reason that I had no relations over here. I

had a friend who was also from back home in Guyana and she also had nobody over here, so it was just the two of us.

Then as the years went by a lot of black people came to Blackheath. There was one family who moved next to me and they came from Jamaica. Most of the people coming over then were from Jamaica. It wasn't as people think. People think that, because we all come from the West Indies, it's lovey-dovey between us. But in fact, it wasn't like that at all; there was inter-island rivalry. However, in the circumstances, we did become friends because we were the only two black families. I was black and the Jamaicans were black, so like that we became friendly. You make friends with them or you don't have any black friends.

Shirley Clarke

It used to be very hard for a black nurse to get promotion. You had to work twice as hard as the white person to get promotion. And at the same time, very few get right to the top; they cut you off half way, unless you decide to leave that hospital.

Joyce Gibbs

I find that as I get older, I enjoy being with my own people, as well as white people. I have some very good friends. But I find that when I'm with my own people I'm on the same wavelength as them. They can follow what you're talking about. You don't have to do something different just to fit in here or fit in there.

Erica Atkins

At the end of my road there was a hairdresser; a black hairdresser. I was very glad that she was down there because there were always black people down there having their hair done. And I used to enjoy going and sitting there just to listen to them talk and getting the accent because ever since I'd left Jamaica I wasn't involved in all this. I used to just listen to them. It was lovely.

So then members of the COFA (Caribbean Over-Fifties Association) were the first lot of black people I got involved with. I made a special point to get to know them. I even took a group of them – Joyce is one of them – to the Lake District. My life was built around the Lake District and that area so I took them to see that. And so I've joined this group now. Because of my background, Black History Month meant a lot to me; seeing black people doing their things and getting involved in the culture and all that. And that is how I got involved in this group.

Irma Reid

In Trinidad, we used to get books come through the post or sometimes or we would go to the Ministry of Health and they would give us addresses to write to and then they would send these brochures with all these hospitals with all the pictures of the rooms and they tell you what food you're getting and things like that.

Then you'd write off to as many as you wanted to and then some will answer you and say "sorry, no vacancies" and some will say yes and then you decide which one you would like to go to. So you reply to them and they will tell you "you have to take this letter to the Ministry of Health and they will interview you". So I went to the Ministry of Health and they asked stupid questions like "do you know how to make a macaroni pie?" I don't know why but that was one of the questions that stick in my brain. I think they were probably trying to see your reaction because people do ask you something that is not relevant to what you're doing. And I just said "yes, I know" and I told them how to make a macaroni pie – macaroni cheese as they call it here – and then they said to me "yes we approve". Straight away – you go outside for half an hour and then they call you back and they approve. Then they write to you and you send your letter off to whichever hospital you chose to go to.

When I came to England in 1970 after spending two weeks in Ipswich with a friend I went straight into Grove Park Hospital. It wasn't a bad experience because the first thing I noticed when I got there was

they had so many Trinidadians. A great majority of nurses were Trinidadian. And then, after that they had the odd people from the other West Indian islands and then the Irish people. Very, very few English people were there. I think there were two from India. There were a couple of people from Africa but basically that hospital was mainly Trinidadians. So it was nice and I didn't miss home and things like that. It wasn't as lonely as bad as if we had gone somewhere else.

And the other thing about Grove Park Hospital as well is that when we got there they organised for nurses to stay with white English families in their home for two weeks. It wasn't forced upon us. We were asked if we would like to meet white English people and if we would like to go and spend some time with them to see how they live and what they do and so on.

Some of us picked up on this offer and I went to Reverend Leach and his family. They lived in North Buntingford Road which is in Hertfordshire. We took the train to Stevenage then the wife, Mrs Leach, came and picked us up at the train station. My friend Shirley was there as well. She went with us. It was about twenty minutes – half an hour drive to where they actually lived. They lived in this small village. It had one pub, one church. The Post Office was a little confectionery shop. But they were very, very good to us; the Reverend Leach and his wife. They had three children. There was a son who was a pilot. The girl worked in London; I don't know what she did, the youngest. The oldest child she was twenty five years old but she was a Downs Syndrome child and she was very – you know how Downs Syndrome children are very friendly and loving - and she was really like that but she was also spoilt and sometimes she used to get on your nerves but they were very nice.

The first weekend we were there, they took us to a country fete which was in their village and they actually gave us money to spend when we were there. You don't expect to go to somebody's house and they are giving you money. I think we bought local things; books and all those sort of things you get in a fete. I think that Reverend Leach used to do it as a regular thing when a new batch of students came in because nobody seemed surprised to see us. Everyone was nice and friendly to us. We didn't have a problem. They took us to Cambridge, to the University and showed us where all the different faculties were and to the bridges going over the river and it was really, really nice.

