

Kirit Patel

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INTERVIEWER: It sounds like for you, Manchester and the gay community has always been very tied up with love.

PARTICIPANT: Yeah, I think that's a really good way of looking at it. I think I was fortunate that meeting Shaun quite... I was in my early thirties, and... my work in London was primarily- I worked with a bank, which was very soul-destroying. And then I was working within a gay counselling project, which was amazing at the time, if you can think back to the mid-80s, early 90s, when I'd kind of... I suppose I hadn't got involved as a volunteer in an activism kind of way. I knew that the support was there if you needed your different kinds of project-

So the Lesbian and Gay Centre, which was in Farringdon, had had a South Asian space, if you like. It was called Shakti. It was founded by somebody called... I've forgotten his name now. But anyway, he founded it. And that group was there for South Asian lesbian and gay people at the time, and it was the only space available really. Once a month, if I remember correctly, on a Sunday afternoon, there was almost like a tea dance feel to it. And it was nice because you got to see other South Asians and Asians. And it wasn't just South Asian actually, I think, it was more mixed, it had Black people there, it had white people there too. So it wasn't totally 100% Asians there. But it definitely gave you a feeling of not being alone. And that's an interesting feeling, I suppose, growing up feeling that you're the only one. And I think... I felt... and I think the combination, if you like, of being in London, having that experience of seeing- there was one club night called Club Kali, which- actually there was a Shakti club, actually, Shakti organised a club night as well, it was called Shakti and then after a short while it sort of branched off, partly because I think Shakti's club came out of a social need. So they wanted to do social activities. And whereas Club Kali was about money, and just offering alternative kinds of music... and DJ Ritu really significant now, I mean very popular, and rightly so, I think, as a woman DJ, you know, I think she set the ground for a lot of... you know?

So DJ Ritu set a different sort of tone really. And I suppose I kind of looked forward to it, as you do, you look forward to the weekly meetings, you look forward to the clubs. And I was fortunate in that sense that I met my first friends- real friends, really, I mean my lifetime friends really, people I've met in my early and mid 20s, who are still my friends now. They are your replacement family, in that sense.

And I met Shaun, and then that kind of changed a bit for me, a little bit, because I was leaving London to come to Manchester. And, because I was working for PACE – Project for Advice, Counselling and Education for Gay Men and Lesbians, I had access to lots of lovely people. Lots of free counselling actually, free therapy. I was the evening receptionist, you know, the host or hostess, making teas and drinks, and getting to know people, and welcoming people into the centre. That was my job. But in that space, I also found out that what was available outside of London- [there were] a lot of people ringing up about support services in their areas, what could they meet, where could they go? So already- because I was lucky, I think I just happened to be in the right space really. So I... there was a manual, actually, I can't remember

what it was called now, was it the National AIDS Help Manual? It was a helpline- it was mostly a manual about support services across the country. And within Manchester, I looked at Manchester for what was available and there were a couple of things there. At that time, there was something called Health Gay Manchester, which is now the LGBT Foundation. And there was another group called the Black HIV/AIDS Forum, BHAF. They were based in Manchester. So I kind of knew that there were these support groups available. So when I arrived in Manchester in the mid-90s, I really wanted to find those groups. Just for social contact, really, nothing more than that, really, making new friends.

And I was lucky that my first job in Manchester was working within what was then called the Community Health and Resource Centre, which were basically centres around wellbeing and health. And it was multidisciplinary, so it had lots of different projects within it, and would you believe it that the Zion community centre had within it BHAF, the Black HIV/AIDS Forum? Among many other groups, around drugs, around mental health, around supporting people, self-help groups, you know, counselling and advice. So I was very lucky I think! I arrived into Manchester and I was fortunate to have been in a centre where actually BHAF was based.

And within BHAF- BHAF was a very small group. I think it was set up around 1990, so... it was an organisation looking at HIV and AIDS within Black communities within Manchester, that was their remit. And at that time, I was the reception administrator for the centres – I was one of many, there were about four or five of us appointed around that time. And I was looking for other work, really. I was only working part time, so I wanted to find other things to do. And BHAF at that time, in the late/mid n- I think it was '97/'98, they were looking to develop a project around the needs and support for Black gay men. And this was in partnership with Healthy Gay Manchester. So they were looking to develop a joint project- I mean, I don't know the history of support services for Black gay men and lesbians before that date, I just knew what I experienced in London. And what I experienced in London was that, maybe the size of the minority population in London, maybe the size of the gay population in London meant that there was more available to you. And once you come out of Lon[don]- I was maybe not expecting the same, but I was expecting something not too [dis]similar.

