**Ms. Clare Murphy**



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Interviewed by: Jamil Iqbal

Ms. Murphy came to Tower Hamlets in 1972 to work with Avenues Unlimited as a Community Development Worker. She challenged the local authority on such issues as housing, repairs etc and formed a group to do something about the Bengali housing problems. Currently, she works parttime with the YMCA.

My name is Clare Murphy, I am 59 years old and I am semi-retired. My part time work is with YMCA doing student supervision for their youth and community course.  
  
I came to Tower Hamlets in 1972 to work with Avenues Unlimited Youth and Community Project. I was appointed as the community development worker there. I was attracted to the area, I think because of its different cultural heritage. The Jewish community was very much more in evidence at that time, although it was obviously on the wane. The Bangladeshi community in 1972 was largely older men who were working and young men who were brought here perhaps for few years schooling before starting work. Many of the younger men, even if they were at school, in fact were probably doing some work after school hours. My introduction to the Bangladeshi community was by Ashok Basudev, who was the first Asian youth worker [with Avenues], and he was appointed largely because of the evidence of the large number of young Bangladeshi men who had got nothing much to do in the evenings. He worked together with Lutfur Rahman (Shah Rahman) and Peter East, who was the Warden of the TOC H hostel. They ran various things. I think Shah did language classes in Myrdle Street at the Adult Education Institute. Ashok, Peter and Shah ran a number of evening clubs, camping trips and so forth. There was an emphasis on youth work, but to sort of counter balance that I was looking for some areas of community development. There were no tenants associations obviously to get latched onto in the area, partly because, few years previously there had been a big rent strike, in protest against what I can’t remember. That had sort of broken down [community cohesion].  
  
I spent a fair time contacting people and so forth; and what I was trying to do, was to get them, rather than moan about issues of re-housing, repairs and anything like that, to actually form a group to do something about it. The things I was doing, by about 1974, there was getting to be more enthusiasm for confronting the authorities, in one way or another. Spitalfields was unique in Tower Hamlets, on housing issues. It happened to have had much less bombing during the war, which meant that some of the old tenement blocks were left standing. Some of them didn’t have even kitchen to each flat. But many of them didn’t have a bathroom or they might have to share a toilet and so on. So in 1974, we managed to get a big meeting of local people in the Montefiore Centre in Deal Street. They decided to start taking up issues with councillors and local authority departments. The organisation called Spitalfields Community Action Group (SCAG) was formed, and Michael Myers was one of the chief spokesmen.  
  
In that year Caroline Adams had taken over as the Asian worker from Ashok Basudev. Caroline had a much more community development view of how to tackle things. So I coordinated with her, to try and involve some Bangladeshi people. At that time it was a little bit of tokenism in a way, because the Bangladeshi issues were fairly different from the issues of the White working class. Caroline was simultaneously working with a number of Bangladeshis, many of them were affiliated to the Bangladesh Welfare Association. Her work was with Bill Blair, who at the time was a social service community worker and they were addressing the need for some sort of facilities for Bangladeshi people to go to, whether for a cultural thing or a meeting or so forth. And then about three months later [after SCAG], they formed a group called Spitalfields Bengali Action Group (SBAG). SBAG ultimately decided to negotiate for some sort of meeting place for Bangladeshis to use, and the end result of this was the Kabi Nazrul Centre many years later. The Bengalis involved in SBAG were very adamant they wished to have a non-Bengali chair and a secretary, just so that any possible argument that might emerge could be neutralized.  
  
