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POWER TO THE PEOPLE

COMMUNITY ACTION

It was important to Jessica and Eric that Black children understood the value of education and that they received an education out of which they would emerge as confident, competent people, proud of their heritage and able to contribute to society. Neither Jessica nor Eric had any interest in being part of the bureaucratic structures that provided education. They knew what these bureaucratic systems were; they paid their taxes and expected them to work effectively so that Black children would be educated. However, along with many other Black people they were bitterly disappointed with certain aspects of the educational system, as well as with the attitudes of some White teachers towards their Black pupils. In particular the large number of exclusions and expulsions of Black children from schools and the biased tests that labelled a disproportionate number of them “Educationally Sub-normal” (ESN), and placed them in ESN Schools - “special” schools set up for children thought to be insufficiently intelligent to be educated in mainstream schools.

The Huntleys did not get involved in government commissions, nor did they respond to consultative reports on education. They were sceptical of reports and commissions, having come from Guiana where the British had used such processes to oppress the people. They had not developed through the governmental systems of the UK, as later generations of Black activists did, making them more likely to respond to government documents. Jessica and Eric steered clear of anything to do with government-led race relations organisations and were also sceptical of Black people who worked for such bodies. However, over the years, their attitude changed towards many individual workers with whom they came into contact and got to know.

The Huntleys’ concern was with what “Black people could do about education at the local level”. They wanted to take action that would make a difference. The organisations they founded and supported acted independently of government-led bodies. They both admitted that there were contradictions in their approach: they were against close association with the government yet worked closely with individuals who were part of government systems. However, as tax payers they were entitled to access government resources for the benefit of their community.

Growing numbers of supplementary schools were being set up in London in the late 1960s. Black migrants to the UK during this period held the British education system in high esteem and expected their children to benefit from educational opportunities they had been denied back in the Caribbean. They assumed that schools in Britain were free from discrimination and open to all. However, Black supplementary schools were developed in the UK to supplement the shortcomings of an education system that was failing their children. Jessica and Eric were involved in the Supplementary School Movement from its very beginnings, actively supporting a number of the schools across London. Among these were the Albertina Sylvester Black Community and Supplementary School and the George Padmore Supplementary School in Haringey, Kwame Nkrumah School in Hackney and Queen Mother Moore School in Clapham.

In 1972, Jessica, Peter Moses and others founded the Marcus Garvey School in Museum, Eric talked about the catalyst for the development of supplementary schools:

With the publication of Bernard Coard's groundbreaking work, How the West Indian Child Is Made Educationally Sub-normal in the British School System, in 1972, the Saturday Supplementary Education Movement received the impetus it was awaiting for. The founding fathers and mothers, all Black, were parents, trained teachers and senior students. Teachers did not welcome any interference from non-professionals especially if they were Black. Indeed the education authorities could not comprehend how it was that Black working-class migrants were exhibiting ambitions which they associated with the White middle classes.

In 1986, the Huntleys established the Peter Moses School in Ealing. (The name was to honour their friend Peter, a young man from Dominica, after his untimely death from sickle-cell anaemia.) Black pupils attended supplementary schools mostly on Saturdays but others attended after school and during the school holidays. Supplementary Schools operated independently and developed based on the interests of the organisers. All focused on the 3Rs with some providing African and Caribbean history, arts, culture and the sciences as well as homework clubs.

A tragedy took place at 439 New Cross Road in the early hours of Sunday morning on 18 January 1981 that will be forever etched in the memory of the British public, especially Black people in the UK. During a party to celebrate Yvonne Ruddock's and Angela Jackson's 16th birthday, held at the Ruddock's family home, a horrific fire broke out and engulfed the house, killing 13 of the young partygoers, including

two of Mrs Ruddock's children, Yvonne and her older brother Paul. Many of the other young partygoers were seriously injured. There was shock and sadness within the Black community at the horror of the New Cross fire.

