

Interview with Dennis Carney for the Haringey Vanguard Project

Extract: 00:00 – 11:55

Dennis Carney: Well, I was born in Manchester. Back in the early 60s. Um, I'm the first born of four children, two Jamaican parents, I moved to London when I was 20, one of the main reasons why I'm moved to London was that I knew I was gay and wanted to live my life as an openly gay man. I didn't feel that I could do that in Manchester at the time. And I don't know how it happened, but I managed to get to London and I ended up at a party, a black gay party in Brixton. I walked into this house, it's a house party and the house was just packed full of black gay men and I was like I thought I had gone to heaven. Because growing up in Manchester there were no black gay house parties and there wasn't a black gay scene. It's was very much a kind of mainstream white gay scene. So, which I didn't feel... I wasn't made to feel a part of... I remember my very first time going to a gay venue in Manchester. I remember walking round the bar.

Time and time again I was walking around the park, just as these whites guys were going, they would just walk in no questions asked and when I get there, I've finally built up the courage to do it. You do know this is a gay bar? I remember you know I got quizzed while the white guys didn't. I mean, for a first-time experience on the gay scene it really shaped my view, because I remember thinking before I went there, I was very anxious about it...my first time thinking it should be alright. They know what discrimination feels like as gay people so they're not going to discriminate against you because of your race, because you're black and I got a rude awakening that very first time.

It completely shaped my future experience actually, the more I think about it. And it's probably one of the reasons why I joined BLGC years later, looking back on it now. So yeah, so I moved once I went to that party, four weeks later, I was living in London. Yeah, I think 4-6 weeks, 6 weeks later, yeah, I managed to find a job 'cause I was at the time in Manchester, I was working for the civil service and yeah I managed to transfer to London to headquarters personnel, yeah, at Elephant and Castle and then I managed to find a place to live in Peckham curiously enough. Uh I stayed there going on about three months and then I moved to Finsbury Park, I moved in with a boyfriend, an older guy.

And then from there I moved - to - out the frying pan into the fire so they say - to Vauxhall with another boyfriend for about a year and then I managed to find my own place, which was through Ujima Housing Association, which is one of the few - while saying one of the few - I don't think this is actually documented much or people are aware but I think the Housing Association movement, in the 70s and 80s was largely kick-started by black housing.

Maybe because who was the group who was most disadvantaged in terms of housing, it was black people because of racism and discrimination and so... Anyway, Ujima - I was very fortunate to get a flat, a studio place. I was there for 10 years and I think it was there ... so because I was living in Brixton ...no Stockwell was where the flat was. I used to go to Brixton Recreation Centre swimming every day after work or something and then I saw a sign. A post on the entrance to Brixton Recreation Centre and it said: *'Homosexuality in the black*

communities - Public discussion or something'. I was like wow. Wow, I've got to go to this. But I was really scared, I was only about 23 at the time. 23 yeah.

Because I used to go there all the time the receptionist would see me every day and then I thought well if I tell her that I want to go to this, she's going to think and know that I'm gay. And I remember debating in my mind about well Dennis, are you going to do this, what are you doing to do... then I thought fuck **** I'm gonna give them my 20 Pence to get in, it was a 20 pence entrance fee to get in and off I went. And this meeting was a community meeting with everybody, so it wasn't necessarily everybody there was LGBT. And it was... as you can imagine back in the 80s. It was a highly charged event I'll put it that way yeah, but I loved it I loved it so much because it was a brand new experience, I'd never been to anything like this before.

Uh I got talking to Robert who was one of the workers at BLGC. And he said to me, Oh Dennis we're having another meeting in a few weeks, would you like to come – I was like yeah, thinking about the experience, yeah definitely. So, I went to this meeting of BLGC, which wasn't another public meeting. It was the Annual General Meeting of BLGC and before I know it, I get elected as the Treasurer, was it the Treasurer at first? It wasn't the Chair, I can't remember but I think it was Treasurer. Yeah, I don't know anything about finance or anything like this so looking back I don't even know how I got nominated, it probably was Robert that nominated me.

I think it's fair to say that Robert M saw some potential in me or something. I don't know what 'cause I still think about that when I think about you know how is it that we met at that meeting? Anyway, next thing I know I end up becoming the Chair of BLGC. I think I was the Chair for about five years, if I remember rightly.

And as you know the project was set up to set up a centre and in terms of its history from what I understand it got its funding from, its first set of funding from the GLC. Uh And you know, I think the first office that I remember was an outbuilding, was a prefab building, oh my gosh, when I think back. On Haringey Town Hall no, Tottenham Town Hall premises, which is now where the cinema is.

And oh my gosh that's changed. Yeah, that's where it was and we're in this very cramped... in fact, the offices weren't much bigger than this, actually when I think about it, it was probably twice the size of this. Two rooms. Gosh, yeah, anyway so the project was set up to set up a Centre. And it took quite some time. And one of the... I think one of the main reasons why it took some time... it was that BLGC got kind of inundated really with uh responses to the community – I mean people in real need, people who are being kicked out of their homes. People who are struggling to come to terms with their sexuality because this is the time before gay marriage, civil partnerships, Elton John on the front of *The Sun* newspaper with this partner and baby - long before then. In fact. I think back, the very first time I had sex, I was 18, gay sex. I never forget being absolutely terrified that I was gonna go to prison because I was breaking the law because I was underage. You had to be 21 to have sex with men without being prosecuted. Fortunately, I didn't end up in prison. But you know, I remember it was a very real fear. And for an 18-year-old to have their first sexual experience and that being the lasting thing memory rather than the event itself is quite sad when I think about it. But that tells you a lot about the world back then.

So anyway, yeah BLGC what can you say about BLGC, it changed my life. I don't think I would be the Dennis I am today, if it wasn't for those experiences - it was, yeah, and you know, I ended up including all the time I started going to BLGC I was still working for the civil service and it was through Robert's encouragement that I left the civil service, I'd worked there for 7 years over there and switched back into housing.

I remember he even sat me down and we did a mock interview for the job and I got the job. I didn't have any experience in housing and how I got the job I do not know however I did and yeah that just changed my life.

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