

Mr. Derek Cox

Age: 68

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Interviewed by: Jamil Iqbal, Abdul Shahid and Shanaz Shahid

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.

Q: Were you involved in the youth movement, or cultural events or anti-racist struggle, during the 1970s?

Yes, our project was called Avenues Unlimited then. We appointed the first Asian full time youth worker in the country, Ashok Basu Dev that was in 1970. He left after four years. In 1976, we appointed Caroline Adams to replace Ashok. Little bit later we appointed John Newbigin. In those days we used to call Caroline and John, our Asian department. In late 1970s and early 1980s, we saw the emergence of women and children coming from Bangladesh. Earlier there were scarcely any women from the old East Pakistan. It was all men who came to send money back to Bangladesh. But in the early 1980s, families started to come in large numbers. In 1980 we appointed Pola Uddin, who is now Baroness Pola (Uddin) and she stayed with us for two years. So we were in the fore front of employing as well as working with people from the local community.

The situation in the late 1970s, it all focuses on 1978 when Jim Callaghan was then the Home Secretary and during the defence of Brick Lane, he would be seen in a little car going around the corner, observing what was happening. Because the first sub police station was setup in Brick Lane as a result of that.

Avenues Unlimited it was then, we had an office in 124 Bethnal Green Road, above a factory and the National Front on Sundays used to distribute their newspapers from our door at the street level. Those days it was like a siege mentality in the community, particularly people who had recently come over from Bangladesh. Lots of rumours were going on that they are going to be attacked. There was the actual presence of the National Front that congregated in that part of Brick Lane. The famous photographs at that time, you have people sitting down little further down near Quaker Street, to stop people coming into Brick Lane. It was quite a scary situation. A lot of the current politicians were among the young people who were demonstrating and occasionally fighting with the National Front.

Q: Can you tell us more about Avenues Unlimited?

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.

Q: Can you tell us about Brick Lane then and a bit about the National Front activity?

I did not get directly involved in the confrontational situation with them. But I showed my self supporting the families and young people and while some people were on the barricade, and some went to play with the children, do things and keep them occupied. We had a bunch of play gardens that opened in 1971. So that had premises and gardens and everything. We used that a lot. So we did a lot for the kids. That really was mainly my function. I was not one of the barricade people.

Q: How did the community organise against the attacks?

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.

Since 7th July bombing in 2005, they seem to assume suddenly everyone has got better, but if you go back to those time, there was a lot of racism in the police force. You had to make sure that you protect the local young people, when they went to court and so on.

Q: Can you tell us about the housing problem the Bangladeshis were facing?

I know a family very well in Boundary Estate, there were probably a lot of squatting was going on there. There was squatters above them and below them and this was a divorced lady and she and a lot of her relatives and children, they all came in 1984. I was talking to one of her niece and she said that "There was nothing in the place at all. It was dirty and there was a tiny cooker with they had to cook on. There was a little basin and they had a toilet and so on. It was pretty crude and big thing going on about charges, building charges and so on". Now its all been done up and it looks wonderful. Boundary Estate was first estate built by the LCC (London County Council) in 1903. Interestingly enough it used to be where most of the Jewish family lived. When I first came to work in 1963, there were lot of Jewish families in there. They moved out and then that was the business of GLC. GLC was

responsible for lot of housing here but not the London Borough of Tower Hamlets and I am sure it was Ken Livingstone who was active then. He was very supportive for anti-racist work and everything else and the interest of Black women and so on. There were hundreds of flats there. So you can imagine the condition of people living in there. But often, there weren't too many wives with them, so you had a lot of men living together on one flat. People wrote letters for people who couldn't speak English and couldn't write Bengali. Then there were some guys who would come over to your house and you had to pay 10 times the actual rate. Where we are in Brick Lane now, there used to be Great Eastern Street, I don't know if you know Kamal, he was a student then, his family used to live and that was a terrible slum sort of thing. Some of the buildings like Pelham Building did not have inside toilets. Those were the conditions that people were living in. Mainly pretty scared men on their own.

