

Flora Ocran

Marieta Borreda: My name is Marieta, today is the 7th of February, here we are in Stratford in Hibiscus Lodge and I am with my beautiful friend Flora. Flora can you say your full name and date of birth please?

Flora: My name is Flora Ocran, O C R A N, 2nd of September 1939.

M.B: And where were you born, Flora?

F.O: I was born in Ghana.

M.B: And how old were you when you arrived in the UK?

F.O: I was thirty..twenty-seven...I've forgot. I arrived in sixty-four, 1964.

M.B: And where did you arrive? Did you move straight to London?

F.O: No, I arrived in London...in our case; we had to get school, lesson school before arriving so I went straight to Kent, because I was doing 2 years adaptation. I had done 3 years at home already, as I qualified as a registered nurse, so yeah, I had to make 3 years to make it to British standards.

M.B: And how old were you when you started working here in the UK?

F.O: About...between twenty, thirty...yes.

M.B: What was your first job in the UK?

F.O: Nursing

M.B: Where did you live, and where did you work?

F.O: Well, by then I was in Kent, a Nursing Home for 2 years before. When you qualify, after the 2 years you had to go and get yourself a job. I went to so many hospitals but first I was in St. Francis, near King's College, and then to Dulwich Hospital...a few hospitals before.

M.B: And what was the Hospital where you worked for the longest time?

F.O: Really, when I came back...every time I go to nursing I wasn't very well, I had a slipped disk or something else so my counter breaks one and off but the longest I would say, (when I) came back to East London, I worked in Health Unit for 10 years

M.B: In East London, where?

F.O: Swanstone Road, near the Chest Hospital [Bethnal Green]

M.B: And when you were here in East London, working in the Hospital, did you live near work, or did you have to travel?

F.O: No, I had to travel. Usually...But by then I was married and then one of those things, and I divorced. But I was travelling myself (she pauses). Yeah...I was in Hagley Road, that's where we bought our home first, and I was travelling from there to Swanstone Road, and to the Health Unit.

M.B: Obviously you explained that you first had to do training, when you had finished your training, was it much difficult for you to find a job, after your training?

F.O: Yes, you were sent to go and get yourself a job, but if it's difficult, because by then it is not so difficult for nursing to get agencies and so on, I was "agency" with Hunt, Reed, and I also used to do Charity work with Crossroad Care too. So one day when I came back from work they called me (*and said*) that they need help. I used to go there.

M.B: So it was easy for you to get a job?

F.O: By then it was not as too difficult as it is now.

M.B: And could you tell me how was a day at work for you, your daily routines, what did you do? What were your responsibilities?

F.O: My responsibilities were nursing and care. Mostly I was on night duties. So you write your cases, your cases you write and report about them. Then you supervise them during the night and throughout the day and when they come in the morning you hand over to them, with your written notes, and go from case to case, to inspect the conditions of people, or children or who are you working with, the medication you give them, everything recorded, by then there is no computer or anything, you work with written notes and verbal notes, verbal handovers and so on.

M.B: And besides taking notes and everything, did you also have to cure the sick people...I mean...doing any sort of healing yourself any...first emergency, any...?

F.O: If they need medication you give them, tidy them, but because I was mostly on duty with junior nurses or somebody, so we divided the cases, and in the morning you give them a cup of tea, wake them up, and prepare them for their duties, and then the other nurses come and take over. Those were the cases we do but every time you have to record everything about, a client or your patient,

M.B: Nursing is a very vocational job, because you are dedicating your life to people, you see things sometimes that maybe are shocking, or people who are in distress or suffering. Why did you want to be a nurse, was this something that was in your family, was there people in your family who had done this before?

F.O: No, nobody in my family but my mother was dedicated...a natural midwife, I would say, though she did not have training, but the whole village in those days she used to go around and deliver the cases, the children. So when they were older, they told me stories of "your mother delivered me". When I grew up, I wanted to be a nurse, because

I love to care, I love caring for people...so I became a nurse, at home, for three years, you do your training, and then when there is vacancy, I apply for it...

M.B: How many people worked with you?

F.O: It depends...

M.B: On a normal day, when you were on duty, how many other nurses or doctors were with you?

F.O: Well at home...tutor...very direct because if cases come, you have to assignate Senior nurses in charge. You have to try and identify a case like ectopic pregnancy, you know the signs and symptoms already, so you prepare your case, ready for the doctor, to come and inspect. Then sometimes medication, they give it to you on telephone, by then you check with your second nurse, then when the doctor comes he signs for it - that is how it was at home. Doctors were very few, so most of the cases you know what to do, so you give intravenous fluid or so on, you do all these things, and doctor comes to check, and its right and those are the cases at home, but here you do not get that chance, at home we go to theatre, we do laparotomy, but here nurse, nurse as it is, but it is the same nursing care, you do...sometimes you do this, some people are a bit difficult...

M.B: Why?

F.O: I do not know.

M.B: You mean here in the UK?

F.O: Yes, some of the elderly, elderly some... a bit difficult about maybe your color but you try to convince them and let them know that you are there to help them but most of my cases that are difficult we become friends because it depends on how you handle them, and because of nursing etiquette you do not leave a client, difficult or not, you try to help them and understand them. We help them to cure them, just few of them...just few of them were a bit difficult not all of them. Afterwards they give you a special respect that they know or that they realise that you are there to help them, so we become some sort of friends, although, the care, the relationship is quite different. Afterwards everything is easy.

M.B: So you are talking about some patients, specially older people, at the beginning they were taken a bit aback because of your colour, your background, what about the people working with you, did you treat you different or special in any way, did they accept you?