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INTERVIEWER: More than what there actually was.

PARTICIPANT: Yeah. More than there was. And there was-

[00:06:37]

INTERVIEWER 2: Sorry. Can I just pause you there? [Interviewer adjusts mic.] Sorry to interrupt. You were asking a question-

[00:07:05]

INTERVIEWER: Oh, just that there wasn't nearly enough support for non-white men and Black men specifically-

PARTICIPANT: Yeah. And I think I was quite excited by the Black HIV/AIDS Forum.. I'd never worked, I'd never volunteered for any lesbian or gay- apart- I worked for a lesbian and gay project in London, but I wasn't volunteering. And at that time, that partnership between Healthy Gay Manchester and BHAF, to look and provide support services for Black gay men, appealed to me. So I applied for one of the roles; they were looking for three sessional workers, and I was one of the successful workers. And we – myself, Clint, and there was a third guy, who for the life of me, I've forgotten his name, he'll kill me won't he? – he was from the North West [laughs] if that counts. He was South Asian, that covers everybody, doesn't it!? [laughs]

But there was definitely a team of us, there were three of us. And I was the only one who was based in Manchester, the other two weren't, which was a good thing and a not a bad- there were advantages of that and there were disadvantages. We were working together as a team, but it had work as a- isolating experience really, sometimes. And at that time, Healthy Gay Manchester, to my mind, were a bit more resourced, had wonderful office spaces, they were very... it felt at the time like we were almost like a smaller partner. We weren't- I mean BHAF was not solely looking at the needs of Black gay men, they were looking much more broadly across Black and Asian communities, they had a much broader remit. But there was recognition of the specific needs of particular groups within that, so women – women's services, support for women, look at lesbian communities, look at younger people. So they were trying to cover a broad remit. So I don't necessary think that they were equally, uh... in the sense of, how do you ensure that these things aren't done on an ad-hoc basis, or on a temporary basis? How is it made permanent and how's it- and if you look at the time, even now, if you look at the history of Black gay and lesbian projects, there are very few. You can't even name them. If you can name them, you'd be surprised. There are a handful. And the Blackliners was in London at the time, which was very good, very successful, in its day. And I think in terms of Black communities and particularly LGBT communities in the Black communities, if you like, the history of our work seemed to be one of trying to make a case, make an argument, why our needs- well, how is it different, how is it specific? It's doubly, because we're experiencing double discrimination, double injustice, double the inequality. And how do you then make the case for that within a population that is very invisible in the city? So that's one of the questions – how do we... it's not about hard to reach, but hard to see! Where are they!? And we knew that they were there, but we knew that there were issues about how they came out.

A lot of them were very frightened and fearful of being found out. Fearful to come in the Village in case they were found out, because a lot of the taxi drivers were probably South Asian, potentially, so they were fearful that it would somehow get back to their families, through the networks.

And then the other aspect of that was that people who had could, who had the means and resources, would escape. They'd go to London, they'd go to the bigger cities. And you also saw a different kind of response from them to the issues, if you like, to their identity; how well they were able to accept themselves and accept whatever situation they're going to be in. And we found that between Clint myself and... I can't remember his name, but the three of us, we tried to look at what could

we do that would replicate some of the work that was being done elsewhere. So how do we create the space, how do we create the identity, and also, working within the context of Blackness, you know, political Blackness in the sense of a political expression, of people experiencing racism and prejudice due to their colour, their background, not meaning a specific ethnic identity, which is what it's become now. And so we are looking back at a time when, if you like, the splits and the fracturing within the Black community wasn't there as much. I think the issues were still the same, in the sense of making particular, how do you respond to the needs of, let's say, within the Muslim community, or the Hindu community, Sikh community, or... within the African diaspora, you know, so many countries of origin, so many languages, so many cultures. So if you think about all that stuff, you think, well how on earth do you start to provide that space? One thing that was a challenge quite early on was, what do we call ourselves, even. I think we ended up with Black Gay Men Development team, which wasn't fantastic, because bloody too many letters, for a start! So it wasn't something snappy.

[00:12:32]

INTERVIEWER: That's really interesting. Could you tell us more about some of the specific things the project did to help people in the South Asian community and how you were able to facilitate their... their lives, I guess?

