

Canerow

// Weaving Power, Woven
Wisdom of African Diaspora

JANUARY 2024
TO JULY 2025

// The
intergenerational
interviews



// Foreword

Almost 14 years ago, I applied for a Churchill Fellowship in 2012, driven by a deep curiosity about the future of African Diaspora leadership and a desire to explore how community enterprise could foster more collaborative and co-operative models of business. At that time, I was on the cusp of a major life shift, with the nascent beginnings of The Ubele Initiative taking shape. I saw these moments not only as reflections of my own journey in servant leadership and entrepreneurship but also as vital strategies and tools to build more sustainable, empowered Black communities.

Although my professional background and somewhat unplanned career path allowed me to develop my leadership skills and eventually establish a thriving consultancy and training business within the social economy, I was unprepared for the profound and transformative journey that the Fellowship would take me on. Spending two weeks in Atlanta, Georgia, USA in 2013, and three weeks in various rural and urban areas across Aotearoa, New Zealand, the Land of the Long White Cloud, in 2014, not only enriched my understanding but also gifted me magical, life-affirming moments of insight and connection.

The impact of my Churchill Fellowship has continued to ripple outward in tandem with the growth, global recognition, and success of The Ubele Initiative. I was fortunate to receive a further opportunity—supported by the Churchill Trust's recently established Activate Fund—to explore the intergenerational leadership recommendations that emerged from my initial fellowship.

This has sparked a series of creative intergenerational projects, including a podcast led by a remarkable team of young Black women, headed by Elsie Cullen from Ourppls International in March 2025; a beautifully crafted booklet capturing key moments from my life, created by Dr. Peggy Warren; and 14 insightful interviews of African Diaspora women leaders by their peers, as well as an intergenerational retreat and series of conversations now published in three engaging documents.

For nearly three years, many women have journeyed with me in co-creating Canerow — Weaving Power, Woven Wisdom of African Diaspora Women. Their ideas, creativity, generosity, and trust have infused the project with profound sisterhood, which I hold dear.

What began as a seed of an idea in 2012 is now in full bloom. With sustained attention and care, I believe that the intergenerational leadership model is poised for harvest in the years ahead.

Yvonne Field OBE, Ubele CEO

// Contents

// Context 4

// INTERGENERATIONAL INTERVIEWS

Anita McKenzie 8

Barbara Gray11

Constance Rose.....16

Janett Walker..... 22

Lucy Isaiah 26

Marsha Garrett 29

Mia Morris OBE32

Michelle Peterkin-Walker35

Dr. Peggy Warren 40

Portia Roberts-Popham 46

Salha Kaitesi..... 50

Victoria Barrow-Williams53

Yvonne Christie 58

Yvonne Field OBE CF..... 62

// Acknowledgements 66

// Conclusion..... 67

// Context

‘Canerow’ - Weaving Power, Woven Wisdom of African Diaspora Women is a Churchill-funded leadership development initiative designed by and for Black women leaders. The Churchill Trust Activate Fund for Churchill Fellows allows Fellows to deepen their enquiry into an aspect of or recommendation from their original fellowship. Activation can happen up to ten years after the original fellowship. Yvonne Field OBE CF was awarded her Fellowship in 2012, travelling to Atlanta and New Zealand, and the Activate Award in 2022.

Yvonne OBE CF’s Fellowship was instrumental in the development of Ubele; allowing her to explore Black Community Leadership in Atlanta and Community-based Enterprise amongst Māori community.

The Ubele Initiative has a proven track record of success working with intergenerational black women leaders. Their work has provided opportunities for a significant number of Black women leaders to travel throughout Europe and parts of Africa engage in development through collaboration. The programmes which were predominantly Erasmus+ (European) funded provided opportunities for international sharing, exposure and professional development. Such international opportunities are rarely open to Black women leaders and is in this case a unique example of Yvonne Field, using her unique international exposures to research, obtain funding and co-create programmes so other black women could engage in reciprocal learning internationally. In so many public and private organisations, there is underrepresentation of Black women leaders.

These interviews, conducted over a period of 18 months, offer a deep exploration of four interwoven themes—race, gender, identity, and leadership—based on the lived experiences of 14 African and Diasporic women leaders. Through their voices, we uncover how these dimensions shape leadership philosophies, challenge systemic norms, and redefine what it means to lead from the margins.

The following is an exploration of some of the main themes which emerged from across the 14 leadership stories.

Race: Leadership in a Racialised World

Race is not a passive backdrop—it is an active force that shapes access, perception, and opportunity. These leaders confront racial injustice not only in society but within the institutions they navigate.

Janett Walker’s legal career was stunted by racial bias: *‘I knew I wasn’t going to get any further because I was Black.’* Her leadership emerged from this realisation, fuelling her advocacy for anti-racist work in Cumbria.

Yvonne Field OBE CF critiques systemic bias in entrepreneurship: *‘Black business ideas are not regarded as robust... That hasn’t changed in 25 years.’* Her leadership is rooted in building economic justice and community resilience.

Marsha Garrett’s experience of racialised sexual harassment during a public talk reveals the compounded violence Black women face: *‘My voice had literally stopped... I just left and screamed in my car.’*

Race is not just a barrier—it is a catalyst for leadership, activism, and transformation.

Gender: Navigating Power and Patriarchy

Gender intersects with race to compound exclusion, but it also fuels innovation and solidarity. These women navigate gendered expectations while redefining leadership on their own terms.

Constance Rose led a community centre for decades, often unsupported: *‘The management committee was weak... I didn’t get any support.’* Her leadership was grounded in service, not recognition.

Barbara Gray reflects on the solidarity of women in international projects: *‘We surprised many by our presence and our impactful initiatives.’* Her leadership challenges gendered assumptions about capability.

Dr Peggy Warren prefers leading from behind: *‘I never felt comfortable with the title leader.’* Her relational leadership style defies hierarchical norms.

Michelle Peterkin-Walker calls for elder women to pass the baton: *‘Leadership is not about control; it is about transmission.’*

Gendered leadership here is relational, often invisible, and deeply rooted in care and community.

Identity:
Embracing Complexity and Wholeness

Identity is dynamic and multifaceted. These leaders embrace their cultural, racial, and personal identities as sources of strength, creativity, and leadership philosophy.

Victoria Barrow-Williams affirms: *‘My identity enriches my leadership.’* Her work centers joy, civic pride, and cultural healing.

Marsha Garrett, of mixed heritage, insists on authenticity: *‘I bring my whole self. I can’t put on the mask in the suit.’* Her leadership is rooted in lived experience and radical self-love.

Anita McKenzie explores her African-Indian Caribbean background and neurodiversity: *‘There is so much healing to do.’* Her leadership is reflective and creative.

Lucy Isaiah draws on cultural spirituality and maternal wisdom: *‘Let your hands be multi-talented.’* Her leadership is shaped by survival and transformation.

Identity is not a limitation—it is a lens through which leadership is practiced and reimagined.

Leadership:
Redefining Power and Practice

Leadership is redefined across these narratives—not as authority, but as impact, integrity, and legacy. It is relational, resilient, and rooted in lived experience.