Another strand that was running along at that time was that the newly elected Labour GLC (Greater London Council) had decided that they should have a special pilot project in two areas of London; one was off the Holloway Road and the other one in Spitalfields, to try to address all the problems that have stopped areas thriving. The area off the Holloway Road wasn’t nearly as bad as Spitalfields. Spitalfields had still a huge area for slum clearance and redevelopment. There were hardly any open spaces. There was just neglect upon neglect upon neglect. So the Spitalfields Project was set up as a combination of GLC, Tower Hamlets (Council) and the local community. I think the Home Office put in a certain amount of money as did the GLC and as did Tower Hamlets. Permanent staff were appointed, one of whom was Bill Blair. There were meetings, which were largely councillors of Tower Hamlets, GLC, and about 4 local representatives were allowed to be appointed. The appointees came largely through SCAG and SBAG, which put the names forward. The meetings were held in public, which was a little bit of a farce. You had all the people on the top table discussing certain issues they had put on the agenda and people disagreeing from the floor of the meeting. It was the beginning of things moving quite rapidly. So it was very obvious that this was a bit of a fobbing off. The funding that was allocated really only went as far as getting ‘cherries on top with a bit of icing. The intention was that this official group of people would try and force the various local authorities to put redevelopment, or what ever and Spitalfields ahead on the agenda. So funds that were given were never meant to build houses or very expensive things, or improve schools, it was meant to help things along. Did it have any success? It might have done. There was a number of playgrounds that were enhanced by the funds, but then that was partly because various of the officials were dedicated to try and find something that was obvious, showing that something was happening in the area. I would think on the housing front, probably the biggest [change of all]. The atmosphere that was going on did, in a way, at least encourage people to come out and protest a bit more, if they were living in horrible housing, and to perhaps go and visit council meetings and make their protest and present petitions and so forth. That was good because, it then meant that the councillors, that were delegated to sit on the Spitalfields Project meetings, had actually got some evidence of the need for getting a move on. In fact, as the Spitalfields Project went on, it began to open up a bit more so that there were fewer councillors and then, as different community groups became stronger, a representative from that community group was asked to go along. So after the initial five year phase, Spitalfields Project had this new structure and by that time, there were quite a number of different Bangladeshi groups that had actually found their feet. That would have been about 1980. In that time, there had been a number of Bangladeshi youth [and women] organisations set up. They were doing a variety of work: some of them youth work; some low key welfare work, accompanying people to benefit offices, and things like that, when they weren’t able to put their own case. So that was the beginning of quite a big change. The second phase of the Spitalfields Project was much more satisfactory, because there was a lot of participation.  
  
The later phase of the 70s, from late 76 to definitely 78, there was a lot of trouble in Brick Lane through outsiders coming in. Racial attacks and so forth. Some of the attitudes of the white working class people who lived in this area were getting worse and some were getting better. The white class working people who were living in this area felt if anyone is going to complaint about Bangladeshis, it should be them, not people who live miles and miles away. The 'Skinheads' who came and started fights and so on in Brick Lane were [considered] outsiders, so it turned number of the white working class people to defend the area and to defend their neighbours of what ever origins they were. It’s funny that sometimes you can do a lot of work to try and attempt to broaden people’s mind but then something else happens and, in fact, what you are hoping for happens by chance almost. One of the [leading] people in this change was Cathy Forrester, because she and her family took quite a big stand in defending Bangladeshis and telling almost racist kids that they should know better than to create trouble. Cathy went on a lot of marches and made her opinion known. She did give lot of support to Bangladeshis like (Rajonuddin) Jalal, Sunahwar (Ali) and so forth. In a way, I would think probably she was one of the earliest of the indigenous population to take such a stand because, if a lot of Bangladeshi young people and older men knew white people, they were likely to be professionals in some capacity or another, be they social workers or teachers or community workers and so on. That was a bit of a rarefied position.  
  
One of the things the Spitalfields Project was able to fund, that was very useful was the organisation called the Spitalfields Housing and Planning Rights Service (SHAPRS); and that employed a solicitor and two co-workers. The solicitor was Philippa Fawcett, the two co-workers were Charlie Foreman and Mark Adams. The reason for that to be set up was because it was identified that one of the chief problems in the area, even though the Spitalfields Project was going for five years, was related to housing. And very often the housing issues had some redress in law or policy or in what ever else. So with that rather specialized team, it was possible to take up the issues of re-housing, repairs and sometimes neighbour harassment. The funny thing that was going on at that time was in the conservation area around Fournier Street in Spitalfields, all those Georgian houses had become totally neglected. A few people were living in rooms in them. But also the rag trade was practiced in a number of places with amazing staircases and everything else. Sewing machines rattling away. It almost felt like the sewing machines might fall through the floor boards at some point. Just gradually, a slight upturn in the property market, one of the local estate agents was trying to up the rent and get people out, in order to do the houses up and rent them out as offices. One of the big cries at that time was that offices were certainly not to employ [local] people like us. What we needed was housing. So one of the things SHAPRS also took on board was to oppose the squeeze from businesses moving into the area. The irony is that by stopping some of the office planning permission being given, just slowly, slowly the new breed, the ‘New Georgians’ came along so that you got, one by one, people who came with money and patience doing them [houses] up and competing with each other over how authentic the pigment of their paint was.  
  
However, before that, there were some well-meaning people who come to Avenues, to see if there was any way that we could interest the Bengalis, who use the old Georgian houses, in doing them up. These were people who knew that there were grants available and the very nice classic Georgian houses were falling down. But they didn’t know any Bengalis and did we. I can remember saying, “Actually, I don’t think it’s a matter of interest to those people. It may be very possible but, number one, they probably haven’t got the capital and, even if they have they would have, other things in mind—like sending it back to Bangladesh, and they’re working so hard, even if their working conditions were appalling, probably they don’t notice”.  
  