Veronica Shirfield

I had a friend who lived in Lee, south east London. The day I came over from the West Indies, she came to meet me at Victoria station. But unfortunately I was so ill for the two weeks that I stayed with them that I saw nothing of the country or what was happening outside. My first experience, when I looked through the window; when I was able to get out of bed, because I had pneumonia then - I was very ill. I catch it on the boat or I don't know where I catch it but I was so ill.

I was treated by a lovely doctor Brian Thompson, you know his son has now taken over the practice in Lee. He came and took one look at me and said, "Ah, we got drugs here that we make you better in a couple of days." He put me on some antibiotics and some vitamin C. And within a few days I was myself again; I was fine. Just as well, because at the end of that week I had to go and have the interview at the hospital in East London. My friend told me to get a taxi and then I had my first experience of going under the river through the Blackwall Tunnel. I came through this tunnel and said "Oh my God!" Coming from Lee, through the tunnel, the taxi drop me straight at the hospital. So I said "Well, I don't know my way back home. How am I going to get back through this tunnel?" Then somebody advised me which bus to take and then I came back by bus.

I went to work at a hospital in east London. I came through a friend who was already working there. She wrote and tell me they need nurses so if I come I would have no problem and that is what I did. On the 11th July 1958 I started my training here at Langthorn Hospital, a geriatric hospital in East London, which means they only looked after the elderly. We were affiliated to another hospital, the Forest Hospital, to study surgical nursing and we nursed children from the local Doctor Barnardos Home to learn about children's nursing. I spent two years there. There were many West Indian girls there; from Jamaica, from Trinidad, and Irish girls, mostly Irish girls. So I had lots of company there.

As soon as I started at the hospital I wasn't lonely at all because, as I told you, there were all these Caribbean girls there. We had a lovely Home Sister - we used to call them home sister in those days - They took quite an interest in us from home; we had nobody here as relatives so they looked after us very well. They were trained nurses and they were sisters. You know, the top of the profession - ward sisters. But instead of being on the ward they looked after the nurses in the home. We were so happy there.

We went out together. We'd go up the high street shopping in the day and we had the weekends where we'd go dancing down at Tottenham Court Road. We used to go to the Astoria Ballroom in Tottenham Court Road. That was the nearest one for us. We dressed up and had our nice dancing clothes on and then come back and get off the train. And then we had - people say they can't walk the road now because they are so scared - but we used to walk through a cemetery at night because it was a short cut. The buses were finished at one o'clock in the morning so we walked through this cemetery and were not scared at all. Sometimes you had to get a pass if you wanted to come back late. You were offered one pass a week.

In Langthorne, the first hospital I went to, I met a lovely girl called Dorothy. She came from the Forest Hospital to come and do her geriatrics at my hospital and we became friends. They were lovely to me. They used to take me to the theatres. It was the first time I went to the theatre - I used to go to the cinema at home but we haven't got theatres at home. They took me to their home and were very nice. Up to the time I got married. They came to my wedding and helped me look after the children when things started going wrong. And the husband is still alive but unfortunately for me, I lost my friend Dorothy with cancer about eleven years ago. I have another friend from when I first came over and we are still friends to the present day.

When I left the hospital in East London, I went across the river and I went to work in Ashford. And from Ashford we took the green line bus, the 702 or something like that, and that used to drop us right at the dance hall. We would dance the night away and run to catch the last coach home.

That's how I met my husband. I married a white English man who I met at a dance at the Hammersmith Palais. We used to go all over the place dancing. Well, my parents weren't here to object. I mean I told them he was nice. They said, "If it suits you, fair enough, but make sure you don't make a mistake." But his parents, oh they were dead against it because she said to me, "You're going to have a lot of problems because when you have the children people wouldn't love them. They'll have obstacles, they wouldn't get jobs." Well we took no notice of them and we did get married and we spent nearly nine years together and then he started to look at another black girl. We had three lovely children so it was not a waste. I had twins and all. And then I've got my grandchildren now so I'm quite happy that I did get married, even though it didn't last. I still keep in touch with his family. His mother died last year. His father died four years before that.

My children? Well, people used to call them names. The girl, the twin girl, she was very sensitive. The boy never take any notice. And the last girl was quite tough. She could look after herself. But the first girl, the twin girl, she was quite sensitive. She always used to come and say that they were teasing her, pulling her hair and calling her half-caste and half-dummy and all sorts of names. I just tell her she has to be strong and don't take any notice. Her father used to tell her, "Tell them your father is going to come and beat them up."