The racially intolerant environment at the time, supported by a largely right-wing press, created fear among Black people in the UK that an attack by White racists was a strong possibility. However, police complacency and the messages of hate sent to the bereaved family were totally unexpected. Yvonne Ruddock's mother received letters from racists who claimed to have carried out the attack. These letters were in stark contrast to the messages of sympathy from Margaret Thatcher and the Queen sent to the families of Irish victims killed in a fire in Dublin one month later. The silence of the Queen and the Prime Minister in showing no public expression of sympathy for the Black victims of the New Cross fire reverberated throughout the Black community.

The early media reporting and eye-witness statements suggested that it was an arson attack. However, police reports leaked to the media refused to consider that it was a racist arson attack. Jessica was in Guyana with Accabre visiting family at the time. Eric, who was a personal friend of Sybil Phoenix, a community worker in South-East London, went with John La Rose to her home in Lewisham. There, they met Dr Aggrey Burke, consultant psychiatrist, Baroness Roz Howells, community activist, and Mrs Ruddock, owner of 439 New Cross Road, where the fire had taken place. Jessica learned of the tragedy in Guyana and contacted friends in the UK to find out how the investigation was progressing. She was deeply affected emotionally by the deaths of the young people and, in spite of arriving from Guyana on the day of the inquest she went to demonstrate outside the Coroner's Office. She was angry and determined that something must be done. She contacted John La Rose and Darcus Howe to discuss how to support the bereaved families and how to mobilise the Black community nationwide behind a campaign for a proper investigation into the cause of the fire. Howe, broadcaster, writer and activist, describes Jessica's humility in taking a major role in leading the campaign for justice for the victims while remaining very much in the background.

The Black Parents Movement (BPM) was one of many organisations to challenge the investigation of the fire by a hostile police force and the misreporting of evidence by an unsympathetic press. Two days after the fire, the West Indian Standing Conference and the BPM organised a public meeting; more than 300 people attended from different parts of the country. The 20 January meeting decided that it was a "massacre politically" and the group took the name the New Cross Massacre Action Committee (NCMAC). The committee set up a fact-finding commission to gather information about the fire and report it to the newspapers and television, as they

did not trust the information that the police were leaking to the media. At the same time, they set up the New Cross Fire Parents Committee so the families would make decisions and take action based on their own interests outside of NCMAC. A New Cross Fire Fund was also created. Managed by key members of NCMAC, it raised £27,000 for the families whose children died in the fire. Eric notes that without the major support of Alex Pascall, at the time presenter of BBC Radio London's Black Londoners, that sum could not have been raised.

John La Rose was the chairman and Darcus Howe the vice-chairman of the New Cross Massacre Action Committee (NCMAC). At a meeting on 27 January the committee decided to hold a Black People's Day of Action, a march to "disrupt the working day, make the entire country aware that the black community will not stand for the kind of outrage and holocaust which had occurred". The press was largely silent when the date was announced. NCMAC members, Eric among them, travelled the country to address the Black community about their activities and the march. Leaflets were distributed nationwide about the forthcoming Day of Action.

On 2 March 1981, 20,000 people marched in the rain from Fordham Park in New Cross, south-east London, to Hyde Park. They marched through Fleet Street to indicate their disapproval at the way the press were (mis)reporting the fire. Banners on the march included the now famous "Thirteen Dead Nothing Said", "No Police Cover-up" and "Blood Ah Go Run If Justice No Come". A delegation from NCMAC took a declaration and letters of protest to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher at 10 Downing Street, to Members of Parliament at the Houses of Parliament and to the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police at Scotland Yard. The declaration stated:

The authorities have ignored for three decades the pain, the rage and outrage of the black communities around the country at the racial murders, injuries and threats to our existence. Threats have come even from the highest authorities... there will be no peace while blacks are attacked, killed, injured and maimed with impunity on the streets or in our homes.

On the day of the march, the young people raised a slogan, "Come what may we are here to stay", which resonated with Eric. It was a day that changed his outlook on his life in the UK – the day he realised he had not really "settled", and, after 21 years, was living with one foot in England and the other in Guyana. He decided, as he walked with his daughter Accabre and Steve Lewis (who represented the Ealing Branch of the BPM), that his future was in England. He was here to stay. He was home.