PARTICIPANT: Well, one of the things that was clear to me was that we wanted a social space. I think in my mind I realise what that meant. In my head I thought it would be something similar to London, so like a club night. We went down that road of offering a club night. [missed] [00:12:55] club night, but it was actually a social night actually, once every month, and tried to do it quarterly, and we had lots of headaches thinking about how it would work. We ran a club night, if I remember correctly, it was called Northern Masala. Even finding a name was tricky. We had DJ Ritu come in, and came and did it in partnership with us, and she performed, they did a night with us. And we found another group in Birmingham that came and did a night. It was successful to a point, I think partly people felt there was a gap. It became world music, you know, the kind of, err- But we weren't club promoters, that wasn't our thing – it was a vehicle for us to get the messages across. And I think what we found from doing the club night was that people come in for different things. People wanted support around the issues they were struggling with – struggling with their sexual identity, and with their family, sometimes some of them were married, and that was really torture for them, torturous having to live a double life, having to deal with religion and family and their partners, the children. And that was really hard. I hadn't worked with that before. My personal nature was very much about wanting to meet that need, and the need was overwhelming.

I think, how do you- and I do remember, it was hard really, there was one lad, was he in Oldham or Bolton? Might have been Bolton. And he wanted to keep his family, and literally I met him at the station, and I put him on a train. He was having some friends and some contacts in London. Now, would I have done that today? No, probably not. Yeah, we got too involved. But the boundaries of support, it really did test us as to what we could do. So that was one of the ways we were trying to find... we didn't have the resources to do the kind of work that is now almost every day things, like helpline, support groups, weekly meetings. I think the need was so

diverse and so desperate. It was coming from different parts of the country, in terms of the North West, it was coming from different need young people, older, different ethnic groupings – I met a Jewish Orthodox lad. Yeah. How do you - some of the commonalities were there, you know, acceptance, wanting to be themselves, wanting to be recognised who they were, flee some of the damage, so some of the pain, the hurt. And I think we still - I look back now and I think, I do remember that - it's almost like giving people... I don't want to call it role modelling, it's not role modelling. It's just showing them how it could look. It's not easy, I don't think it's easy for anyone, at any coming out point in their lives. I don't know if ever you come out at all really, you just look out one door, go, oh I'm here, you know what I mean? So yeah.

[00:16:18]

INTERVIEWER: That's really amazing, and I can imagine that at that time, the white gay community was probably not the most welcoming place, if you were Black or Muslim, so I guess this would have provided a halfway point-

PARTICIPANT: Yeah. I think, one of things that comes out, definitely, is that some people did experience hostility in terms of the Village; they didn't feel welcome. Some were seen to be threatening, [because of] stereotypes. If you like, the stereotypes that we have now are of the Muslim community, partly because of the scrutiny over them about the way they dress and so forth, but at that time in the late 1990s and the early 2000s, it was all about whether you were a Black person, and whether you were going to be seen as dealing drugs or being aggressive. So there was [a lot of] stereotyping people.

There was also this idea about whiteness. Can you imagine the absence of Blackness in a white space? So seeing, you go into a room now, and you go into a multicultural space, do you see difference? You go into a white only space and a Black person appears and it's a [missed] [00:17:28] and you suddenly think, that's not quite right, why do I feel uncomfortable with that? So what is the fear there? What is the issue that's going on there? And it works both ways. So for some it was about feeling the Village was a safe space for them. And we tried very hard. Our first attempt at a club night was here in the Village. I think a few times later we tried to move it out and there was a bit of a backlash - it was too far away from the Village. A ten minute walk! In London you travel an hour to get somewhere. Ten minutes was too much here. So there was an issue here about Manchester's particular way of... its development of what it means to be the Village.

And the other thing which is just about age really. It wasn't about a club experience. It was about sexual health messages. Why are we focusing on... because where the messages were coming from, at that time, around HIV and AIDS, particularly HIV, and it was about the stigma and the taboos. And so some of our work was about looking at how we get stronger, more positive images of Black people in the public... so people recognise, "oh that's me too". And part of it was working with, at that time, Healthy Gay Manchester to help and support them to start to think about the images that they produce, so it's not all monocultural and men – OK, it was a men's project at the beginning obviously, so it was about men. But this is interesting because I think the history of LGBT projects is about survival and thriving. And about getting