Salha Kaiteasi builds shared leadership: *‘Teakisi is not Salha. If I step away, I want them to believe they can carry on.’*

Mia Morris emphasises wellness: *‘We cannot serve from an empty vessel.’* Her leadership includes rest and joy.

Yvonne Christie prefers quiet impact: *‘I’d like to be remembered as a soldier—not leading from the front but beavering away.’*

Portia Roberts-Popham centers legacy: *‘We don’t pass the burden. We pass the baton.’*

Leadership here is not performative—it is intentional, inclusive, and deeply human.

Leadership Categorisation

Different leadership types can be identified from the interviews, and the following two tables illustrate different leadership styles and archetypes:

Leadership Type	Description	Illustrative Traits	Individuals
Transformational Leader	Drives systemic change, inspires vision, and empowers others to lead.	Visionary, community-focused, legacy-driven	Victoria Barrow-Williams, Yvonne Field, Barbara Gray, Portia Roberts-Popham
Servant Leader	Prioritises the needs of others, leads through service and care.	Empathetic, nurturing, self-sacrificing	Constance Rose, Michelle Peterkin-Walker, Mia Morris, Peggy Warren
Authentic Leader	Leads with integrity, self-awareness, and transparency.	Self-reflective, values-driven, emotionally honest	Janett Walker, Marsha Garrett, Lucy Isaiah
Creative/Cultural Leader	Uses art, heritage, and storytelling to lead and inspire.	Creative, expressive, culturally rooted	Anita McKenzie, Michelle Peterkin-Walker, Victoria Barrow-Williams
Grassroots/Community Leader	Emerges from and leads within local communities, often informally.	Locally embedded, responsive, relational	Yvonne Christie, Constance Rose, Salha Kaiteasi

Intersectional Analysis: Where Themes Converge
The Triple Bind of Race, Gender, and Leadership

Leaders face unique challenges at the intersection of all three identities:

1. **Hypervisibility:** Expected to represent all Black women while individual contributions are minimised
2. **Authority Challenges:** Must constantly prove competence while avoiding "aggressive" stereotypes
3. **Emotional Labour:** Expected to nurture communities while advocating for systemic change
4. **Resource Scarcity:** Face funding and advancement barriers that compound across identities

Leadership Archetype Framework

Archetype	Core Traits	Representative Leaders
The Community Weaver	Builds healing spaces, fosters connection	Barbara Gray, Victoria Barrow-Williams, Constance Rose
The Integrity Anchor	Leads by example, values authenticity	Salha Kaiteasi, Janett Walker, Peggy Warren
The System Challenger	Confronts inequity, creates alternative platforms	Yvonne Field, Marsha Garrett, Portia Roberts-Popham
The Reflective Guardian	Prioritises self-care, models vulnerability	Anita McKenzie, Mia Morris, Peggy Warren
The Legacy Architect	Focuses on succession, builds sustainable systems	Constance Rose, Lucy Isaiah, Yvonne Christie
The Balance Seeker	Redefines success, sets boundaries	Michelle Peterkin-Walker, Janett Walker, Salha Kaiteasi

Anita McKenzie

by Tracey Sage



Anita Jeni McKenzie is a multifaceted professional, serving as a photographer, archivist, raw food teacher and consultant, and Interfaith Minister. Her work includes various initiatives, including Healing Image Photography (HiP), McKenzie Heritage Picture Archive (MHPA), and Sistahintheraw. Recognised as an expert in her fields, McKenzie played a crucial role in the early black photography collectives in the UK during the 1980s, establishing a legacy of collected images, prints and post cards that celebrate African and South Asian representation in the UK and across the Diaspora.

The Journey of Discovery and Acceptance

It is on her personal and professional development that Anita reflects on first.

"More and more I'm accepting myself as having a polymathic work life."

She attributes this realisation to a better understanding of her creativity and neurodiverse background. Currently, she focuses on photography, aiming to evoke feelings of legacy, visibility, and representation. *"It feels like a really privileged place to be in now."*

The inspiration for her work draws from the deep connections she establishes with her subjects or collaborators: *"It's not like a formal photo shoot. I don't take myself that seriously; it's as much joy and fun for me as it is for the subject or sitter."* This joy is evident in the way she captures her subjects in both animated and serene moments, defining her approach and personality.

Leadership and Visibility

When discussing the concept of leadership, Anita expresses reservation: *"I don't see myself as a Leader... I've always wanted to be invisible, so I could avoid being a leader."* She acknowledges a competitive nature she wishes to avoid, instead wanting to focus on more meaningful connections and contributions. She admits to often feeling she simply acts upon

what interests her and her passions, letting others take the lead. Despite her claims, I point out that she is a leader in many different sectors and a lot of people look up to her.

Anita began to recognise her leadership roles in projects like the 'Black Women and Photography Group' which, in 1987, produced the landmark publication 'Polareyes' – a journal by and about Black Women working in photography. Anita as a mother of three children, recalls stepping back during the collective's formation, but begins to see her actions through a leadership lens. *"I think it began when I was a child... I was the eldest, and there was a lot of responsibility."*

"What it means to be not easily identified on the Indian side has been a painful and difficult journey."

“I think that it’s really important... to create a legacy that will be there long after I’ve gone.”

Identity and Self-Reflection

Being from an African-Indian Caribbean background, her dual heritage informs Anita’s identity. She explains, *“I see myself as mixed heritage.”* Her journey toward understanding this duality has involved navigating challenges around internalised racism, visibility and representation. *“What it means to be not easily identified on the Indian side has been a painful and difficult journey.”* Recently, through her creative lens, she is embracing this identity and its historical significance in community healing. *“There is a unique perspective... there is so much healing to do.”* She recognises that the complexities of her identity drive her to ensure effective representation in her work.

Success and Fulfilment

Anita’s definition of success has evolved over time. Reflecting on her early experiences in the photography community, she relayed feelings of inadequacy, saying as a mother, *“I saw people begin to soar... I kept thinking to myself, ‘your time will come.’”* Now, success is defined by personal fulfilment and creative expression rather than external validation, emphasising the joy of finishing a project she is proud of. *“For me, that’s where success is now.”*

