

## **Launch Event for Journey to Justice Music and Freedom Exhibition. 3rd March 2018**

The fast pace and odour of power, the frenetic building boom, the obvious wealth of whole sections of the city – these can create a wholly mistaken view of London and its deep inequalities. Parts of east and south London are as isolated and distant from prosperity as many towns in the north of England. According to the government in 2015, seven of the ten worst local authorities in the whole of the UK for older people's deprivation are in London, as are eight out of the worst ten for child deprivation: Newham is third and seventh respectively. It takes longer to get from Chelsea to Beckton by tube and DLR than it does to get from Euston to Birmingham by train. Beckton Globe is an ideal venue for JtoJ, located right in the heart of a working class community in the poorest end of a borough which shares with Sunderland a story of dying docks, collapsing industries and the feeling of being totally left behind. The difference is that the poorest can see ostentatious wealth on their doorsteps, as expensive apartments spring up on the footprints of forgotten industrial plants. Nevertheless, next door to a huge ASDA and a thriving secondary school, the warm and welcoming Globe is always busy and buzzing.

Two days before the launch it seemed doomed by the weather. The core exhibition was stranded in snowbound Newcastle and wouldn't be there, the heating had failed in the youth centre sports hall and a key speaker, our patron Leyla Hussein, was stuck in the USA with flights to the UK cancelled. However, we had all put so much into creating a fantastic line up (see attached) nothing was going to prevent us from going ahead.



As we set up surrounded by students concentrating on their assignments, families were arriving downstairs for a film show and choirs were practicing in the side rooms. We knew all 120 advance places had been booked and more said they were coming, but would snow and rain mean poor attendance? Well, by the time Newham young choir leaders Amina and Itoya opened by getting us

all singing Oh Freedom, the place was so packed that the large team of JtoJ London volunteers – and several latecomers – had to stand. We counted 143 people! Naomi Scarlett – local singer and DJ and our compere – then got things rolling. After a welcome from Lisa of the greatly supportive Globe team, Carrie's introduction to JtoJ and a short collage of clips ending with a line from Oh Freedom sung by little Spencer at the Newcastle launch, we had the first of several speeches by Newham activists, Amina Gichinga on how the Renters Union are organising and supporting people in private rented accommodation. No issue, perhaps, is more pressing here than housing.



Then, a real emotional treat: a 1996 ITV film made by Year 7 pupil Shamima Patel and her class who campaigned successfully to stop the deportation of their Angolan classmate – followed by

Forest Voices singing Let Natasha Stay, their song created in tribute to that campaign. This was followed by Maria Xavier, Newham community worker, telling the story of her railwayman father Asquith who singlehandedly overturned the 'colour bar' at Euston Station. As she ended, the exceptional youth choir NewYVC sang Lineage and the Tanzanian song Imbakwa (Sing from the Heart), followed by Solid Harmony – a choir based at Newham's sixth form college – with Justice for All, created especially for the event.



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Next, another local activist: Halima Hamid, whose Health is Wealth addresses mental health issues locally, spoke with courage and honesty. She was followed by internationally acclaimed Bengali



musician Gouri Choudhury who taught us all to sing Jodi tor dak shune. I introduced the local stories in the exhibition and how they show that key advances benefiting people all over the UK – free legal aid, tower block safety, combatting police racism, providing safety for women with learning disabilities suffering domestic violence - were won by unsung grassroots campaigners in Newham. Then Goga Khan, the youngest of the Newham 8 whose landmark case in the early 1980s brought hundreds of Newham school students out on strike, told his story and reflected on its significance while thanking Steven Timms MP, who was sitting in the front row, for his support all those years ago. As Goga spoke I looked out over our audience in all its diversity and at the young people of colour happily using the library and thought how this was the very part of town Black and Asian youngsters could not set foot in a generation ago for fear of extreme

violence. Cases such as Newham 8 helped drive the change.

But communities face other threats now. We heard, and participated in, a deeply moving performance by the ASTA singers, a group of residents of Royal Docks, a community ignored as they suffer isolation and an epidemic of murderous youth violence. Older and younger residents together sang their own creation We have a Voice, climaxing in the declaration to the audience that they all have a voice. Then, after an exquisite rendering by Solid Harmony of Mary J Blige's Mighty River dedicated by the choir to the river Thames, the formal event closed.



We'd thought the weather and the absence of our core exhibition might mean few would linger. In fact, after the MP and Peter Mawengi – a young member of NewYVC – cut the ribbon, people stayed for ages. One unexpected result of the nonappearance of our US exhibition was that people really focused on the local stories of the Plaistow Land Grabbers, Stardust Asian Youth Centre, the Domestic Violence Revolutionaries, the Poor Man's Lawyer, the Ronan Point Safety Campaign, Asquith Xavier taking on British Railways and the school students' strikes in support of the Newham 8.

The Music and Freedom Project has started. Some amazing people made it happen. From Living Song, Jane and her extraordinary network including Naomi, Amina, Itoya and so many more, not least lovely sound technician Steve. From JtoJ Carrie of course, but also the fantastic team of volunteers (Tania, Pat, Mary, Hana, Arianna, Maz, Rob, Zeba, Richard, Alison x2, Kat, Zeba, Simran, Mohini, Frances) And the Globe team for whom nothing is too much trouble: Suzannah, Lisa, Inge, Natalia, Steve, Helen, Rahman... And Bethan, whose indefatigable work digging up stories, checking sources and interviewing participants gave us the local exhibition.