

Breaking Barriers

By Julie Jaye Charles (CBE, FRSA, FRSM, Dip SW, LFW)

For over thirty years now, I have worked to build power in marginalised communities. Though, I have advised both major political parties, and shared my knowledge about the impacts of inequality and discrimination against disabled people of colour, we never received the money we needed from the government. That's an indictment of our two main political parties, who claim they are committed to equality.

My own commitment to levelling the playing field began with my lived experience of inequality: I was a single expectant mother at the age of 17, living on a council estate. I became passionate about developing a day nursery, because although I worked, there were no educational play facilities for children, which made it hard for parents like myself to get back into employment. I formed a group called 'The Oliver Close Action Group', which negotiated with politicians and local government for three years. We only secured premises and funding thanks to Comic Relief.

We were the first group in East London to receive this type of funding. It meant that families who would never normally have access, could use nurseries. The Nappy Gang Nursery continues today and stands as a testament to the things that can happen when ordinary people come together, are empowered and are committed to building a better future.

My journey in community development did not end in 1983 despite adversity. In 1996, I was diagnosed with a condition that still affects me severely. I have bipolar, lupus, spinal stenosis and other conditions. This has not quashed my passion for community work. I still support and defend the rights of excluded and marginalised groups.

In 1997, I developed the Equalities National Council (ENC). We specialised in providing services for black and minority ethnic disabled people and carers. We employed 24 staff and had around 2800 members across London, with more throughout the UK. It was so clear to us that there was a serious need for advice, mentoring and advocacy across housing, education, employment, immigration, welfare, health and many other public sectors.

The ENC played a crucial role in bringing different people together. Our solidarity proved that when communities work alongside each other, we have power in numbers despite the barriers we face.

For over 20 years, we fought for government recognition and funding. Nine UK universities endorsed our work, and their endorsements stand alongside the awards we won – as testament to what we achieved. However, I do not believe any government ever

understood just how crucial our organisation was. What did happen was this - government organisations and their partners copied our ideas. This happened for many years, and it was disappointing because we often shared those ideas in good faith to open up a dialogue. We had hoped to be commissioned to provide better services for black and minority ethnic disabled people and their carers across the UK.

Eventually, we became the first black and minority ethnic disability organisation to successfully be awarded over £1 million by the National Lottery. This helped us sustain our work. But, it greatly saddens me that neither party's policy outcomes made any difference to the lived experience of the communities we served. Even more tragically, at the beginning of 2020, a lack of resources forced us to close completely.

My passion and drive, however, remains. I formed Start Change towards the end of last year. We are a community interest company, we provide intersectional services and we follow a truly Black Lives Matter agenda. We help the same communities we helped with the ENC. However, we also work alongside communities more widely to support growth post Covid-19 and improve local services.

If I could say one thing to government, it would be this – do not ignore the needs of the minority to feed the majority. Thousands of overlooked communities have been disregarded and often feel like they are the underdogs, begging for the system to let them, and give them the chances that are rightfully theirs. If I could say one thing to the next generation of changemakers, I would remind them to stop, look, listen and learn before taking action. Despite government disappointment, there is incredible power within community. The doors of power can be pushed down with collective force.