Creating Space for Well-Being

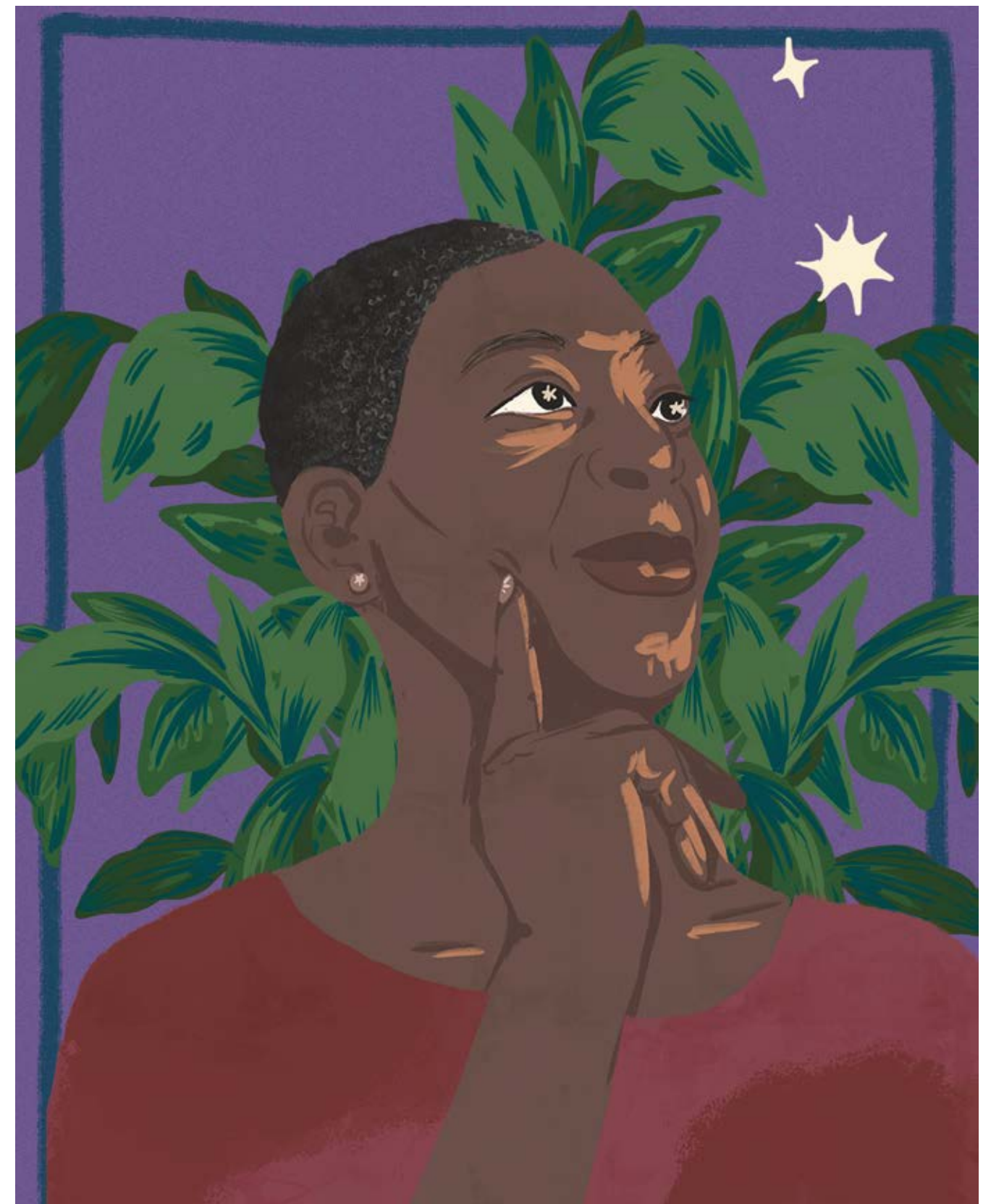
Through self-care and self-awareness, Anita emphasises the importance of making space for personal needs. *“I found that when I started to nap, it was so liberating.”* She encourages others to listen to their bodies and establish environments conducive to their well-being. In navigating the complexities of trust and criticism, Anita shares her experiences of self-inquiry: *“You have to really delve into it and ask yourself... why do I feel the way that I feel?”* This introspection builds a deeper trust in oneself, allowing for greater empathy and compassion toward self and others.

Legacy and Future Aspirations

As the conversation closes, Anita reflects on her legacy as a community builder and photographer. *“The first thing that comes into my head is that I was a family person,”* emphasising the interplay between her personal and professional life. Further, she acknowledges the importance of documenting stories that resonate with her community and ensuring that their narratives are told authentically. *“I think that it’s really important... to create a legacy that will be there long after I’ve gone.”* She embodies the idea that her work not only serves to uplift her family and community but also pays homage to those who paved the way before her.

Barbara Gray

by Shanell Johnson



Leadership Roots, Perspectives, and Influences

Reflecting on her own beginnings, Barbara attributes her leadership journey to her mother's unwavering belief in her potential, emphasising inclusivity as especially important: *"Leadership can emerge from any individual committed to moving something forward. It's not confined to titles; anyone can take the lead; it's just being willing to do what's needed."* She makes a clear distinction between formal authority and grassroots activism, pointing out that leadership can emerge from anyone, including children. Anyone who shares their thoughts and ideas, inspiring others with another perspective, contributes to or makes change happen.

"I grew up with racism, just as my parents did, and now, I wish I could share the lessons learned from their struggles."

Barbara's approach is firmly rooted in asset-based community development, inspiring and facilitating individuals and communities to bring about the change they want to see. She is keen to point out that *"Throughout my career working with local authorities, I have seen how community engagement can redefine leadership."* and adds that *"Asset-based community development creates an environment where children, young people and adults in the community are empowered to state*

their own values, realise and use their skills and experiences and deliver the right solutions for themselves. When we build relationships and uplift each other, the results are impactful and sustainable."

She describes her experiences collaborating with communities as being *"like watching butterflies emerge from a chrysalis, the transformations of people and their impact I witness is extraordinary. I never know what will happen next, but it is always uplifting and amazing. Real power lies with individuals and communities being inspired and stepping into their power, as individuals, working in collaboration and as a grassroots development."*

Maya Angelou stands out as a significant influence. Barbara recalls, *"... she told us to be true to ourselves, to collect and tell our stories. That advice drives connection."* She is also inspired by her child, Megan, who is a Masc presenting leader in HR and Founder of the podcast 'Megtalksonline'.

"I'm awed by Megan's confidence and unapologetic authenticity in a world that often challenges such freedom," she says.

As a young woman, she learned that self-belief was powerful and that barriers are merely obstacles when you remain stubbornly focused on the end goal. Reflecting deeply on the kind of roles she wanted and always being conscious of her values and sticking to them has given her a clear direction. Whilst there were easy choices to make along the way, it was the hard work and persistence that opened doors. Some of the projects she has spawned include the Lewisham Mayor's apprenticeship scheme, providing careers for hundreds of young people, Urban Dandelion, inspiring communities to bring about the change they want to see and KINARAA CIC, working to achieve community wealth building of Black led organisations.

Unexpectedly becoming Mayoress of Lewisham made it possible *"to reach anyone I wanted to."* That role provided the opportunity to have direct conversations with people who have responsibility and the power to make things happen locally, across London and nationally. *"It was very impactful. That is what surprised me the most. I used it to empower the community."*

One of Barbara's proudest leadership moments was developing and leading a significant international economic development project over 18 months with South Africa, displaying the power of Black female leadership. *"We surprised many by our presence and our impactful initiatives."*

Race and Systemic Challenges

Reflections on Barbara's upbringing and experiences as a Black woman reveal deep-rooted issues around race. *"I grew up with racism, just as my parents did, and now, I wish I could share the lessons learned from their struggles. My mother faced challenges daily, yet she persevered."*

She recalls her own mother's struggles with the education system in the 1960s and 70s. A report produced by the Caribbean community at the time, and more recently Steve McQueen's film 'Education', highlighted how the discriminatory practice of wrongly placing Black children in *"Educationally Subnormal"* (ESN) schools affected generations of Black children.

