

Interview with Dirg Aab Richards for the Haringey Vanguard project

Extract: 00:00 – 11:02

Veronica: Hi this is Veronica interviewing...

Dirg: Interviewing Dirg Aab Richards who used to be working at the Black Lesbian and Gay Centre Project which was somewhere between 1985 ... I think I was there for about five or six years. Five years working part-time and what happened...I had just come out of college; it was my next job having done community and youth work at Goldsmith's College and whilst I was at college, I knew that an opportunity was coming up to be a black gay man's outreach worker and - I was initially I think on the Management Committee and I had to step down – on the Steering Committee – and I had to step down because I really wanted the job. And so, I applied like anybody else could and I was given the post.

VM: So, tell me a little bit about where you were born, when you first came out... in London?

DAR: I was born in Jamaica 29th July 1959 and I'll be 60 in this July – and I don't look it! I came here to London when I was ten. I knew I was gay, in fact I'm pretty sure I knew I was gay when I was five. We moved to a house in the Barbican and I knew I was gay. Didn't know anybody else was. I thought I was the only person and I came to London and attended primary school, got into primary school – the last six months of primary school and then got into Secondary School with a smile because there were no real tests. There was an interview but you know some people go through examinations and all of that and you get into secondary school in this country completely differently to the rigorous testing that would have taken place had I been in Jamaica. I don't think I would have got in for free.

VM: And how were your teenage years? And When did you come out?

DAR: As I said earlier, I knew I was gay. I went to Secondary School which was William Penn in Red Post Hill. I became Head Boy the last couple of years and everybody apparently knew I was gay. Why? Because I told them. And it was obvious, I wasn't hiding nothing, everybody knew but nobody really gave me any trouble. I didn't have any problems coming out as gay at school. I was obviously liked. I had personal struggles about how I was going to survive after school, and I wasn't enjoying my weekends and some evenings after school because I had to go and work with my dad who was a builder and I hated the idea of working with him and it was soul-destroying to me because it wasn't how I saw myself being. I didn't see myself being a builder at all.

VM: How long did you do that for?

All my school career really. I think my dad felt that he was going to use that opportunity to make something of myself and toughen me up or whatever... but I wasn't focusing on my studies, there was lots of turmoil because I could see into the future, the hassle I was going

to go through in staking my flag you know.

I left school with a few GCSE's, an O Level and I failed A-Level biology I was going for. I really enjoyed it but I failed it. I resat O Levels – I began the course to sit O Levels at Vauxhall College of Further Education and I went to see the school counsellor because I was being personally stressed out and what I did was I had a chat with her and she discovered that... no... she thought that I was somebody else who had written to her a few days earlier with almost identical problems. So, she made some time for me, then she discovered it wasn't me. She told me later on.

The point was I was having a nervous breakdown, just struggling with the fact that I had messed up my school career and to cut a long story short I wanted to tell my parents that I was gay and for six nights I wasn't sleeping and something inside my head broke and I ended up in the Maudsley the day after I told my family.

DAR: How did your family react? Did they support you at that time? Were they surprised?

I am going to say generally speaking the family were supportive. Immediately I told the family in the front room my dad took my mom outside the living room door and I heard my mom shout 'What do you mean look what I've done?'

So I've never forgiven him for that but many years have transpired and some things have changed. We are on speaking terms. He leaned into me and said – relatively recently – in the last three or four years 'you don't have to be an activist you know Dirg' and I immediately began a six-page letter to him telling him why I was an activist and what I have done and what I have managed to achieve. Stuff he never knew about me or what I was capable of. And where I had been hiding my light so to speak.

VM: And what was his response?

He didn't elaborate in writing, but he used the phrase 'on the other matter' he said, 'you defended yourself very well'. I was completely blown away because for him to say that, to reach that point then something happened. He appreciated my letter, he appreciated things about me that he didn't know so I think what has happened is we are now catching up with the fact that he has discovered my capabilities. And we are trading with that at the moment. Let's leave it like that.

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