So SHAPRS had quite a number of victories with helping people and it was very busy and very popular from the word go. It was one of the best things that came out of the Spitalfields Project, but that is until a certain point when the funding dried up and they could not continue. Starting with those three workers, who were quite outstanding, they had a fourth post rapidly for a Bangladeshi workers. One of them was Ala Uddin, who is now the chair of Spitalfields Housing Association. Another one was Osman Gani, who is also on board of Spitalfields Housing Association. They also had Shishu Chowdhury, one time. Osman was living in Wentworth Dwellings in the Petticoat Lane market area. Osman knew first hand, how bad the conditions were. Whereas it had been possible to push forward the redevelopment of some of the old tenement blocks on the east side of Commercial Street, [through various action and through SCAG and so forth], the authorities was dragging their feet on redeveloping the tenement blocks on the west side of Commercial Street. A lot of Osman’s hard work was setting up Spitalfields Housing Co-Op, which is the predecessor of Spitalfields Housing Association, and to negotiating about re-housing Bangladeshis from Wentworth Dwellings and so forth. Some of the older blocks were quite shocking in the 1980s, because two flats shared a kitchen sink on the landing and shared a toilet; you came out of the front door with your washing-up to use the sink and you had to come out of the front door to use the toilet. It was very bad. Wentworth Dwellings was largely occupied by Bangladeshi families. Compared to the conditions that some Bangladeshis had to put up with in the 70s, possibly even sharing a sink and sharing a toilet was better than feeling under attack. If you put up with worse housing conditions, then you might be in a palace. But if you are under attack, you are really unhappy. That was one thing, and another thing was, the authorities still had to be educated about how to contact Bangladeshis. Perhaps nothing had been done about Wentworth Dwellings because the planning authorities and the housing authorities just didn’t know what to do. To them it was like Bangladeshis were just an alien species. Osman spearheading the approach on re-housing was the only way to do things.  
  
In parallel there were other areas where Tower Hamlet council couldn’t cope with dealing with Bangladeshis. An earlier thing would be registering Bangladeshis to vote. Caroline Adams organised, couple of years running, just registering people to vote, and I think funds from Tower Hamlets were there, although it might have been done on a voluntary basis to make the point. It was quite extraordinary looking back. I mean, all you had to do was knock on the doors and ask the people their names, be a bit more patient and explain why you are asking for their names. If registering for voting is an example, there were lots of other things that needed chipping away, breaking down barriers. Some Bangladeshis might have been a bit timid and frightened about seeing an official at the door way—“what did they want?”--because of years of experience. [In the early days] there might be an immigration officer very often on their doorsteps and examining passports, whether they are here legally or illegally. Officers sometimes asked about the number of residents in the home. There are stories that the officer might say, ‘there should be 2 people here and I can see 6 pairs of shoes, so there must be 6 persons here’ and so on. So that there would be some reason why the official hadn’t a wonderful reception, but the same time [it depended on] how they are going about it. So we all did lot of that sort of work with people’s benefits and making Bengalis seem like normal human beings. Hospital was another place where the Bengalis needed help, so we sometimes accompanied people to doctors and hospitals and so forth and demystified culture and customs. I can remember the first time when Caroline Adams accompanied some poor woman to a hospital appointment and she had to mediate between patient and doctor. Because the male doctor just couldn’t understand why a Bangladeshi woman was reluctant to undress, and when they snatched her sari, she screamed. So there was a lot of work along those lines, a) if you understood and b) if you dealt with this sensitively then all would be OK.  
  
Things went on from that. Everything had a knock-on effect. I can remember someone who was working in a relatively lowly job in the London Hospital and finding that she was being given the opportunity to have training on Asian naming systems, which people wouldn’t automatically know. Demystifying some of the cultural differences I can remember this woman, who was not a racist at all and was used to quite a lot of Bangladeshi names, just being delighted because someone explained to her how the naming system worked and therefore she could use them with confidence. Like “Mr. Begum!” would be frequently be called to come and be with his wife.  
  
