

P.J.Samuels: Coming to England from Jamaica. Applying for asylum in the UK. Working at LGB Centre with Mind and at Weather the Storm LGBT asylum group. Church and Family.

P.J.SAMUELS

Clare (C) interviewing PJ (PJ)

Extract 1: 00.17 – 5.42

COMING TO ENGLAND FROM JAMAICA. APPLYING FOR ASYLUM AND BEING LOCKED UP IN DETENTION.

PJ: I'm from Jamaica. I am from Jamaica, but um, I ... I quite delight in saying I am from ... the hills in Jamaica are described as Backabush. That's mean you get to the bush and you keep going behind it. I'm from as deeply rural as you can get, and I'm quite proud of that because everybody that I've met, everywhere I've been, the impression that people have got is that I am cosmopolitan, and I am not, I am deep rural barefoot running girl is what truly delights me and is totally what I am from.

It's a long way to be! It's Cascade Hanover hills. It's a long way to get to London and it has been interesting and it's funny, I'll readily say my heart is still there, but in a way my heart is also very much in London, so I think I leave pieces of me along the way, or maybe acquire pieces! Depending on how I look at it, as I move through places and life.

Yeah. I am ... oh my God, this year I'm 47, I'm old! (*Laughs*). Yeah I ... I ended up in London because I'm LGBT if I'm going to try and put it in a nutshell. And um, I ended up in England in the first place because I am, and in London, because I'm a refugee. Because when I came to England I was in Wolverhampton, just outside Birmingham, and circumstances changed and I moved to London, following a woman, as you do! (*Laughs*) And um, that changed as well, because in a lots of ways we supported each other for a long time 'cos we were together for a long time, so it made life possible without ... with less trouble. So when I was on my own I needed a stronger support network and that sort of led me out to find that, and that's when I actually applied for refugee status and all of that malarkey which ... which essentially changed who I am. The whole refugee process really changed me.

C: In what way? Do you want to tell be a bit about that?

PJ: Yeah. I ... it made me into an activist really ...

C: Right.

PJ: Is what it did, because I encountered so many questionable things ... that just didn't feel ... it didn't sit within my spirit, if that makes sense so I felt ... I ... I've always written a lot. I write. I share most of the poetry but I write a lot about, just about everything and I journal a lot and even the way I journal, when I look back now, it changed during that time and then there was a whole time that I couldn't journal.

I applied for asylum on the ... I went to the Home Office on the 1st July 2010 and was incarcerated. It's a general thing to not want to use that word, and they don't want us to use that word because the idea is that you are not in prison. I was in prison. So it's all well and good to say you're not in prison when they have you locked up. I don't know what is the essential difference that's meant to happen there and I had a really hard time coming to terms with it.

At the time when I was locked up I didn't necessarily react because I used to sort of go into ... into operational mode. There are things to do and so you sort of do ... and it's like afterwards that I kind of felt it. But ... I don't know that I reconciled it necessarily and put it to bed, I just know that I've probably grown a bit. I still don't understand the psychology that ... how you make it logical to lock somebody up. If I come to you with everything that I've got, my papers and everything and say "I'm obviously not trying to hide. If I was trying to hide, I wouldn't be here. So if you lock me up to say it's easier to access me ... whatever you tell me to do, I'm going to do." And when you

eventually release that person you tell them “Come in and sign on every week.” So obviously you know they’re not going anywhere, so the whole idea of locking somebody up feels like psychological terror. I cannot see any administrative reason which either was given that it makes sense and it damages people and affects how they then move on and what ... how they then become productive citizens and it’s a cycle that ... I had a hard time dealing with.

Extract 2: 29.57 – 34.22

WORKING AT LGB CENTRE WITH MIND AND AT WEATHER THE STORM WITH LGBT REFUGEES

PJ: ... currently I’m running the safe space for women at the LGBT Centre with Mind for mental health. So I run a discussion space where people talk or – well a safe space for women, so it’s utilised however LBT women feel safe to use it.

C: And it’s at Mind?

