

Transcript of a presentation delivered at the Brockley "Festival of Ideas for Change" held on Sunday 20th November 2016 in the Mural Hall at Prendergast Hilly Fields College, SE4, London.
Festival website: www.brockleysociety.org.uk/brockley-festival-of-ideas

From Life to Action

Jacqueline Walker

Read on her behalf by friend Rosalind Stopps.

I have 10 minutes. I'm not going to speak of great philosophical, creative or political ideas, though without doubt these stimulated, challenged and authenticated me.

At this point in my life I realise whatever I've done, whether teaching the poorest kids in Lewisham, working with emotionally disturbed young people, in prisons, writing, protesting, trying to change outcomes as an anti-racist trainer, facing fascists, challenging nationalism and cheap identity politics, opposing particularism, patriarchy, spreading the word on social media, bringing up my own children, wherever I've been I've been driven by a sense of hope that change is possible, always possible.

Like many people in Lewisham, I wasn't born here. That hope for change has travelled a long road with me, from jazz swinging Harlem and Kingston Jamaica in the 1950s, to South East London here and now.

That hope comes not primarily from theory but from the communities I have had the privilege to be part of *as well as* the oppression and exclusion I have been subject to.

And while you might say, starting off in America in the 1950s, with a black, Jewish, civil rights, activist mother, and a Russian, communist, Jewish, civil rights, activist father, I was born to seek out change, it isn't true. Like everyone, I had a choice. I could have ignored what I saw around me, folded into myself and maybe just watched more TV.

Given the political situation, globally as well as more locally at the moment, watching TV may have been a better option.

But it gives me comfort, comfort and courage, to be reminded that when I was born in 1954, at the height of the McCarthy witch-hunt, to even be called a communist was enough to lose your job and worse. To sit on a bus next to a white person if you were black could have you both beaten and worse.

It's good to recall that being on the 'wrong side' was enough to get you slung into a psychiatric hospital, be pilloried in the media, hounded, threatened, stripped bare.

That an agency of the American government, in the way governments do, felt they had the moral right to break the law, invade privacy, to blackmail, to harass, open your mail, wire tap your phone if they suspected you were a Communist or in the civil rights movement.

It's necessary to keep in my mind that when my parents were beaten, despised, made the object of racism and, as in my mother's case deported for un-American activities, they both must have held their breath and despaired as they saw their lives falling to pieces.

But as they say, history is a long time, the struggle never stops and everything changes.

And change happened here too – in England, in London, yes, even south of the river in Lewisham.

When my family came to Deptford Church Street in 1962 it was an Irish ghetto, lived in by the descendants of the navies who laid the original railroad that enabled Brockley to be built, constructing it as a Victorian, middle class, suburban haven from the city.

When I close my eyes I see Deptford as it was in the 60s, First Communion parades and the meanest poverty. The scars of the recent war against fascism were barely healed in 1960s London. Bombs sites were play spaces, craters gouged out between smoke-blackened, back-to-back homes of the poorest who could afford no where else to go.

In the 1960s there was no council housing for blacks. The Labour party of the time ran a colour bar in Deptford. Bit-by-bit, as migrants do, blacks found alternatives and bought up larger houses in Brockley, in New Cross – wherever was cheap - subdividing them into smaller units to share with family and friends.

But this is no working class idyll, no 'Call the Midwife', sanitized rendition of a lie of working class London. Men were brutalized and overworked, too often taking their frustration out on their women and children. Life was hard for everyone but if you were black, it was worse.

In the end my mother had the windows of our house boarded up, the letterbox screwed shut to protect us from the stones and petrol bombs, the dog turds posted what seemed like almost every day into our house. 'They' wanted us out.

Like all survivors, it's hard to share what you have had to overcome - older black people simply don't talk about this.

I lived in this area as a child but as an adult I chose to remain, living, studying, working and bringing my children into adulthood in Lewisham. I have had the privilege to be part of, and to live with waves of migrants that transformed our community - the Irish, the Caribbeans, the Africans, the Vietnamese boat people washed to our shores against, if I recall, as much opposition as we get against refugees now.

And then there were the Goldsmiths students, the drop outs, the creatives, the teachers, the people who just couldn't find anywhere else as cheap (and nice) to live and even now, and more recently, there are the people who have come here because they *can* afford it and find in this area a tolerance, a beauty that for me remains unique. All of this is precious. All of us need to be unremitting and observant to protect it.

Next year is a time-changing year in Lewisham – the balance is tipped. For the first time, people of colour will make up the majority of the Lewisham population. Now I want you to look around, yes, look around, right here, now. And I want you to think of the places you

work in, the political party you are part of, the places of power, locally and nationally, and I want you to think of the colour of those people and I want you to hold that in your mind for a moment.

Change has come for minorities too. As someone of Jewish and Caribbean heritage I have no doubt that the position of African Caribbean people has improved since I was a child. And the last 80 years people of Jewish heritage have seen their opportunities transformed beyond almost anything that could have been hoped for. Still subject to abuse, Jews are now represented in all professions, at all levels. They contribute fully in the political, intellectual and business life of our society.

That is not the same for people of colour. Look around again. People of colour are 50% of our population, where are they here? Blacks still make up the greater part of the Lewisham population but where are they now, for example, in the Brockley Conservation area? Where are they in your work, in your political party?

Many of you will know the figures but they bear repetition.

If you are a young person of colour, whereas your white counterparts have seen long term unemployment slightly fall, for you it has doubled. If you are a black woman you are 7 times more likely to be detained under mental health legislation, more likely to be imprisoned for the same crime even if you have a similar background.

As a person of colour you are likely to die younger, have half the chance of getting into a top university, twice the chance of living in poverty and while that is happening you will lack the political representation you deserve in order to change things.

So can ideas change things – for me the yes, but only if that change comes from the people, a bottom up change that through solidarity changes the structures that exclude and occlude. Until that happens we just have to keep struggling being part of the change we all need.