

Windrush Era: Memories of a Child

At age eight I arrived from Jamaica with my brother on a B.O.A.C flight (now British Airways) to join our parents in England in the 50s. We heard about the cold weather, snow, and fog in the winter, also that coal fires were lit in homes to keep them warm and wondered why the houses did not burn down!

Mum and dad had already bought their first home, a three-story property with a basement, 18 Kensal Road, a poorer area in Paddington London. It was not unusual to see a few bombed-out houses resulting from World War II. Our family occupied the basement flat and rented rooms to other West Indian immigrants; finding decent accommodation was difficult in those days.

Both mum and dad had unskilled jobs working for British Rail at first, and my brother and I went to the local St. Stephens primary school, where we were the only black children at that time. Taking a crowded bus to school was strange as sometimes no one would take the empty seat next to you, preferring to stand. Most children were friendly, but we must have been a curiosity as we would be stared at, some wanting touch our hair, and a few called us names at times because we were black. This was hurtful and there was no one to turn to and nothing we could do to stop it.

After school we and other children would play games in the street like skipping, hopscotch, hide and seek, and throwing ropes over the gas lamp poles to make swings. I was friends with twin girls living across the road, and remember their front door was always left open during the day. They introduced us to bread and dripping (an acquired taste), also fish and chips was nice, apart from being wrapped in newspaper.

We looked forward to the weekends and if mum was not working, she would take us on train journeys, sometimes to the coast. Other enjoyable occasions were when some family members and friends met together in the home for a meal, calypso music and a good chat, but we children would entertain ourselves otherwise.

My parents had a strong Christian faith, and we attended a house church in Westbourne Grove Paddington, where immigrants were welcomed. The church was a source of stability, assurance, and friendship in the life of our family.

We moved from Paddington to Kensal Rise, then Cricklewood, Harlesden and Wembley; each house and area a little better than the one before. I saw that despite hardship and struggles, my parents managed to establish themselves in the UK.

In those days immigrant children were not expected to achieve much in the school system. However, when the time came for me to leave secondary school, to my teacher's surprise my mother said she wanted me to continue my education. I wanted to become a nurse so a Pre-nursing course at Chiswick Polytechnic was recommended. At the interview, the course tutor said I should ask my class teacher which GCEs I would be taking. The school then hurriedly enrolled me for two subjects: Needlework and Domestic Science, which I passed to their amazement.

During the Pre-nursing course I gained four other GCEs in English literature, Biology, Botany, and Anatomy and Physiology, with grades ranging from A to C.

I went on to complete my Registered General Nurse (RGN) training at the Whittington Hospital in North London, then during my career progression, qualified as a Midwife, Health Visitor, and some years later a Registered Nurse Tutor. Along the way I attained a Dip. Health Studies, MSc, and a PhD.

My work in the NHS covered medical and surgical wards, A&E, ICU, CCU, Cardio thoracic surgery, District Nursing, Health Visiting, and latterly Lecturing in Adult Nursing at the University of Hertfordshire, from where I retired. Now I am mainly involved in my local community, as a Harrow Councillor.

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