**Q: Were you involved with any of these Bangladeshi organisations and interacting with these organisations?**  
Once Caroline Adams and John [Newbigin] left Avenues in 1980-81. I had been involved to an extent; but I became much more involved, once they had gone. John and Caroline were the people who were chiefly involved in working with the various youth organisations. When they left, I would say that my involvement was a bit different. Because Caroline and John had done such a good job in helping to set up the organisations, helping them run holiday projects, camping trips and other things. In the early days they even ran a six week, one evening a week citizenship course, to explain how the council works and the housing department works and how the DSS works and so forth, which I think was quite crucial actually. So a number of the chief people in the youth organisations had got fairly good grounding in how they could operate. Now taking it to another level perhaps. The people who were the youth, so called [ they were probably already in their late and mid 20s], still really needed help with, say, the nuts and bolts-- filling in the forms. They were fine on devising play schemes and running things, making contact with the officials and so forth. They’d got the confidence to do that, but perhaps where they didn’t have so much skill at time was actually in very basic things, like filling in the forms. So I did quite a lot of that kind of thing or composing letters if they had difficulty with them, perhaps advising them. There were few of the young men beginning to go through some sort of youth work training. Again I’d point them in the right direction if they wanted to be involved in the local youth office’s training.  
  
**Q: What do you think of Brick Lane now and Brick Lane then, what transformation do you really see in Brick Lane?**  
Well, Avenues Unlimited was on Bethnal Green Road, but in 1980-81 we had to move and it was into Brick Lane.  
It was quite interesting in many ways. In 1972, there were about three restaurants in Brick Lane, one being the Clifton; one being Nazrul and the third one was further down where the health centre is now. There may have been one or two others. They were very basic. They were used by people like Ashok and Peter East as contact points very often because, if young men were of working age, they might be going in there for lunch and so on. So that was a useful way of using them [the restaurants] apart from having some dinner. There did tend to be cockroaches. I can remember taking students and people there sometimes and they would scream in horror if they saw a cockroach.  
I think years and years of health inspectors visiting a bit more thoroughly have eliminated most of the cockroaches, but they were endemic in the old buildings.  
There were remnants of old Jewish community and just gradually, and, there was a much more Bengali presence by the end of the decade in Brick Lane itself.  
Because there were a number of demonstrations in the middle and late 70s in Brick Lane, it was always seen as the focus of the community and, I suppose as well, it was definitely becoming more of the focus of the community with more rag trade factories taking over from the old Jewish factories. There was a certain amount of housing where a lot of the single men lived and you could march up and down, and demonstrate in [Brick Lane]without too much trouble.  
  
Now you have about 44 restaurants in Brick Lane. It must have been in the 90s, when the latest transformations started, which may have partly been because Trumans Brewery was no longer a workplace. Although the property-developer owners were keen to redevelop the site, because property values nose dived, they couldn’t redevelop this site. They found other uses for the site and, in the mean time, they still wanted to make big money, so they drew in music studios or God knows what. That had a snow ball effect, so that you have now got the Brick Lane of today, which is hyped all over the place and it’s the coolest place to be, even if they do call it Shoreditch in the press. But I do remember, when this new wave was starting, there were sort of parallel universes that the people were living in. There would be some sort of trendy persons striding along to the latest internet or coffee bar in Brick Lane. And you might have various hajjis going to the mosque. Their worlds just didn’t cross over. I remember one time, asking an elderly Bengali man what he thought of it and what was going on. And it was like it didn’t exist, he almost didn’t see it he had to see it now because it’s so prominent.  
One of the shops just opposite to the Avenues office was, for a short while, let to an art gallery. They thought they could do a sort of cheap version of Cork Street up West End with art showroom. There was one point when there was an explicit exhibition of nudes there which might be found up the west end [gallery]. These were sort of the early days. My colleague, Rosy, in Avenues, whispered to me, could I help some women who lived in that block [above the gallery], because they were so ashamed when they had visitors. The visitors couldn’t miss this sort of art show, which was going on for couple of months or more.  
So I thought “what do you do about this?” I gather it upset quite a number of Bengalis on their way to the mosque, and their eyes flipped in the wrong direction. I thought “Hang on! The Bangladeshi community was here first, why should these interlopers come in and start showing these western art forms”. I was puzzled a bit, how to go about this. The authorities were very sympathetic, totally understood the cultural clash, but hadn’t really got any means to do anything about it. I think they suggested going on to the police. I was confused, remembering how the police could be so lacking in understanding but again, you have these amazing surprises. I went to the police station and the officer was very sympathetic, he went to have a look and came back. He saw exactly what I meant. It wasn’t a sort of thing that Brick Lane needed or wanted. He said, “I went in and I spoke to a young lady there” and he said, “I didn’t liked her attitude at all. I would almost say it was racist”. It was quite a surprise. His version was that the young lady said “what’s the problem, they don’t have to look”—totally lacking any sensitivity at all. It was agreed that they should put some frostings on their windows, so even if the door was wide open, there was less opportunity for people to be offended by the oil paintings of nudes.  
So there are parallel universes.  
  
