

Fitting in by being yourself: Avenues Unlimited and youth work in the East End c. 1960s–2000s

By Eve Colpus

It was on ‘schizophrenic’ research for her book *On Brick Lane* (2007) that Rachel Lichtenstein first came across Avenues Unlimited.¹ At the youth group’s Brick Lane headquarters, she interviewed three young men, Saleck (21), Atiqul and Bodrul (both then aged 19). The three friends had grown up together on the Wheeler House Estate; Bodrul had arrived in the UK as a baby, while Saleck and Atiqul were born in East London. Lichtenstein asked the young men about their earliest childhood memories. Derek Cox was the first person they mentioned: ‘He made our childhood fantastic’, said Atiqul. ‘He took us camping abroad and on many activities in the area... day trips every week from the age of six or seven... to the cinema, swimming, everything we wouldn’t do with our families at home.’

Derek Cox had worked with Avenues Unlimited since it was set up in 1965. He began, in his words, as a ‘street worker’ in Spitalfields, working with young people when they were not in school or at home, or were homeless. Long-term projects on local housing estates, such as those in which Saleck, Atiqul and Bodrul lived, had been part of the work since the early 1970s, and had enabled him ‘to get to know whole generations of families’. When Cox met Lichtenstein, he told her about a recent project taking local Somali and Bengali boys on a day trip to the countryside: ‘They are both Sunni Muslim but from very different cultures, one African and one Asian, and both competing to adapt to a Western culture, and they don’t mix well’. He went on: ‘The Somalian community today are like the Bangladeshi community twenty years ago, and they need extra support.’

In the 1980s, Avenues Unlimited worked mainly with the

expanding first- and second-generation Bangladeshi populations of Spitalfields. The holidays and day trips Saleck, Atiquil and Bodrul remembered were one part of this work. Another project was ‘The Girls’ Room’, which opened in 1984 in a converted furniture factory on Brick Lane, offering Bengali language classes, music and dance, cooking, sewing, and painting. ‘The Girls’ Room’ was an important development in social provision for young second-generation Bangladeshi women, reflecting their demands for social and cultural facilities, demands which youth workers felt were largely absent in the 1970s. Avenues Unlimited worked to encourage community leadership in their projects. ‘The Girls’ Room’ developed a Women’s Support Group of local Bengali women and later a crèche: it became a success story.

When Derek Cox arrived in the East End in the 1960s he found a complex multi-racial community: fifth- and sixth-generation Irish families, alongside more recent Greek and Turkish Cypriots, Maltese families, Jewish communities, and Caribbean families. Before joining Avenues Unlimited, Cox was a youth worker at St. Hilda’s Youth Club, just off Brick Lane, where he set up a late-opening coffee bar that attracted local Mods and Rockers. The experiment indicated unexpected things about the bonds that young people might forge across racial and ethnic lines. Cox remembered the Mods (unlike the Rockers) as a mixed group: ‘a lot of Nigerian boys, one or two from the Caribbean, a lot of Maltese, Greek and Turkish Cypriots, white guys and many Irish... a couple of Jewish guys, a few mixed-race children’, the latter of ‘Bengali wives’ – white women who had married Bengali seamen. The coffee bar pointed to the value of creative thinking about the forms (including pop culture) that integration might take.

‘You had all these kids, from a real variety of backgrounds sticking together because they were Mods and they lived in the East End’, reflected Cox. Many of these young people died young, he remembered, and had been drug users. But he was still in touch with Peter, a former Mod, who took over the running of the gardens Cox had set up around Christ Church in the early 1970s: ‘the only place (apart from maybe a few rare back gardens) where you can grow *dodi* and other vegetables from Bangladesh’.

The diverse faith communities within East London provided a distinctive set of opportunities for youth projects engaged in integration. In Brick Lane in the early 1960s, Derek Cox recognised St Anne's Catholic Church was an important centre for the Irish community, while the Brady Centre (originally a Jewish boys' club) and the synagogues in Cheshire Street provided for the vibrant Jewish communities. The pressing need for physical spaces to get young people off the streets worked against segregation and encouraged youth workers to be entrepreneurial. In Wapping in late 1970, during a period of sustained violent racial attacks upon the East London Pakistani community, an Avenues Unlimited youth worker organised a disco in St Paul's Mission for Seamen in Dock Street, building on a long tradition of sharing space among local organisations (when the Mission was set up in the 1840s it worked with the London City Mission). What happened at the Mission for Seamen happened elsewhere, for instance the crypt of St Botolph's church, Aldgate served in the early 1970s as a homeless shelter at night and by day the Avenues Unlimited club for Asian boys.

It is tempting to look back on the late twentieth-century history of youth work as a moment of optimism about integration that is now sadly obsolete. But instead, it is the complex process of adaptation that stands out in the story of an organisation like Avenues Unlimited. Saleck, Atiqul and Bodrul, the young men Rachel Lichtenstein interviewed in Avenues Unlimited's office, described themselves as 'British Asians': 'British first and then Bangladeshi'. Asked if they had mixed with any white people when they were growing up, they all shook their heads. Race was less interesting to them, however, than their family – all their grandparents had grown up and knew each other in small villages in Sylhet – and religion. Derek Cox converted to Islam in 2005 after 40 years working in the East End, and it was largely though his inspiration that the three friends were all training to become youth workers.

Rachel Lichtenstein's conversations with the three aspiring youth workers reinforces how just as one race and faith doesn't push another out geographically, nor is there an either/or choice between identities. But, as the longer history of Avenues Unlimited suggests, security in one's own identity was at the heart of feeling a sense of belonging.

Whether as Mod, in ‘The Girls Room’ (‘NO BOYS ALLOWED’), or ‘British Asian’, paradoxically, cultural integration depends on the confidence and freedom to self-define. □

Endnotes

1. Materials used in this article: Lichtenstein (2007); Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives, Avenues Unlimited papers (TH/I/AVU); London Metropolitan University, 'Britain at Work: Voices from the Workplace, 1945–1995' collection, 'Interview with Derek Cox by Jamil Iqbal, Abdul Shahid and Shanaz Shahid, 22 March 2006'; University of Warwick Modern Records Centre, Papers of the Young Women's Christian Association, *Update*, issues 1 and 3 (Winter and Summer 1990); White (1973).