Recently there was a documentary on TV about Brick Lane and a guy was explaining the housing problems. Now if you multiply that many times over, you can imagine the difficult housing problems were there. That is why Terry Fitzpatrick and others came in with the squatter movement and they were very effective. Nurul Haq was in Pelham Building, I remember helping him and Anwara get the East End Community School which started in Brunswick building with loads of places. In those days, the housing situation was terrible in the Brick Lane area. One of the nicest estates would be the Chicksand Estate, because that was built before the war. Old Montague Street used to be a notorious area for drugs. There used to be lots of cafes, there used to be a Jewish fish and chips shop in the corner of Fashion Street. When they saw me coming, they use to think I was the only tourist and they always used to charge me more then other people. But in those days the Bangladeshi people were the minority and there were quite a lot of Pakistani families and I always remember this, they had complete family units. And the East Pakistanis (Bangladeshis) didn't. And most of the Clifton Restaurant was owned by the Pakistani and he was a big businessman. And most of the property was owned by Jewish people.

Q: How was the picture of the then Brick Lane?

In Brick Lane, there was a Maltese café. There used to be a Hungarian one. There were no restaurants. You have to imagine Brick Lane without any restaurants. No hints of Banglatown, not at all. There was Allison Goldstein, you know the Sonali Bank, there is a big building there, Allison Goldstein was a very big employer of people. Truman Brewery also employed lots of people. They used to have piles of malt and the rats used to love them and when you phoned the rat people. It didn't work in Brick Lane; it was because the rats have eaten the wire. When they knocked down the Great Eastern Building, this was old, they just concreted the sewerage, they didn't bother to trap the rats there. We used to work with Great Eastern Building tenants; they used to take down sacs full of dead rats to the Town Hall in Patriot Square. There was a Chinese family, Shui Wong, I won't forget him, and he used to catch the rats and put them in bags and take them down to the Town Hall and say "What you are going to do about it?" Just off Brick Lane there was a Building and it used to have "Try and live here Janet Jones". Janet Jones was the head of the housing or social services. There were lot still in those days, fifth or sixth generation of Irish families. There were Irish families because of the Catholic Church. Most of the Estates used to be mainly Irish families in those days. Big Maltese Community and Cypriot, both Greek and Turkish. In those days it was much more multi-racial. Very few people from the Caribbean and very few from Asia in those days but a lot from Cyprus and Malta and a declining Jewish population mainly in 1980s. They used to have the Brady Centre, that was a Jewish club, and the synagogues were open then, the synagogues in Cheshire Street. Cheshire Street was famous because of the murder of J. Marks, by the Kray brothers; they murdered him in Cheshire Street. Cheshire Street was a scary place. When I came in 1963, I was scared to walk out. It took two years for me to feel confident because it was so dark and I was a youth worker, we used to serve until 11 o'clock. I didn't like to go on my own. You can imagine what it must be like to the people who came newly to the place from Bangladesh.

Q: Did the women participate in community struggle?

The time you are talking about, there weren't many women. Jalal's wife was a barrister and she was very active. Pola was feisty then, pretty active, but she had a lot of trouble with the young men. In those days, the traditions of the community, they didn't like to see women in some of the activity; this also included some of the young youth worker as well. There was Anwara Haq, Nurul's wife, she was very active. She ran the East End Community School, she was very active. Clare Murphy was very active too. Caroline was probably the most active, she was very well known. If you think in the local community itself, at that time there weren't many as I can remember.

Because you have to think like what your age now and you have to go back to late 1970s. Most of the families were quite traditional then. For example, Hosnara, she married into a family and we were doing a filming thing. But her husband said she could go but her mother-in-law wouldn't let her go at all and those sorts of things were quite common in those days. But I have worked a lot with young women in the Wheeler House, particularly; one or two was working with the women refugees. There were the ones we called the feisty ones. The ones rebelling against school and so on. They will come in more into evidence before, but they were too young at that time to be really active. There was a lady called Mala Dhondy, she was active but she was not of this community.

Q: What sort of programmes did you put for the youth then and how did it change?

