

Remembering the 1970s

Derek Cox



Mr. Cox has been a youth and community worker for over 40 years and worked for Avenues Unlimited in Brick Lane. It employed the first full-time Asian youth worker, Ashok Basu Dev, in the early 1970s. Mr Cox was involved in setting up the Montefiore Community Centre. He now works for New Avenues, the successor to Avenues Unlimited. Age 68, still working as a full time youth and community worker.

..... We were one of the best youth organisations in the area, at that time we had very good staff and so on. I haven't mentioned Clare Murphy, (who) came and joined us in the 1970s and her partner Terry Fitzpatrick was in Deal Street and running the squatters. That's how he got electrocuted and burned his face. He was very active in the anti-fascist movement, and still is, probably the one who stayed most consistent to that cause. In those days, we did one or two pioneering things. Lady Plowden, she wrote a report called the Plowden Report which extended the school hours. She was the Governor of Robert Montefiore School in Vallance Road, it's now the Osmani School, it used to be a secondary school. The old Robert Montefiore Junior School was at the corner of Deal Street. When they moved to new premises in Buxton Street, Lady Plowden and one or two of us got together, she was the chair of the committee and I was the vice chair, setting up the Montefiore Community Centre. And the Montefiore Community Centre was very crucial in 1980s. As a community resource and all the big meetings that took place in the area, took place in the Montefiore Centre. It was quite an exciting place. Some of the then new youth organisations, now established, like the Progressive Youth Organisation (PYO), started off in there. The Avenue's workers more like John and me; we helped setting up the Boundary Community School on the Boundary Estate. We then followed, what was called the community development method, our job was to stand back and encourage people to run things for themselves. And John Newbiggin did a lot of that and Caroline Adams as well. Also Peter East used to have the hostel (TOC H) in Trinity Square in Tower Hill. I remember the bowling alley, we played on there and there were a number of key people, like Jamal, Jalal and Syed Nurul and also a number of other people who were the residents. That was another thing was going on. Ashok and Peter first and then John took over, taking groups of young men to residential holidays, with TOC H. TOC H got centres all over the country, that was a very forward looking and interesting thing. At that time the frontline worker would have been Caroline and John, with backup from Clare Murphy and me. Clare got much more involved when Caroline left. Caroline and John lasted about 4-6 years or something like that. It was in the early 1980s, because Pola Uddin replaced Caroline in the 1980. In the 1980s, all of us started working with the Bangladeshi community then. And hoped we carried on some of the good work.

..... There were a lot of people and quite distinguished local political careers, so there were lot of able people who were able to organise. And as you know the Bangladeshi community has extended family networks and if you want to get lot of people there it is not difficult to do and for example at No 19 Wheelers House there was a very active guy, just ordinary guys. It became part of their life to challenge and confront the National Front. It was really Sunday activity, because they (National Front) sold the newspapers on Sundays. They had their methods of organising themselves. It was people sitting in Brick Lane, so that people can't buy and sale. There were running skirmishes as a youth worker and had to go to court sometimes, you know people were fighting and some people got arrested and so on.