F.O: We work as a team, you come in the morning, you divide the jobs, taking temperatures, the BPs, and so on and so forth, we help feed people who could not feed themselves, and most people they are not bad to me because it was an understanding that you are there to help people, and they always take to you in the long run.

M.B: How were the working conditions for nurses back in the 60's and the 70's?

F.O: Well...It's the same type of nursing but when you come to England you become a bit junior, so you do more junior nurses, but...

M.B: You mean that you had a more senior job in Ghana, and you were downgraded?

F.O: Mmmm [as in "yes"]. Because they think you are coming to do...But it depends, in the long run you do become one of the nurses but first you become down, after your training, then you become one of the nurses that nurse people.

M.B: And what about the working conditions in terms of salary, atmosphere, stress, working long hours...

F.O: It was not a big one, but I did manage to save somehow. When you came to London you got a bit of allowance, London Waiting Allowance, and so on and so forth so, and you do a lot of agencies, I have done so many agencies - Reed and the Charity one, and I was always busy working somewhere.

M.B: Did you ever feel you were being discriminated in any way...was it more difficult for you compared to other British nurses to maybe get a promotion, or better conditions, a better salary, because of your color or your nationality?

F.O: By then you do not know much about the differences, your salary just comes and you get it or pay into a grant, you are just trying because there are so many responsibilities, you want to be hard working, in that case you do not much about the differences that people might have, I was paid, and that's it.

M.O: Were there other women from Ghana or any other African women back then working as nurses in this part of London?

F.O: Back then very few, not too many at all. But personally I have not worked with black nurses as such because we were few and I am not saying black nurses are difficult for me but I feel more comfortable working with white people because you know we are all working hard but our problems is...I don't know whether it is competition or what not...but I feel comfortable working with white nurses because at that time I didn't work with so many black nurses so...I work more with white nurses and most of them are very friendly.

M.B: I don't know much about the hospital you were talking about, so far I have never been in hospital in here in London but does the hospital where you worked in East London still exist?

F.O: I do not know if it closed down or not

M.B: What's the name of the hospital again?

F.O: It is not hospital, is a health unit

M.B: And what's the name again?

F.O: Swanstone Road, near the Chest Hospital [Bethnal Green] but we used to come from the Royal London, Whitechapel.

M.B: What about trade unions? Were Unions very active in your line of work?

F.O: Yes...but not as such, unless you'd got a problem. By then Trade Unions were not as outstanding as it is now. But in the long run they start UNISON. They come nurses which is like advocates in case that you got into trouble, they are very good to help you, like some sort of lawyer or barrister, who directs you in what to say or not to say, or something like that, they are advocates and very helpful to help you to know your rights.

M.B: So were you a member?

F.O: Yes I became a member...

M.B: What was the name of the union?

F.O: UNISON.

M.B: And do you have any memory from any activity with the unions or any in case in which you needed them to help you?

F.O: A mate of mine had a problem with a case one day, and all of a sudden she was transferred to another hospital. They helped her a lot. By then she was doing nursing, I was doing general nursing.

M.B: Nowadays we do see in the public services, unions going to strikes, because they want better conditions...

F.O: But then I never had such a thought, no strikes, no strikes at all

M.B: You said you had been a nurse back in Ghana and you arrived here and did your two years in Kent, you got a job. When you were already working here, during the years while you were working here, did you ever apply or were invited to do further training, or adult education?

F.O: No

M.B: So all your training was before you started working?

F.O: Yes

M.B: Were you offered the opportunity?

F.O: No. I was working long hours trying to save money to send home because when I came to England my mother was a bit elderly and because my dad died very early, so she struggled so hard to look after me, I was struggling so hard to look after her, so I became a "workaholic" trying to get something to send to her, I was not thinking of promotion or anything just how far I can get with my wages.

M.B: You were taking care of sick people but who was taking care of staff? How was healthy and safety back then?

F.O: Healthy and safety was not all that outstanding, but you know as a nurse you should not do cross-contamination or no anything, you know what to do, washing hands, you know already, so you do about all these things. But later on this health and safety became outstanding but as nurse you know you handle maybe a case, from case to case you always need to wash your hands and be careful not to cross contamination so it was not difficult in our case.

M.B: In which other areas do you think (I assumed you have been in hospital in recent years and seeing nurses doing their jobs) which other aspects do you think that the job of a nurse has changed from when you worked as a nurse to nowadays?

F.O: Those days you are always very busy.... but you know exactly what to do, as soon as you come to the ward you divide the work among yourselves already so from there to there everything goes automatically...but these days (I don't know I left hospital for a long time) so I don't know how it goes. Administration is done by secretaries and so on and we do not do...the only thing we do more those days was you record your cases, a nurse knows everything, you write it down, you hand over verbally, you call your doctor in the night, you write everything down, all your notes, and you explain to them go from patient to patient and hand over your case before you leave. Everything was systematic but those days we don't have such intense cases with IT use and so on, as such, but as skills developed things become more ...we become more... but Doctors always come, they are very friendly, you know what your capacity is. You hand over cases to them or tell them the history about case notes from client to client.

M.B: So it was more personal maybe?

F.O: Yes because if a doctor comes to the ward he knows why he came, so...but that time you see Doctors coming to hospital, matrons and so on were there, so maybe matron came and inspected the client already, telling if you needed the doctor is here, or if you needed a doctor you rang them, and they come to inspect the case, it was not as busy as it is now, but everything was systematic, to be nursing was not as hectic as it is now...its really developed, highly developed. But doctors depend on nurses more because most of the things you do for your patient, doctors come and checks and confirms and signs things with you, but these days I can not tell you any more about these days because things are so different.

M.B: Flora when did you notice more black African women arriving to London or East London?

F.O: I think in the 80s, they come yes. In the 80's most of them come.