It was mainly John and Peter did things with the Bangladeshis. I remember taking Helal Abbas Uddin, he was one of the first Bengali guys in the mixed group. We took them to Lake District in the late 1970s. At that time, most of the groups we were taking were multiracial minority Asian kids and so on. We had few Sikh boys that we took as well. In the 1980s, things were changing and families were coming over and we were working less with the mainly White and Black families in the area. We changed to working more with the Bangladeshi families that was a gradual thing, because we called John and Caroline, the Asian department, because that was their part. We had a book written then, it was a piece of action research was taken by guy called John Abington, he was with a guy called Michael Young, a researcher. There was quite interesting stuff written on that, in quite a great detail. We were a big team, there were eight full time staff. Some of us were working in the Collingwood and then we moved to the Old Ford. People in Spitalfields gradually changed to working more with the Bangladeshi community, probably late 1980s and onwards. **29:49** We've always done lot of residential holidays. One year, we got money for 14 residential holidays and I went on them all. On a personal level, (my) marriage broke down and so on. For a long time I thought like shall I get married again? I put everything into my work. I was a workaholic par excellence, so I did a lot of things with other people's kids. I went in a full tilt and I think I was quite successful, I was certainly very popular. If anyone wanted something done, he or she would call up Derek. When John was around, because John also had his marriage problem and I don't know how much it has to do with working with Avenues, but he would be available if someone wanted to have his furniture moved 3 o'clock in the morning. John would do it. That was all very different in those days. We are killed now by risk assessment and many things. You could do anything at that time, we could take them to Lake District and Mount Everest if we wanted in those days! But we used to do a lot of the adventurous things ourselves. You are not allowed to do it now. You got to have all the qualifications, because there were some bad cases, but that was a golden era of youth work then. Good workers and people were prepared to take not only risks, but to do thing with kids and they got excited about it. **31:58** We do quite a lot now with art projects and that kind of stuff now. Remember the gap between me and the young people is getting wider and wider. In Avenues we have only two male workers, so for a long time it was me and lot of women workers, mainly Bangladeshi and Somali. Now we work a lot with the Somali kids.

Q: Can you remember any memorable event that took place then?

In those days we used to work lot with the kids and in the early days we used to work almost

hundred percent in the Chicksand, but that changed a little bit. We had a very over weight kid, and we went up Hale Valley and this guy, I don't think he climbed any stairs, so the rest of us, we were determined to get him up there. We did managed and it was a beautiful view from all mountains. But then a thunder storm was coming. So we had to get him down as quickly as we could and it was quite exciting. Of course the kids remember it, they are in 20s and 30s and they always talk about the residential holidays we did. And we did things, we started in the 1980s and we did it for Toynbee Hall, the chair of Toynbee hall, very rich man and big land owner. During the summer there were 6 or 7 weekends and we did for Bangladeshi boys and it finished unfortunately in 2002 but that 14 years they were coming and every activity you could think of, it was like a bit of military camp. The kids loved it and there were campfires every night and there were competitions. I couldn't do this, but you know they were getting gold medals and silver medals and bronze. Some of the campfires were (of) very high standards and of course we don't get it any more. You know the policy now, the government and the council wants to know what's happening. There isn't any open space, as soon you see an open space; they are building a new house on it. The Wheeler House lost their football pitch.

There was this difficult boy, but he was a good artist. At that time Wheeler House had lots of murals. They had cowboys and all that stuff and they had a thing where they put all their names. They put the names of the artist.

This is horrible story, because there was a terrible murder of the little girl, her mother and her sister was murdered in a field in Kent, about six years ago. They always had a working party went down first and they had people from all over, mainly from universities of Oxford and Cambridge and so on volunteering. They were giving training and they went to a pub and had some drinks, one of the guys had a fight with somebody, which turned out to be SAS guy and he was flattening everyone and they got back and I don't know what happened in the pub, but a helicopter came on and all the people were arrested. It was all tied up with the murder thing. Lot of exciting things happened. We use to have this called Cities in Schools and then we had the Bethnal Green Youth Consortium, they would give us money to employ young people who showed leadership qualities to run different activities and if they did that well, and they got a residential holiday and the rest of it. What I remember is that one, you cannot do it now, it is politically incorrect to give anyone, pocket money, because it is cheating now, they used to get something like £60 a week. No one got into trouble then, and everyone had a great time and everyone felt good. Ever since that closed down now, they are setting up volunteers and millennium volunteers and not getting paid. You can't engage young people in the same way, because that carrot is quite important. It did wonderful things I think and that lasted about four years.