When asked to support a mother whose five year old child was being labeled as a failure, Barbara was struck with the parallels.

"I thought, 'no, this cannot still be happening again in 2022. With the parent, I attended a meeting with the teacher and the child's reading level quickly soared well above average."

Her deep sense of racial injustice after witnessing similar struggles *"again"* 50 years later underscores the ongoing

impact of inequality and echoes her belief that for the community she is part of "the system doesn't change... We still do not have equal access to the opportunities, to be wherever and whoever we want to be...Evidence shows the system's policies define who we are, what we are capable of and what our aspirations should be, cementing...what, in many cases, we ultimately achieve and who we become."

Gender Dynamics

Barbara's journey and her reflections on female leadership emphasise the importance of authenticity and the necessity for women, particularly women of colour, to navigate their leadership paths with self-acceptance. Her experience developing and leading an international project in Lewisham Council involving two other women—one Black and one white—further illustrates the power of female solidarity in overcoming preconceived notions about race and gender in leadership roles both in the UK and in post-apartheid South Africa.

"We still do not have equal access to the opportunities, to be wherever and whoever we want to be."

Sharing Wisdom

Offering pearls of wisdom to younger Black Women Leaders, Barbara advises: *"Set your vision and stay focused. Life is not a straight path."* She also suggests

that they should “keep to your truth...be informed,” because, in the end, “.... purpose leads to fulfilment.”

Barbara advises aspiring Black women leaders to carry a backpack of wisdom including:

1. Be yourself.
2. Realise and embrace your unique gifts.
3. Prioritise self-care and personal space.
4. Stay informed and engaged.
5. Bring people with you and create for others coming behind.
6. Make time to support others to identify their path.
7. Celebrate the power of being a Black woman and all that entails.

// Conclusion

Barbara Gray’s insights deeply illuminate the intersections of race and gender in leadership. Her narrative serves as a reminder of the strength found in authenticity, storytelling, and communal support, as well as the transformative potential of inclusive leadership. Systemic racism and gender inequality require ongoing dialogue and action aimed at fostering environments where diverse voices can thrive. Effective leadership is not only about authority but about uplifting others and creating spaces for collective growth and empowerment.

And she quotes from the Maya Angelou poem ‘Still, I Rise’:

‘Does my sassiness upset you?/Why are you beset with gloom?/Cause I walk like I’ve got oil wells/Pumping in my living room’

These words portray a sense of self-assuredness, confidence, and independence, suggesting inherent worth and self-sufficiency. Barbara says “that’s how I go about in the world” encouraging others to feel the same about themselves.

However, she also reflects, “I wish I had been told when I was younger that things would work out in the end. The stress of overcompensation is real, but perseverance pays off.”

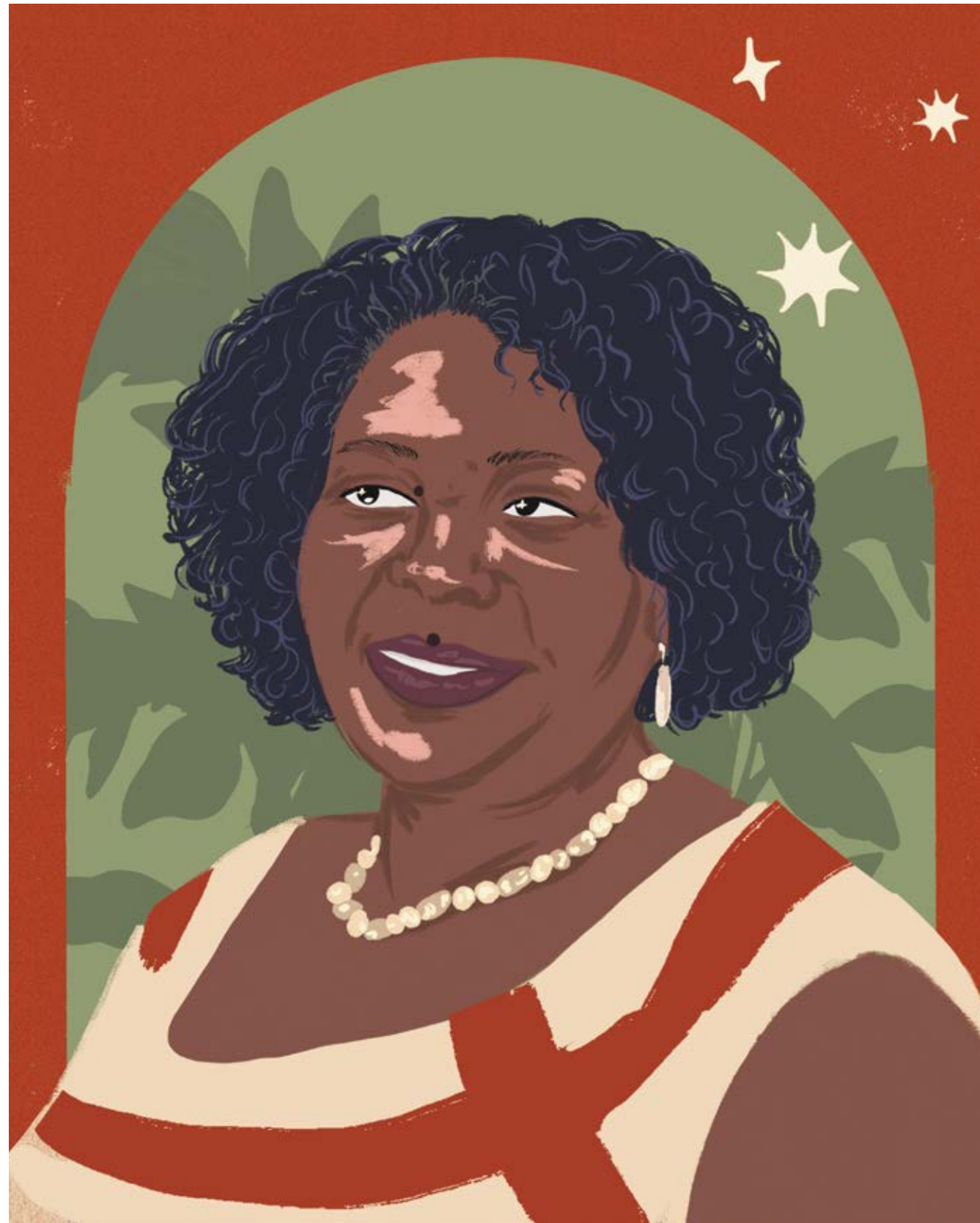
“
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Maya Angelou

”

Constance Rose

by Candice James



The Genesis of Loughborough Community Centre (LCC)

Constance Rose's interview begins with a vivid depiction of the socio-political climate in Brixton following the 1981 riots. The atmosphere of tension and frustration is palpable in her recounting of the period: *"The riots happened in April 1981. There was so much tension and frustration amongst local people. Everyone had had enough of being suppressed. It was so hard for black people to progress and get jobs."* This sets the stage for the emergence of LCC as a response to systemic inequalities and the lack of opportunities for Black people in the community.