the resources behind it. I think if you're a Black lesbian or gay person, you find the issues are around resources, about acceptance – it's double, you experience double the struggle, if you like. From within your own community, partly because they don't accept it and they don't see it as of value – where do you go for funds within your own community, to raise funds like that? And if we go to the wider lesbian and gay community, they don't see your need as particular, they see it as part of many needs. So we are... You kind of, this is the thing, you want to be accepted on your own terms, not because you fit some quota or a tickbox, you know, [because] we need this group to be included in our funding application. For me that's not substantial, or it's not embedded, it's not going to create the change for the long term. It's ad hoc, it's temporary, it's transitory. And I think if you look now, that's what you see. If you look at the history of... I mean, I look now very positively, I look at Rainbow Noir, and I think the excitement around that, the young people involved with that project, they meet fortnightly, they get involved. I think it's moved on, and you could argue that social media has helped a lot. I look back and I think one of the interesting things now it provides anonymity that a lot of Black and young people need at a time when they're deciding on the choices they're having to make. It also means that they don't have to deal with some of it, so they're putting it off, which is not such a good thing actually, because it's pushing it behind, you know.

So part of my thingy now is that actually, we do need- I know of my age group, I'm the 50+ group, can I say that's quite scary, isn't it!? 50+ group. But there are a lot of us that are either in relationships or not relationships, but we've created a lives for ourselves as a good support family, an alternative family, dare I say the word. And that's quite solid and quite strong. But I also know individual people who haven't had that experience, and who are probably feeling quite alone in the their own families around their sexual identity. So I just feel that we're just catching the surface, because... as you get older, your needs change. So I can't imagine myself being in an old people's home, but there you go, if there one... is that the right word? But those sort of homes, I think, what is the scenario for us, you know, as we get older. Will be be included in those spaces? And if we don't argue for them now, will they ever be met? Who will look after that need? It's a scary prospect.

[00:22:15]

INTERVIEWER: So are you still involved with LGBT community-

PARTICIPANT: You'd be surprised, you'd be surprised! [missed] [00:22:24]

I've just started an MA at the University of Salford in Creative Education. For a long time, I didn't want to look at race and sexuality, and for a long time- at the beginning I was going to explore it, then I thought no, I can't do that, I've been there and bought the t-shirt. And now actually I'm looking at it, as part of my final year. And I'm looking at social action, social change through, how do we make LGBT people globally feel that they are going to be heard? And that someone will fight for them? Given that in their own situations, they're probably under... hidden, they're going to be fearful, they're going to be criminalised. So my thoughts are, that actually we are in a very powerful position as LGB people. We're powerful, the fact that we're in a very liberated country. We have a Village, whether we like it or not, there's a Village there for us to go into if we choose to into it or not. But I'd like for us to believe that

we are a global family, and that means that we have to fight for each other, as we would do, and support each other when times are tough. So that's [what I'm] planning to do.

[00:23:39]

INTERVIEWER: I think I've asked all my questions. Is there anything you want to talk about, that you want the world to know about, that you want to plug, or anything you want recorded for posterity?

PARTICIPANT: I think the only thing that I think is good to know about, I suppose, each person's experience and story is unique to them. I'm a firm believer now... I've always been a kind of- I like to listen to people, I know I talk a lot but I do listen as well! But I like the idea that people get a chance. I know that people have given me chances along the way, and we've just got to find a space for people really. If we do that, I think we're in a good way really.

That's a bit of a plug for nothing much really!

[00:24:26]

INTERVIEWER: Thank you, that was really nice.

PARTICIPANT: That's great, thank you.

[00:24:42]

INTERVIEWER 2: That was great. I was just going to ask... when you were working for BHAF, what kinds of challenges did you face, and what kinds of attitudes did you encounter? And even going further back actually, I also wanted to ask you about when you first heard about this thing called HIV, or that became HIV... and then maybe you could say a little bit about... because it was really interesting hearing about how you had to intervene with more mainstream gay kinds of, like, HGM stuff, to try and make their work more inclusive, but in a way that wasn't just tokenistic as well. I'd like to hear more about that- I mean I'd like to hear more about everything! But yeah, when did you first hear about this new virus? Do you remember that?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah yeah yeah, I think I- it's funny, because I grew up in the mid... well I was 21/22, so I didn't come out till I very- and I think I was waiting for the magic year, because up until that point, it was criminalised. You weren't... to have a gay identity, you [had to be] 21+. And was something called the Time Out, which is a magazine which still exists, and they used to have classified listings at the back. And they were like little adverts, you know, somebody seeking someone. But always in brackets, 21+. I thought, oh my good God, I'm only 18, I'm only 19, how am I going to get to 21!? So I was a really firm believer, this is the age to be, you know. So that was my first thing. And once I came out on the scene and I was introduced to it through someone I met, and that helped, because you got to meet other people.