Q: Can you tell us something about Caroline Adams?

Well talking about interview. Sometimes we employed good people and sometimes we made bad decision. Caroline Adams was a success; what happened is, sometimes when you do an appointment, there was a local candidate who want the job and this was a Pakistani guy and when we went to the short listing, we saw this young women who had done work in Nepal and have been all around and she was running an off site education centre in South London. We interviewed her and took an instant like to her because we thought this is the kind of person we want. Of course the favourite was very unhappy, that's tough, that's life. Some times you take risks and you go on with your intuition and this is the person for this job. The other thing, my leadership style which wasn't always agreed by everybody. But I believed, if you get someone like Caroline, you don't tell Caroline, what to do. You let Caroline do things and tell you what she is doing. Because otherwise, it's like a bird that can fly, you cut their wings and then they move around on the ground. They don't do anything exciting. She got very involved in the community and people still remember her. John is still remembered by the people and also Clare is still remembered. People still talk well of them. She also came under Peter East's spell as well. They did an awful lot together and she did a lot of things behind the scene. She was a very positive minded woman. After a while she

decided to move on from Avenues Unlimited. She started up the unemployment project run by Tower Hamlets and then she became a youth officer. I didn't see so much of her in the later part of her life. But we all got together, when she was dying, we met her on one workers house just a few weeks before she died.

John and Caroline took a group to Isle of White and she got quite badly injured and lost lot of teeth falling off the horse and John got injured as well on the same business. So there are some dangers in youth work as well.

Q: Are you involved in politics now days?

I voted Green Party in the last election and after one mistake with Blair, I voted twice for Green Party, I couldn't think of voting for the others. So now I stayed out of party politics, but I suppose, I am fairly well known in the area in regards to the community dimensions. Like now with the Respect Party coming as well. We are doing a lot with Respect in terms with the community. Also with the Labour Party at the moment and I think the whole Labour movement need a change. No one ever talks about it; I always felt for the last few years, that we need a coalition. You are not going to have Tories taking over from the Liberals, I think that may happen on the 4th of May, they may end up with a coalition between Labour and may be Liberals. I don't think, any one would win a clear cut victory, but in terms of youth work, I think, it is an absolute disaster. We wasted millions of pounds by not having the right setup or having poor management, by neglecting to look what was good in the past. Politically I want to make much more noise in that direction.

Q: What about the council at that time, were they very helpful?

In most days the vast majorities of councillors were White, it was hundred percent in those days Labour had been for many years and they used to talk about three political parties and Bethnal Green was the Protestant, Poplar was the Catholics and Stepney was the Jews. At that time Bangladeshi people did not featured very much as they were minority. That's the only way they divided up the then Labour Party and so we used to think on the youth committee, and there was some John Kevin who was chair of it. He was Irish and he would say what are we doing about the homeless Irish people because you have to remember that the Irish suffered a great deal of prejudice as well so there was a big Irish contingent in the borough council. I don't think they were particularly initially sympathetic to the Bangladeshi people.

Q: How was the relationship between different ethnic groups in those days?

Not good really, there came a time; when it was Black and White against the Asian people. That's not so prevalent now. There was a lot of gang activity on racial ground. Now it is on territorial ground. It is often Bangladeshi against Bangladeshi, Cannon Street versus Brick Lane. I did a study on gang violence because of the child protection issue. Now there is a lot of Bangladeshis going against Bangladeshis, they are taking the lead. Now the Somali community is growing. In my work place it is difficult task indeed. You have Asian culture, you have African culture and co-existing in a western culture. The only unifying thing is that they are Sunni Muslims.

Q: When did you become a Muslim?

I have been Muslim now for four years, when I first came everyone would come to the mosque then; very few of the ordinary kids will now come to the mosque. There is great respect. I always get Salaam near the mosque. It is a different world from that point of view, you get those who are religious and those who are not. I pray, it doesn't matter what else you do, you must do those five prayers. Lot of people don't, but that has to be the number one thing. So I am always demonstrating about doing that. Some time I go to Brick Lane Mosque and not East London Mosque and in Brick Lane Mosque; I think it need to be a bit more up-to-date to be more encouraging for young people to attend. And I think unfortunately, in their plan to rebuild it, they have dropped the women's section. But they

need to have a women and men section. In some way, it is a bit reactionary, depends on your point of view.