Constance Rose, a founding member and pivotal figure in the establishment of the Loughborough Community Centre (LCC), served as its manager from 1981 to 2009. Her efforts were central to driving community development initiatives led by Black individuals in Brixton, Lambeth. The LCC was a constructive response following the 1981 Brixton Uprisings, marked by tension and frustration over systemic suppression, employment challenges, and racial inequities.

LCC was officially constituted in November 1981. The transition of the community centre's management from predominantly White to Black leadership marked a significant shift post-riot, allowing greater access and involvement for Black residents.

The establishment of LCC is presented as a collective effort, born out of a community meeting and a shared desire for positive change: *"We had a community meeting and announced constituting as the Loughborough Community Centre around November 1981. We were all so excited about the possibilities of being able to make an active change within the community, that was led by us, local residents."* This highlights the grassroots

nature of the initiative and the collective agency of the Black community in shaping their own destiny.

The early challenges faced by LCC are also highlighted, particularly the prevalent racism within Brixton at the time: *"You wouldn't believe it now but there was a lot of racism by White people to Black people in Brixton. Before us the community centre was run by White people. Black people were not allowed to hire the community centre, that all changed after the riots. We Black people ran it!"* This emphasises the significance of LCC as a space created and controlled by the Black community, representing a tangible shift in power dynamics.

On Becoming a Community Leader

Despite not viewing herself as a leader, Connie was driven by a desire to make others proud, a hard work ethic, and her role's importance in people's lives. She transitioned from volunteer to manager, often serving as a source of advice and support, although she felt the management committee sometimes lacked full understanding of her challenges.

Constance was initially reluctant to identify herself as a leader is noteworthy: *"I don't see myself as a leader, I see myself as one of the staff."* However, her subsequent narrative reveals a gradual recognition of her leadership role, driven by her dedication and the community's perception of her abilities.

"I don't see myself as a leader, I see myself as one of the staff."

Leadership Style, Challenges, and Personal Growth

Constance's emphasises hard work, organisation, and discipline: *"I like to be well organised and disciplined, the same way I was at work was the same way I was at home."* This reflects a strong work ethic and a commitment to structure, both in her professional and personal life. The influence of her upbringing and the challenges of raising boys in Brixton during the 70s and 80s shaped this approach, emphasising the importance of stability and structure for her family.

Balancing work and personal life was challenging, especially as a mother raising sons in Brixton during the 70s and 80s. However, living near the centre enabled her children to participate in activities there, facilitating her integration as both a local resident and a community leader.

Connie's professional journey was marked by the tension between growth opportunities and community loyalty. Although often tempted by offers from Lambeth promising higher salaries and career advancement, she chose to stay at LCC, feeling a duty to keep it operational and reflective of her community's needs. However, this commitment came at personal costs, affecting her health and family life.

Her leadership within LCC was organically developed, driven by her competence and dedication rather than formal leadership training: *"I progressed into leadership within LCC, the committee saw the potential in me. I was a hard worker and the quality of my work and what people thought of me was important to me."* This organic growth underscores the importance of demonstrable skills and community recognition in building leadership within a grassroots organisation.

Significant challenges faced by Constance include inadequate support from the management committee and the constant struggle for funding: *"A leader to me should get more support than what I was getting, and I didn't get any support. I didn't have anyone. The management committee was at the time weak, they didn't understand as much as I thought."* and *"Halfway through the year we started to fret about money. We were*

fearful of being closed down due to not having enough funding, luckily, we always got by."

While the Greater London Authority (GLC) initially supported LCC with grants, these eventually transferred to Lambeth, changing the dynamic significantly. By the time she retired, her salary had barely shifted, with no structured pay scale or regular raises, highlighting persistent racial and gender disparities.

A pivotal moment in Constance's journey was the realisation that her dedication to LCC was impacting her health: *"My hair was falling out, I kept falling over and I got rashes over my skin, I thought I had lupus...Everything and everyone else was more important than me going to the doctor to check on my own health."* This moment highlights the importance of self-care and setting boundaries, a crucial aspect often overlooked by dedicated individuals.

The experience led to her eventual departure from LCC, emphasising the need for balance and prioritising personal well-being. Post-retirement, the lack of pay scale or raises was a point of contention, highlighting gender and racial inequities in community service roles.

Personal Development and Community Impact

Throughout her career, Connie remained committed to personal growth and development. Encouraged by her family, peers, and committee members, she pursued vocational training in business administration and childcare, evolving alongside her role's requirements. Her tenacity earned her the respect and trust of notable figures within the community, such as Lesley Hammond and Peter McNally, who provided essential support and advocacy.

Career Highlights and Challenges

A pivotal moment came when the GLC acknowledged her contributions with a grant extension that increased her salary, boosting morale and providing validation for her hard work. Despite managing multiple roles and projects, she remained underpaid, a fact she later recognised as discriminatory.

"Work hard and stick at it!...Take all the training opportunities that become available especially funded ones as when it's gone, it's gone!"

Connie also, encouraged her staff to enhance their skills to prevent closures and adapt to systemic changes. Her dedication ensured that LCC personnel remained qualified and competitive, even as other local groups folded.

The depth of Connie's dedication was rooted in her love for children and the community. Though she regretted not pursuing a nursing career like her aunt, her work at LCC left an indelible mark.

Legacy and Success

Constance's desire to be remembered as a person of integrity who dedicated her life to community service reflects her values and priorities: *"A person with good integrity that undertook and committed to the act of community service."* This underscores her dedication to the principles of community development and the impact she aspired to achieve. The loss of the Loughborough Community Centre stands out as a significant event in her narrative, highlighting the challenges of preserving community-led initiatives and the importance of securing long-term sustainability. The struggle with the estate board reveals the complexities of navigating institutional processes and the potential for miscommunication or exploitation.

Connie's leadership style was characterised by integrity and resilience. Her role went beyond the day-to-day operations of LCC; it forged a path for community empowerment and self-reliance. Even after losing the community centre, she adapted, focusing on sustaining the preschool programme. This initiative still bears her name, a testament to her enduring influence. Her transparent communication and trust-building laid the foundation for enduring

success. Her experiences underline the complexities of community leadership, where personal and professional challenges intersect with broader social and racial dynamics.

Her definition of success isn't solely defined by material achievements but includes personal growth, community impact, and the long-term sustainability of LCC: *"Getting funding was success. Having the right people and resources to get the job done well...Seeing the progress of LCC since I left."* This nuanced perspective reflects her commitment to the community and the legacy of LCC, even after her departure.

Advice to Younger Women Leaders

Connie advises hard work, dedication, and continuous learning. She stresses the importance of seizing training opportunities, particularly those that are funded: *"Work hard and stick at it!...Take all the training opportunities that become available especially funded ones as when it's gone, it's gone!"*

The Constance Rose story provides a rich narrative that reflects the intersecting challenges of race and gender inequalities within the context of community leadership and development. Analysing her experiences reveals several critical themes and insights regarding how these inequalities manifest in various aspects of her life and work at the Loughborough Community Centre (LCC).