Another one [cultural clash] was the Vibe Bar. With more custom it began to get beyond itself a little bit, so they started to have really loud music going on into the early hours. The houses built in Quaker Street were only yards away from some of the [Vibe Bar] windows. They were just having hell. They were all Bangladeshi families in that new housing. I thought they were being amazingly tolerant. If there were any middle class white families in that situation, they would have been on the war path. The Vibe Bar was then applying for extended licensing as a matter of course for the week end, but, in particular, over the millennium weekend. They wanted 36 hours of non-stop music. It was probably one of the last things I did there. I organised petitions from the families in the new housing. None of them would actually come with me to the council meeting that was to discuss whether the permission would be given or not, much as I offered transport. But nevertheless, there were petitions. I did go to the meeting to put the case there. Two thirds of the councillors were Bengalis and I knew them anyway. The police were there also to give their view of it. Police did have some problems with the bar and so they were set against the extension hours. So I was quite successful and I think there are certain restrictions put on the Vibe Bar now. They had to have sound-proofing and the hours were fewer than they were asking for. One of the families lived opposite and had a daughter with bad cystic fibrosis. Because of her problem they could not shut the window and she needed ventilation. I think her case swayed things quite a lot.  
  
**Q: Do you remember the Altab Ali long march?**  
Yes, I do. To me the remarkable thing was that so many Bangladeshis turned out for that. Other protest marches would probably have largely the Bangladeshi youths and one or two older men but awful lot of White social workers, teachers and SWP and so forth. But on the Altab Ali march, 80 to 90% were Bangladeshis. And they were all sorts: there were humble machinists to community leaders. Obviously from that point of view, it touched a nerve in the consciousness. It was held on Sunday, which may have helped a bit, but I think people would have gone on the march anyway. Jalal was one of the organisers. There were other efficient organisers. The fact they organised it as opposed to the Anti-Nazi League or SWP or what ever, obviously made a big difference and it was wonderful. I felt it gave a lot more validity to the protest, which was for more police presence and protection and so forth. That was one of the demands that was going through so many of the other marches.  
The other thing was, for a number of years proceeding that when there were a lot of attacks in Brick Lane on the Bangladeshis by 'Skinheads' or what ever racists, what was typically happened, would be that the attack would be made, and someone would call the police, a Bangladeshi probably. The police would take a long time to get there, and by the time the police did get there, the attackers had run away, probably hearing the sirens and the Bangladeshis, who were possibly the neighbours, came out, possibly with a chunk of wood or something to protect themselves with. They were the ones who were arrested for having offensive weapons. Some of that comes out in the “Blood in the Streets” publication by Dan Jones. There wasn’t enough police protection; they were saying that the police would arrest Bangladeshis with the chunk of wood or what ever. The Police made assumptions about the Bengalis being the aggressors. So there were gradual turning points for that.  
  
Every so often there would be marches on specific issues. I can remember a march, it was on a week day evening. The march went up Brick Lane, along Bethnal Green Road. When the march got to certain point on Bethnal Green Road, an impatient car driver wanted to drive through. With all these marches going on, it wasn’t just the local police that were called on but also police from other districts. Had it been local police, they might have recognised that the car driver was from a rather notorious family, with a history of convictions of violence. What happened was that some people on the march went and tried to reason with the car driver. There was a small fight and the people on the march were arrested and the car driver was ushered through. I can imagine that the car driver had no licence, just as I imagine the car was unlicensed and untaxed. And so the march carried on and there was a sit-down outside the Bethnal Green Police Station. We sat there for couple of hours and eventually they [the arrested marchers] were released. That was one of the many facts that would lead you to believe that these two worlds don’t add up.  
  
**Q: What do you think of the Bangladeshi community now; which way are they progressing?**  
The elements that thrived, despite all adversity, are proving to be high fliers, in very good jobs and it’s wonderful to see. The middle lot are making a life for themselves and are employed. And then there is a small section at the bottom which is cause for concern and sadness. Those being, I suppose, the drug dealers. They are the ones who are never going to hold down a job. If they do, it will be all over the place. By and large it’s worrying to see that, the little groups of misfits; the alienated youth is an area that concerns me. Statistically I would like to know how big it is, because I know very often by working with a youth and community project, it is easy not to see the true proportion of things. If one’s work involves people who need help most, you get a disproportionate view of how many they are, because others are getting on with their lives. It does concern me. The nice thing about having worked with Bangladeshi community was that it was much more varied if you like in breaking the cultural barriers ultimately.