PJ: It’s Mind, and it’s at Outcome, near Archway and I also do Weather the Storm which is support for ... for refugees that have been granted. Because what I find is while support ... I mean support will never be adequate, but there ... there is ... there are a number of agencies, organisations that are agitating and are standing together to support asylum seekers and you know, those differences in political terms, which basically if you’re fleeing persecution, you’re a refugee. But you’re not legally a refugee. You’ve not yet required a legal status and there ... most of the organisations that are funded, or however they do their work, focus on getting people the status which will then give you the option to actually live. Nobody’s looking at how you’re living after. Once ... once you’re through it becomes, “Oh let us celebrate.” This person now needs me ... And I found that when I was granted, I don’t remember what day of the week it was, it was either a Monday or a Tuesday that I got the letter telling me that I was granted, and my friends planned a party for the Friday, and by the Friday I’d already broken ... had to cancel the party, I couldn’t go.

C: You’d what?

PJ: I had already broken. I’d already crashed, I had already become ... I’d already gone. So the idea that this is great and we’re going to celebrate it, isn’t necessarily how the person who’s gotten that information feels. Sometimes that’s when the person really, really needs support and really, really needs just a transitional platform that says “I am not alone.” And that’s when everybody is letting you go. The other thing about that is, when you’re granted status, there are no ... there are no services that are specifically for you. You are now an ersatz British citizen, more or less, and you’re meant to utilise the services that are provided for everybody. So you’re now competing with the whole nation. Which is one part of it, and which is acceptable, you know? But one, you don’t know what services exist, even if you could use them, you don’t know, there are people who go “I need a job” without realising that they need an NI number first and there are a whole raft of things that you now need to do to legitimise you, that people don’t even realise they *have* to do, until they turn up somewhere to probably say “OK, NASS” which is the ... who supports asylum seekers “is no longer helping you” or you apply for benefits, and you understand, or you’re not entitled for benefits until you’ve sorted an NI number and that’s how people keep crashing into things by trying to do something and then being told what they need to do before.

So what we’re doing in the group is sort of supporting people into the things that they need to do in order to move on and ... and in order to ... and it’s more peer support as well, because somebody might say “I haven’t been able to get benefits and I’m still job hunting” and then somebody else will say “What I did then, was I talked to Red Cross. This is their number” And I’ll say “OK, I have some time tomorrow, meet me and we can go up there together.”

And I’ve got a lot of that where it’s just finding the space for people to come together and helping each other more so than me necessarily finding help for the person and that has happened a lot where people you know are literally saying “We can get some help for you. Make the appointment and I will come with you.” So people don’t have to feel all alone having to go talk through these things when really you can’t even get the energy to come outside and it’s like ... And then what’s really hard is trying to get anybody to understand how low you feel then in this moment that’s

supposed to be hugely celebratory. It does not feel celebratory at all, and 90% of the people who come out the other end say if they knew they wouldn't even have applied ...

Extract 3: 40.46 – 43.41

CHURCH AND FAMILY

PJ: But, church as well. Church has been huge. ... I have not mentioned church. How could I have not mentioned church! (*Chuckles*) Church is such a big part of my life ... I go to Metropolitan, MCC Community Church, in North London and it's a fantastic organisation. I serve on the board. I've served on the board for a good few years now. But when I went there initially I don't think I was the only person of colour, but close. I probably was the only person ... definitely the only *vocal* person of colour, and I like it. There are so many more people there now and it's lovely and I kind of think that - because at the time I was doing a lot of sort of BME thing where people come and making sure people feel welcome and I still do that but I am really pleased that the demographic has changed hugely now and it's sort of almost 50/50 but ... it's a fantastic place, and religion is just ... is equally the bane of my life and my greatest joy! (*Laughs*)

It's a place in which I've experienced so much violence and questioning of myself, not physical violence but so much doctrinal violence against who I am, you know what I mean? So much terrorising me for being ... and at the same time it's been a place where I've found such comfort and joy and it's a place in which I've found community and it's a place in which I have family bonding and community bonding and ... so it's always for me such a personal and controversial area of my life and in a lot of ways it's like family. Family is the same thing, also the violence I've experienced is, you know, family is where I've got the most violent interaction about who I am and at the same time the most validation about my possibilities. So it's that thing, and church is that for me. I never really speak church outside of church because I ... I believe that church is such a hugely and deeply personal experience and um, it's getting a little bit religious! I believe in the teachings of Jesus Christ and there isn't a single instance on earth when Jesus took anything to anybody without request.