1. **Racial Inequities in Leadership and Access**

Connie’s narrative highlights the systemic racial barriers that Black communities faced, particularly in the context of community services. Before the establishment of LCC, the management of the community center was predominantly White, effectively marginalising Black residents from leadership roles and decision-making processes. The LCC emerged as a transformational initiative wherein Black residents gained control over community resources and services. This shift, initiated post-Brixton Uprisings, signifies a critical reclamation of space and agency, directly addressing the historical exclusion of Black individuals in community development.

However, Connie also describes the racism that persisted in Brixton, indicating that even with the establishment of a Black-led centre, systemic issues lingered. The change in management was not just symbolic; it represented a necessary step toward dismantling racial injustices and fostering an inclusive environment where Black voices could be heard and valued.

2. **The Burden of Gender Roles**

Constance’s experiences also illustrate the intersection of gender and leadership within the community context. As a woman, Connie faced unique challenges in asserting her authority and navigating leadership, compounded by her responsibilities as a mother and wife. She does not see herself as a leader in the conventional sense, expressing that she perceived her role more as part of a team effort. This sentiment may be reflective of societal norms that often downplay women’s leadership capabilities, particularly in community-based roles where nurturing and support are prioritised over authoritative leadership.

Her dual responsibilities highlight the gendered expectations placed on women, especially those in community service roles, where selflessness and dedication to familial and community well-being are celebrated but can also lead to personal sacrifices. Connie’s struggle to balance her work commitments with her family life underscores the need for recognition and support of women who juggle multiple roles.

3. **Workplace Inequities and Recognition**

Throughout her tenure at LCC, Connie faced significant challenges related to under compensation and lack of structural support. She mentions that despite her leadership role, she received little acknowledgment or financial reward compared to the breadth of her responsibilities. Her eventual pay increase from the Greater London Authority is a pivotal moment, serving as recognition of her contributions. However, her initial underpayment signals broader systemic issues of pay inequity often experienced by women, especially women of colour, in leadership positions.

The absence of a formal pay scale and consistent raises throughout her career illustrates how race and gender intersect in the workplace, leading to disparities in financial rewards. This aspect of her narrative underscores the urgent need for equitable pay practices within organisations, particularly those serving marginalised communities.

4. **Community Relationships and Resource Equity**

Connie describes the complexity of her relationships with other entities, including local councils, and expresses frustration over how external organisations often fail to provide adequate support. The depiction of community dynamics reflects the challenges Black-led organisations face when dealing with bureaucratic structures that may prioritise their interests over the needs of the community. Connie’s experience with supportive allies like Peter McNally contrasts with the occasional exploitation she felt from those who failed to contribute meaningfully to her work. This dynamic highlights the need for authentic partnerships that empower rather than marginalise community leaders.

5. **The Impact of Stereotypes and Bias**

Connie’s reflections also point to the stereotypes that can undermine the credibility of Black women in leadership positions. Her statement about feeling taken advantage of, potentially due to her race and gender, draws attention to the biases that can complicate interactions with authority figures and

institutional frameworks. This underscores a broader societal tendency to undervalue the contributions of women of colour, often perceiving them as less authoritative or deserving of leadership opportunities.

6. **Legacy and Future Generations**

Finally, Connie’s legacy at LCC, particularly the establishment of a preschool named in her

honour, represents a significant achievement for both race and gender equity. It highlights the importance of creating spaces that prioritise the voices and needs of marginalised communities while establishing a foundation for future generations. This legacy also reflects how women’s contributions can be instrumental in nurturing community resilience and continuity.

Other Themes from Connie’s Story

Grass Roots Community Leadership and Transformation: Connie’s journey illustrates the transition and empowerment of Black leadership within community spaces in Brixton, promoting self-led change post-Brixton Uprisings.

1. **Challenges of Sustained Community Development:** Consistent funding issues, organisational transitions, and management challenges highlight the difficulties in maintaining community initiatives over decades.

2. **Defining Success Beyond Material Gains:** A focus on community impact, personal fulfilment, and the legacy created rather than solely on material achievements.

3. **Empowerment through Education and Training:** Connie emphasised personal and staff development through education and practical training, ensuring the community’s progress and adaptability.

4. **Intergenerational Learning and Mentorship:** The implicit transfer of knowledge and experience across generations within LCC.

5. **Personal Sacrifice and Commitment:** Her dedication to LCC came at considerable personal cost, affecting her health and family life, exemplifying the often unseen sacrifices in community service work. This highlights the crucial need for individuals to prioritise their own well-being while dedicating themselves to community work.

// Conclusion

The interview with Constance Rose offers a poignant exploration of race and gender inequalities in community leadership. Her journey illustrates the profound impacts of systemic barriers that Black women face, as well as their resilience and capacity for creating meaningful change. Analysing her experiences through this lens reveals the complexities and interconnectedness of race and gender in shaping individual trajectories and organisational dynamics, underscoring the importance of addressing these issues to foster more equitable communities.

Connie’s story also underscores the resilience required in community leadership, the challenges of sustaining grassroots organisations, importance of recognising community contributions, and the necessity of formal support structures for sustainable development. It also sheds light on the importance of balancing dedication with self-care. Her story serves as a valuable lesson in leadership, resilience, and the enduring impact of community service.

Janett Walker

by Sáaliha Abdur-Raheem



Leadership and Identity

Janett Walker's interview reveals a compelling narrative of leadership development deeply intertwined with her identity as a Black woman. Her leadership journey didn't begin with a conscious declaration, but rather through observation and reflection on the leadership styles she encountered as a trainee solicitor. She explicitly states, *"My leadership began when I was a trainee solicitor and thought about being in the position of my supervisor and how I would behave with my trainees. I began to think about my leadership journey when I was a junior member of staff."* This early self-awareness underscores a proactive approach to personal and professional growth.

The intersectionality of her identity significantly shapes her leadership style. She directly confronts the stereotype of the *"angry Black woman"* leader, highlighting a conscious effort to navigate societal biases while maintaining her integrity and effectiveness. Her words, *"I refuse to accept the trope any longer that my leadership could be an angry black woman and I don't lead with anger unless it's required. I try not to over-police myself or co-switch to the point where I am not allowed to challenge people,"* are particularly powerful in illustrating this ongoing struggle for authentic self-expression within the constraints of systemic prejudice.

A pivotal moment in her leadership development was the difficult but necessary decision to remove certain individuals from her inner circle who were not conducive to her leadership vision, even if it meant sacrificing long-standing relationships: *"Who I have in my spaces and circle of trust who has been in that space for a very long time but aren't actually very good for me or the way that I want to lead...making tough decisions about not having them in that space just because they have been around for a very long time..."* This act demonstrates a commitment to prioritising authenticity and building a truly supportive leadership environment.