Q: Why is this?

I think they are your originals. If you go back to late 1970s and 1980s, that age group are the men who dominate the running of the mosque. Unfortunately they hadn't got some inspiration to get some women and so on. You know the special night (Shab-e-Barat); it was in my benefit, they got some one who can give lecture in English at that time. So they are making some improvement in this regard, but you can understand why young people get frightened of a little bit. And the other thing is that, some of the radical guys will try and get them to come in and they get frightened and so they stay away.

Q: Can we ask you about your conversion to Islam?

Yes sure. First story I have to say, why Christianity, for a long time. I couldn't believe that Jesus could be the son of God. And if you don't believe that, you are not a Christian. I remember I have been here for long time; the most of my friends are Bangladeshi and Somali and so on. People always saying, "Derek, why don't you become a Muslim" I am talking about a long period of time. So I started thinking about it in the late 1990s, spiritual things, I always believed in Allah and God. The Kazi in the Mosque, it was the 'Notun Din', he wrote an article about me in Bengali, how I said to him how I am thinking about considering change in my faith. I went to Japan first of all and had a look at Buddhism, So I was seriously looking and then I knew, every time there is a fast, for two years, I tried to fast looking in the Quran without actually being converted. I did quite well in the first Ramadan and in the second Ramadan I did miss about five. But wasn't doing it correctly, so then different people known to me, didn't wanted to push me, you mustn't push them too much, but some people do, they literarily will drag you to the mosque. That shouldn't be done that way.

I have been separated from my wife, I was going to Bangladesh for the first time in 2002 and then as I was getting on the plane, my daughter phoned me and said, "Mummy has died". She was climbing a mountain in St. Lucia and I thought do I go to Bangladesh or do I stop? What I said was she was in St. Lucia in West Indies. She wanted to be buried in Denmark where she was born. So I thought I will carry on going to Bangladesh and come back for her funeral. We were not together for a very long time; we have been separated for about 10 years. Obviously, it was a very difficult flight to Bangladesh. John, a friend of mine, he went as well. Ali, he couldn't get on that flight and he was coming via Singapore. When we got to Dhaka, we spent a week there with a street project. It was my first time and for many years I wouldn't fly. You couldn't get me in an aeroplane. When I was young I was in the army, for a long time I won't fly. First I went to Japan and then to Bangladesh on a long flight. So I said to Ali, you pray and I will pray with you. So I followed him. So when I came back, it's difficult to explain but you know you are in between, and I decided on 7th of May 2002. I went to classes in East London Mosque and talked to the Imam. On a Friday lots of people I know in the youth work and so on and they were actually surprised because I didn't tell them; we shouldn't tell our intension. And Mashallah, it is a wonderful thing. When I went back to Bangladesh in October as a Muslim, very new and went to the mosque in the very special night (Shab-e-Barat) that happened when I was there in October 2002. Really we, you've always been a Muslim, it just you have not embraced it. They took me to the mosque and this was real down town Dhaka and so I went to the mosque, everyone was looking at me because may be I was the first White person in that mosque. After about two or three hours later I said "Do you mind I would like to go now". All the street children were following me there later we decided to leave the place. I still have pictures of it.

Q: Can you tell us about your early career?

I was in a housing estate in Guildford and I did an office job, till I was 18, then I was called up to the army. You had to go in the army in those days. I was lucky, I was sent to Singapore

and then to Hong Kong and back to Singapore and that's two and a half year in my life and you can imagine a country boy really in that situation. When I was on the troop ship, in the Suez Canal, we all thought we were going to fight in the Suez Canal. We had to go all the way around South Africa, I still remember in Cape Town, we were passing by a Black kid and the White people shouting, "Kick him, soldier, kick him". My first trip abroad was Dakar, Senegal. The next one was Cape Town and Durban. In those days I was little bit of active and did a concert and we had a first class cabin. We were in hammocks. **I also took an exam to become a probationary officer in Ruskin College in Oxford**, which is a Trade Union. After that, I always did youth work. In 1961 after a qualification, I became a youth worker.