

**Interview with Savi Hensmen for the Haringey Vanguard project**

**Extract 00:00 – 12:31**

Savi: Okay so, I was born in Sri Lanka in 1962, but I came to the UK with my family in 1964, so I don't really remember Sri Lanka, except from subsequent visits there, but um... the connection remained and remains...uh... through the years... uh... I now work as a Patient and Public Involvement Coordinator for health research network or collaboration, and er... I have worked in service user carer and public involvement for quite a number of years... er... previously in the voluntary sector. In fact, most of my working life has been in the voluntary sector.

Akiha: Okay, thank you. Um... so, I sort of wanted to jump straight into the activism that you've been doing throughout your life, um... I wanna start off with asking how did you... sort of... get into um... doing some activist work for the LGBT community?

Savi: I suppose I had been involved in the anti-racist movement before... uh... uh... as an adolescent it was very clear uh, that there were a lot of challenges uh... a lot of hostility... and indeed earlier but I think I become more confident in challenging that uh... as a teenager. Uh... I had also by that stage realised that I was different from most of the other girls at school... uh... that I was attracted to mainly to members of the same sex, and I was um... not happy about that initially. It took me a lot of time to come to terms with it. Um... it was a time when there was a lot of negativity around... there were very few positive images, especially black and minority ethnic lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people. And... umm... there was... also a lack of legal protection, in fact, gay sex was only decriminalised in England, when I think I was about five, so a whole generation of gay men had... um... grown up having to hide the most basic aspects of their identity, just to avoid getting arrested. For lesbians, there was no protection against being... uh... sacked from your job, or evicted uh, and so on... uh... around that time, and... there could also be a lot of hostility; people who were lesbian mothers might lose custody of their children if there was a legal dispute. So, all kinds of pressures around.

Um... and there was also the question of whether it was right or wrong, and I'd grown up like a lot of Christians in that time... I um... assuming that the only really good kind of a sexual relationship was between a man and a woman, preferably in a marriage or something like marriage. Um... but I gradually came to question that, read more, think more, realised that didn't have to be the case. So... by the time I was about... 16 or 17, I think I'd come to terms with my sexuality, at least to myself, though I was still quite nervous about who else might find out and how they would react. Um... and at that stage, I wasn't ready to become a-an LGBT rights activist, all credits to those people who were out and proud at that age, but uh I certainly wasn't. Um... But I was reading and thinking... and I think having been involved in the anti-racist movement meant that when I did come out, a bit later at about 19, uh... I was more confident um... about doing that and how I did it. I was in my final year at my university when I came out properly and widely. Previously, I'd told a friend and mentioned it to my parents, who weren't very happy initially, though they

became supportive, and that has been very helpful to me over the years, um... as were my older siblings. So, I think I was quite lucky in the reactions that I got when I first came out, uh... and I was studying Chemical Engineering at university, and it wasn't a course with a lot of women on it, uh... and there wasn't anybody who was an out LGBT person in the department as far as I could tell. So, I think that was uh... an opportunity to do something a little bold and gradually I became more confident and began to discover other LGBT people, uh... there was a gay society at university, and then... uh... I became more involved locally with Islington and Haringey Gay Group. Uh... and that proved important in terms of my gaining confidence uh... in terms of activism.

A: Um... I wanna ask more about the Islington and Haringey Gay Group? And wh-what the group was, and what your role was in the group.

Savi: The group was both a social and campaigning group. It was I think affiliated to the campaign for homosexual equality, and part of its role was to change society, but part of its role was also to provide support to people, reach out to those who were isolated. Um... there were gatherings in a pub... uh... tea parties... um... just social occasions, a newsletter. And, fairly soon, I-uh, joined the committee of the group, and people there were very supportive though I was quite young, And um... I was encouraged to take on more responsibilities. I think I became involved in um... helping to organise the programme. And then, as... opportunities opened up for change in um... Islington and Haringey, as in certain other boroughs in London and in some other parts of the UK. Uh... I was given an opportunity through the group to become involved in that process of working for change. So, I was able to represent the group in some-- to some extent in those spaces and... umm... that helped to introduce me to some of the developments taking place.

A: Um... so within Haringey and Islington, were there um... quite a few BME people in the lesbian and gay community?

Savi: Uh... at that time, no, no-not in so-called "mainstream" um... community. In practice, there were a number of um LGBT people who were quite out in certain circles. But um, BME LGBT circles were tended to be quite different, um, so you could go into so-called "mainstream" spaces but you didn't know what kind of response you'd get. Um... the group I belonged to was mainly male, and mainly white, but they were generally supportive. But sometimes people had quite bad experiences on the scene, or in the wider movement.

Interviewer: Okay. Um I wanted um... move onto the work you sort of became involved in um... I understand from the encouragement of that group? Um... the Black Lesbian and Gay Centre?

Savi: Yes. I think what happened there was that in parallel with becoming involved in the Islington and Haringey Gay Group, um... and some of what was happening at local authority and London wide level, I also began to discover an overlap between uh... my life as a black person, using "black" in the broader sense, um... and a campaigner against racism, and being lesbian. So, I came across the Lesbian and Gay Black Group for the first time on a demonstration... uh... around the Bradford 12 case, which was around self-defence in the face of police indifference to racist violence and indeed hostility to um... black communities

defending themselves. And I... read an advertisement in 1985 I think, for posts working for a Black Lesbian and Gay Centre Project, and this sounded an interesting opportunity uh... quite exciting, and so I decided that I would apply, and I was lucky enough to be one of the first four part-time workers appointed to that uh... to that role.

A: Um... so what was your role in um... the project for Black Lesbian and Gay Community... I mean... the Centre.

Savi: I was an Outreach and Development Worker. The centre, initially a centre project, which tried to set up of... uh... or in, to set up a full community centre, was... partly about creating a greater support, recognition, for black and minority ethnic um... lesbians and gays. I mean, in practice... there were some bisexual people involved, and um... people who were transgender. But at that time, I'd say that probably bisexual people were even more marginalised than black and minority ethnic lesbians and gays, and transgender people were more marginalised still, so there was a lot, even deeper invisibility. Uh... but anyway, the... centre project set out to find a space that could be a place where people could feel themselves. Uh... we had a helpline, initially, I think it was members of staff, then, we got volunteers involved as well, providing support... uh... signposting people to where they could get help if they were facing discrimination of any kind. Sometimes just giving them the chance to talk to someone who in some ways like themselves, which, for many people... uh... was the first opportunity, because it was quite isolating at that time. Um... and um we also sought to change people's views, reach out to other voluntary organisations for instance, we did bits of training with uh... people who were learning or studying to go into youth work or community work. And... we... uh... while I suppose, while we looked for a space that would be sustainable, um... we managed to make a lot of connections, carry out a number of activities, um... of a social and cultural nature, which also helped in exploring and celebrating black lesbian and gay identities.

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