But no sooner had I come out than there was this advert, it was the iceberg advert, the tombstone advert. And it was on that same thing, so I didn't... so I personally

wasn't... but it was in the air, if you like. It was not in every conversation, but you knew that something was not right. And people say, well, do you know who has it? And one of my friends, who sadly passed away from it, he gradually gradually lost weight so quickly. And he was one of those people that was really well-off and very middle class, very comfortable. He was always travelling – and for someone who had actually never travelled, apart from Brighton, the lantern [?] – and he was constantly travelling everywhere. For me, he exposed this wonderful, almost bohemian life. He was a film director and producer, he had all these amazing friends, he was very attractive, very funny, and the most important thing was, he took interest in me, which was... I was very unconfident growing up, I didn't feel, myself, very attractive. And David did give me a special kind of attention really.

But within a few years of meeting him, he was gradually losing weight, and by the time we got to 1991, he'd lost a lot of weight, and he was ill. We could see. But it was so slow that it was never... Nobody ever named it, no-one ever said, this is what he's got. And I still remember to this day, we went to the funeral service, and Ade, his Nigerian boyfriend at the time, said we're going to set up a trust in his name, the Cosmos Trust – they used to live in a place called Cosmos Place in Holborn. And it just stayed with me, that nobody named it, nobody said he had HIV/AIDS. And for me that was quite hard, because he was... it stayed with me, really. About the whole nature of safe and unsafe sex. It never really... I suppose I wasn't very sexually active in that way so I never really thought about it in that way for me, but a lot of people around me were. And the association between love and sex and the fear and the heartbreak that came through with it. And I think that kind of set of the tone really, in terms of the fear really. And the fear was that it was amongst us, as friends, and within the people that we knew. And then that kind of, if you like- the work that BHAF was doing, and the work that was done- and at that time in London there was something called Gay Men Fighting AIDS, and... there were other groups, like ACT UP, but I never really got involved with them. It was only when I came to Manchester that my involvement became a bit more- and that's not to say that HIV was prevalent within Black communities, it was just that it wasn't really talked about, it was about the stigma. And that was a key thing, it was about the taboos around it, the double taboos if you like, of sexuality and risk, and you know, sexual ill health, really.

I can't remember what the third part of the question is...

[00:30:21]

INTERVIEWER 2: It was that... I mean you've kind of covered it, I think. Yeah. I mean, I'd be happy to listen to you for hours!

PARTICIPANT: Oh, no, that's alright! I think one thing which is for sure, that I definitely would... I think the nature of... I mean, look at the examples of campaigning organisations like Stonewall or Terrance Higgins Trust. I think the Black communities haven't really... and I say that in a plural way, I think the challenge has been that either we've not had the power to really tackle it in a stronger way than we could have done, and we're too splinters, as groups have been. And part of it, I think it's never been part of any longer strategic plan to say, you know, we're going to do this for the right reason, not because it's going to help

our funding application. And I think that's where a lot of this work sadly sits. It's down to individuals, you know. I could go on for days to say how hard it is to bring volunteers together, to get a parade together, or even just- just those examples. And I'm quite... Sometimes I look at African Rainbow Families, and I think of the parade that was happening in London when you actually see a visible Muslim presence, or an Asian presence, and suddenly you're uplifted. You do feel uplifted, because you see yourself in those people. And I do remember my own marches, when I walked with my then partner, and I remember going through Brixton when the march went through Brixton- and I remember we were on a double decker bus and somebody spat at us, my and my then partner, because we were holding hands. And it's almost like making a statement.

And even now, today, this morning, I was coming here, I saw these two older men, grey-haired, one of them had a stick, but they were holding hands. White-haired, really they must be in the 70s or 80s, and you know, it heartened me. I thought that we... it's hard to believe but I think we're making progress. It's hard believe, but we are. If we can see that, I think that's what I'm looking forward to, really. If it's possible to create that kind of world for everyone, an inclusive space for everyone to be who they want to be, what they want to be. Love without labels, if it's possible to say that? [laughs]

[00:32:49] End of transcript.