Career, Trust, and Personal Growth

Janett's career path reveals significant challenges stemming from gender and racial discrimination within the legal profession. Her eighteen years as a lawyer were marked by consistent experiences of discrimination, culminating in her realisation that her career advancement was being systematically blocked due to her race and gender. This candidly shared experience is a powerful testament to the systemic barriers women of colour face in predominantly white male-dominated spaces: *"I was a lawyer for 18 years and as a black woman the intersectionality of being black and female meant that I was subjected to discrimination/racism, and I knew that I reached a point in MY career where I knew I wasn't going to get any further because I was black."*

Her journey of learning to trust reflects a nuanced understanding of human nature and the complexities of building trust. It's not a naive or readily granted trust but a carefully cultivated one built upon observation and experience: *"By making lots and lots of mistakes, I am a lot less trusting now than I was ten years ago because I see people now, what they do and who they are, I wait a while before I trust them, takes her time to get to know you, explore who you are first and find out more before taking further steps."* This cautious

"...I knew that I reached a point in MY career where I knew I wasn't going to get any further because I was black."

“I would like to be remembered for having made some kind of change.”

approach is a testament to her resilience and the lessons learned from past experiences.

Her commitment to personal growth is evident in her pursuit of self-care and continuous learning. She engages in activities such as meditation, exercise, and massages, along with reading, listening to podcasts, and attending seminars and webinars. This commitment reflects a holistic approach to well-being, essential for navigating the challenges of leadership.

Legacy, Success, and Key Themes

Janett envisions her legacy as creating impactful change for Black people in Cumbria. Her short-term focus is on solidifying Anti-Racist Cumbria, but long-term she aims to build capacity through mentorship and fostering emerging leadership: *“I would like to*

be remembered for having made some kind of change, an impact and a difference to black people’s lives in Cumbria...Towards the ending of the three years I’ve started to look at how I will hand the baton, I want to expand the team to people who are black and display leadership skills and have passion for the work.” This emphasis on mentorship and succession planning highlights a forward-thinking approach to building lasting impact.

Her definition of success is deeply rooted in making a tangible difference in people’s lives. For her, success lies in hearing people express their gratitude for the organisation’s existence – that is what makes the work worthwhile. This human-centric approach to defining success showcases the heart of her mission.

// Key Themes:

Intersectional Leadership: Janett’s leadership is inextricably linked to her identity as a Black woman, navigating systemic biases while authentically leading.

Authenticity and Self-Care: A dedication to self-care and a commitment to authentic leadership, even when challenging, are central to her approach.

Resilience and Perseverance: The interview showcases resilience in overcoming systemic barriers in the legal profession and the determination to create lasting change.

Mentorship and Legacy: Building a sustainable future through mentorship and capacity building are key components of her long-term vision.

Community Impact: Janett’s definition of success is intrinsically tied to creating a positive impact within her community.

This multi-page analysis provides a more detailed understanding of Janett Walker’s experiences, perspectives, and leadership philosophy. Her story is a powerful testament to the importance of intersectional leadership, resilience, and commitment to creating positive social change.

“People saying to me ‘I wish Anti Racist Cumbria was here when I was a child’ it is such an important part of my life, making a difference in individuals’ lives and creating an impact.”

Janett Walker

Lucy Isaiah

by Tracey Sage



Foundation and philosophy of Lucy's leadership

Lucy's leadership journey is deeply rooted in her formative experiences, which have shaped her resilience and unwavering commitment to justice. Growing up in a military environment exposed her to abuse, leading to her at the tender age of five or six courageously confronting her father's abuse towards her mother setting the stage for her advocacy for the vulnerable. Her involvement in the church exposed her to discriminatory practices, igniting her early questioning of gender roles in leadership.

A pivotal moment in her life came when she endured a harrowing experience of trafficking, a year characterised by captivity and violence. This ordeal fuelled her determination to advocate for those who have been silenced. Upon escaping her trafficking situation, Lucy faced additional trauma as she navigated a challenging immigration journey, during which she felt so mistreated by the UK Government that she pleaded, "just send me back." She was not sent back but had to live through the trauma. Ultimately, she chose to fight the system—not only for herself but also for other women facing similar circumstances. Encouragement from a compassionate Child Centre worker furthered her resolve, transforming her trauma into a catalyst for leadership.

For Lucy, leadership transcends personal and professional boundaries; it encompasses culture, tradition, family, and community. She believes in the interconnectedness of these elements and defines success not by personal honours but by the lives she has impacted through her advocacy, campaigning for change, and raising awareness. Committed to justice and empowerment, Lucy is dedicated to helping individuals find their voices to fight injustice, particularly inspiring women and girls to engage in civic activities and pursue leadership roles.

Lucy's leadership has been enriched by both formal and informal training and learning experiences, as well as her lived realities. She emphasises the importance of reflection, dialogue, listening, partnership, and collaboration in her approach. Lucy's leadership is enhanced by her inner strength, which she

defines as cultural spirituality, nurtured by her travels and love of nature.

Leadership inspiration

Lucy draws profound inspiration from pivotal role models in her life, particularly Madam C.J. Walker and her mother. From Madam C.J. Walker, Lucy learns about the tenacity required to "make something out of nothing," embodying the spirit of resilience and achievement. Her mother's wisdom resonates deeply with her as well: "The only way you can survive is through your hands. Let your hands be multi-talented." This philosophy emphasises the importance of diverse skills, suggesting that a multi-talented individual can not only thrive but also adapt to various challenges.

Lucy elaborates on this notion, explaining, "It's not just about intellectual ability; it's about the productivity of your hands." She asserts that intelligence, when untethered from creativity, can be fruitless: "You can be very intelligent, but if you lack creativity, your intellect is like water poured into a basket—it will not hold any ground." For Lucy, nurturing creativity is essential; it is through this creative lens that intellect can be harnessed effectively and make a genuine impact.

A particularly cherished moment for Lucy is when her mother took her daughters to a shrine to pray: "God, you give me these girls. No matter how difficult their life may be, may they be the cornerstone of the world." Lucy believes these words have become a reality, as

"There is nothing you cannot change. There is nothing that is impossible."

she sees herself as a cornerstone, contributing to the foundation of a better world.

Highlights of her leadership journey

One of the defining moments in Lucy's leadership journey was the commissioning of the Children's Centre at Brookhill. She relished every aspect of the process, from advocating for the centre to navigating the bidding process, valuing the invaluable lessons learned along the way.

Lucy also bravely shared her deeply personal story of childhood abuse, a trauma that continues to influence her life. This experience has fuelled her commitment to being a protective parent and a passionate advocate for children's rights, empowering them to speak out about abuse with confidence. She emphasises the necessity of holistic approaches within support systems, noting that when assessing a child's situation, it is crucial to consider a parent's own childhood trauma, which can profoundly impact their parenting abilities and overall well-being.

Refusing to carry the burden of her past in silence, Lucy believes that sharing her story can inspire and empower others who have endured similar experiences. She highlights the far-reaching effects of abuse, which can touch every facet of a person's life, reinforcing her belief in the importance of open dialogue and support.

Advice for younger people

Lucy speaks about racism and gender discrimination which are present in everyday life. Her advice for dealing with it is clear; she is intentional about her strategies for addressing the discrimination. With a strong focus on empowering the next generation, particularly young women, she emphasises the importance of persistence in advocacy. When she

encounters situations where she feels unheard, she writes formal complaints and refuses to back down until her voice is acknowledged.