Cynthia Davis

I was married before I came here. I came over in 1962. My husband came over in 1961, a year before I did and, of course, I followed him, which was the in-thing at the time. Now it's not. I'm divorced. He's gone back to Jamaica. He left with the intention that I should follow, but I didn't go because I'm my own woman now and I do my own thing. But in those days I had to follow him, you know, I had to do as my husband say. Anyway, I came up here and I had several jobs and then I went into nursing. But social life

was no problem because we came up to some family we knew from home and we lived in Clapham Common which was, you know... well, I'm sure you know the population there. Personally, I didn't have any problem with English people, but there were problems in finding rented accommodation. It had to be rented because of course we couldn't buy at the time and, wherever you went there were notices and things on the door "No Blacks, No Irish, No Dogs, No Children" and things like that. But eventually we got somewhere and we were okay. It's not everyone that had that notice up. Some people had and others didn't. When we did get rented accommodation there were so many rules and regulations. You couldn't have a bath on a Sunday after whatever time; I can't remember the exact time, but you had to have your bath before that period of time. No washing on Sundays. There was so many rules and things like that.

But anyway, we survived and we pulled through. And then, I worked in several jobs and when I came to this area then I started my nursing in the Miller Hospital in Greenwich and in Greenwich District Hospital. And then I went into nursing and I did my nursing and I suppose you realise that the pay was terrible; the pay was unmentionable. So I worked in nursing for about maybe eight years and then I left and did social work. When I applied I was Grade One and then you actually work yourself up to Grade Four. I did twenty years with Greenwich Borough as a social worker. I was the only black deputy manager in Greenwich at the time and everyone wanted to come and see who is this black manager. It was just a laugh. Even when I went to do my training in Bromley College, my study supervisor was a field social worker at the time so there was a lot of questions "Who is she? Who is she?" But it was just me. But I did enjoy social work. I did enjoy my work. Nursing was my first choice but I enjoyed social work even more than I did nursing.

Carmen Ward

I came straight from St Vincent. A friend of mine, we went to school together, and she came about six months ahead of me and she gave me the address of the hospital and I wrote to the matron and, from there, they accepted my application. I went to Essex County Hospital in Colchester and when I went there, there were lots of Dominican nurses. My friend was the only Vincetian and myself and there were a couple of Trinidadians there.

We went to the cinema (there were, I think, two cinemas in Colchester) or to church or the park or whatever, to amuse ourselves. I didn't meet my husband for a very long time. From Essex, when I finished my training I stayed on, I moved up to London and did Midwifery Part One and then I moved to High Wickham. I did Part Two there, stayed there and worked there. Then I came to London and worked in the London Hospital. I worked in London Hospital and I went to Enfield and worked in the community there and I moved to Lewisham. It wasn't till I was in Enfield that I met my husband. He was from Trinidad. He was in education.

We went to church. We never really made friends in the church, the various churches you went to. The people were always cold. The majority were white, they weren't so welcoming. They didn't make you feel welcome.

Irma Reid

They start dropping off once they see black faces coming to church. You find that, gradually, they are going to the different churches. Even when I came here to St Peter's. It had a lot of white people, a lot Irish people and so on. The Irish people stayed but the English people didn't. They went off to Our Lady of Grace; the Catholic church. And gradually, you find, if you go to church now, you can count the white people on one hand now at St Peter's. The majority is African because I think that's the community in Woolwich. Sometimes you can't even follow the mass now because they have all the visiting people from the different African countries and they come and do their Mass the way they do it over there. I mean, it's very interesting, don't get me wrong and it's very lively so you find a lot of young African children coming to Mass now. But the young white people, they don't come to mass and the older ones who went to my church when I first came over are dying out. Our priest is very nice and very welcoming and warm. He

encourages everyone. The Africans know they belong and they help keep the church going. There used to be £9 or £10 in the collection but now it might be £500.

What is the value of COFA, the Caribbean Over-Fifties Association?

Everyone

Coming together, a group of people from different islands coming together and gelling together. I think it's very good and it's very interesting to have a group like this. So we can keep together, we can commune with each other. If we have got any ideas we can pass them on to each other; whether practical or whatever. So I think groups like this, they are important.

Shirley Clarke

I came from over the river. First because at that time I didn't know of any group in East London where I lived. I wasn't well at the time but I knew Irma in this group and they'd just formed this group; the Caribbean Over-Fifties Group. So I said "Oh, I'll try it, I'll drive." So I came across and met other members and decided I'd stay.

I think to have all of us so that we can all come together to meet other members and then go out to our Black outings and our meals. We can socialise and, at the same time, know what is happening within the area because each one of us come from different areas. So when we do meet then we discuss what is happening and then we can say this is happening in Lewisham or Greenwich.

Irma Reid

It hasn't gone off in different directions. The only disappointment I have is what you find in most groups – diminishing numbers. What we wanted to do originally, besides doing all the things Shirley spoke about, we wanted to do some outreach work, you know, to the elderly Caribbean people in the area. Visit them and things like that. Unfortunately, one we haven't got the finances and also we haven't got a permanent meeting place or office so it's a bit difficult to do that. When you have a permanent place you can apply to get approval, because you have to be vetted before you go into people's homes, they check your character and so on. That side of things has not happened as quickly as I hoped.