Lucy further advocates for volunteering as a foundational experience, believing it equips individuals with the skills needed for service-oriented leadership. She also emphasises the importance of mentorship, recommending that emerging leaders seek multiple mentors to gain diverse perspectives and support.

Building trust and fostering connections are central to her as a leadership approach. She nurtures rich friendships with women, seeing each of them as reflections of herself at various stages of life. Lucy categorises these friendships—intimate friends, professional allies, community connections—recognising that each plays a vital role in the intricate puzzle of life.

Lastly Lucy recommends a few other building blocks for solid leadership: respect for others, knowing that people come into one's life for a reason, paying attention to what is being said around you, speaking out, connecting with the right people for a specific task, learning the rules of the game and be prepared (studying the context).

Lucy's continued legacy

Lucy would like to be remembered through a Creative Centre dedicated to empowering women through skills development and encouragement to find and express their voices. Her message to women is one of limitless potential: *'there is nothing you cannot change. There is nothing that is impossible'*. She asserts that people impose limitations but that individual women have the power to make the impossible possible.

Lucy envisioned creativity as the central tenet of the Centre, potentially incorporating sewing classes.

Marsha Garrett

by Janett Walker



// Conclusion

Lucy's story of overcoming childhood abuse and trauma in her younger years, and her transformation into a fearless fighter for justice, illustrates that a hopeless situation does not have to incapacitate you. Instead, it can propel you into action, serving others and creating a better world.

Marsha's leadership journey

Marsha traced her leadership journey to the age seven when she experienced racism, being told by 50-plus year-old white man to go back to Africa. This was said in a harsh tone to her and her brother, to hurt them, 'monkeys go back to Africa'. This treatment by an adult awoke in her a thirst for knowledge to address and share awareness about racism.

Identity and leadership

For Marsha identity is very important in her leadership journey; she acknowledges all of her heritage and speculates that it all contributed to her leadership. She recognises her dual black and white heritage and her adoption by white parents. She further notes that her identity evolved from mixed race to black and accepts that her white heritage impacted on her racialised experiences. The development of her identity has come with a development of knowledge that is connected to her leadership.

Pivotal and memorable moments in her leadership journey

Marsha shared a pivotal moment in her leadership journey when a young Eritrean girl refused to be identified as a refugee, once again highlighting the need for nuanced approaches to identity. When this happened, Marsha had to reflect on her own biases and the systemic issues at play. This experience expanded her understanding of her role as a leader and the importance of being consistent in her anti-racism work. This young girl became a confident, independent young woman who in the end bestowed the accolade of being a leader for black women on Marsha.

Marsha viewed her work with a young girl in dance class from age 11 into college as a memorable time on her leadership journey. Marsha saw the girl transformed from a girl with relaxed hair to a young woman with hair in braids, challenging racism in school and college; equipping her on this journey with conversations and books, especially bell hook's 'teaching to transgress' and eventually organising an event for black young women, titled 'crown' where she was talking about her journey and the impact of 'teaching to

transgress'. For Marsha in hindsight this was a case of letting someone grow and go, the essence of leadership.

Self-care and success

Marsha reflected on the importance of selfcare for herself and other women leaders. She advises that self-care and self-love are priorities for leaders. Her self-care is found in nature, alone time, teaching dance classes, watching 'trash tv', a healthy diet and natural skincare products.

Success for Marsha is multi-faceted. First, the feeling of loving of what she is doing, the feeling of this is what she is supposed to do. Second, loving the journey of who she has become. Third, loving her ability to be able to reflect. Reflecting enables her to appreciate her life and experiences and realising how everything happened for a reason, the collective result being her owning her connection to and understanding of whiteness, which gives her a certain amount of power, which she uses in the spaces she operates in.

Sources of support

Support systems on a leadership journey are essential and Marsha named hers as people who she does not necessarily often speak to, books about the black experience, her dance group, family, specifically her daughter but also her son, and importantly support from herself, something not many persons would mention.

Personal development

As mentioned earlier, Marsha had a thirst for knowledge from a young age. She was always questioning things, for example asking her father, 'why do white people hate us', 'why are we always, why are we always going to prison on television? Or why are we always dying in Africa'? Her father did not have answers to these questions but eventually resorting to giving her the autobiography of Malcolm X and following it up with works by Martin Luther King.

Books have always featured in her personal development, as she says, 'always books, always reading. I always make sure that I am buying new books'. In addition, she is using the internet and social where she follows

'Pan African pages and sites with some just outstanding historical information'. At the same time, she also verifies information by having conversations with the people she is working with.

She also decided not to put expectation on other people, not because she doesn't trust them but rather because she believes in herself as she says, 'faith in me and me going with my intuition and trusting in the vibration'.

On the question of how she deals with criticism, Marsha made it clear that she sees criticism as learning moments, moments of reflection. It might mean that she learn something about somebody else or their perception of what she is doing. She also uses the moment to ask herself if she must make changes or not to practices she engages in. In addition, she encourages and appreciates criticism from her children who offer her that in honest ways.

Personal and professional self

Marsha was asked if she distinguishes between a personal and professional self. Her response was a resounding no. She explained that she does both 'racism work' and 'anti-racism work', which she considers as similar and when she does that she says, 'in order to do that (I have) to be authentic, (I can't) put on the mask in the suit, deliver, take it off and move'. She is adamant that in this field one must bring your total being to what you are working on.

Discrimination on her journey

Marsha was invited to reflect on gender discrimination on her career path, and her answer was that she was hypersexualised, in her words 'racialised gender discrimination that's heavily sexualised'. It meant that there were expectations of her and if she did not play into that, opportunities were removed. She recalled one specific episode where she was invited to do a talk to members of the local authority in which she was frank and shared deeply personal experiences related to her interaction with the police which involved her brother. The audience was made up of about 60 white people, about 95% male and the head of the police at the end of the talk said to her 'ooh, you little minx, I'd love to get

behind closed doors with you', and nobody said anything. She was shell-shocked so much so that she lost her voice. She just left the gathering and when she got into her car she cried or so she thinks although 'it was like a scream cry, because my voice had literally stopped'.

Pearls of wisdom

Marsha shared several pearls of wisdom as advice for younger women. Firstly, that they should believe in and trust themselves. Secondly, that they should accept pain to be part of their journey in life but see it as an opportunity to gain something such as, 'the strength, the character, knowledge of something'. Thirdly, the need to see and feel the vision of what they want. Fourthly, that they need to know how to articulate the message they want to get across. Fifthly, that their worth is derived not from external sources, but from their intrinsic qualities and lastly, she advised them to let themselves continuously grow and move away from negatives that hinder growth.

For other women leaders in the sector, Marsha has one message of advice, focus on yourself – love yourself, make time for yourself, care for yourself, see yourself as number one. She advises that self-love will spill over into love of others, which will ensure care and support of others.

Legacy

Marsha is busy writing a book, which she wants to leave as her legacy. She feels she want to be the voice of the group of people she associates with, black mixed-race people. She views the group as the most manipulated racial group with its African history whitewashed. She believes that the group has been 'miseducated to identify as mixed race, biracial, multiracial that won't stop anti-black racism towards us, but it gives the impression that it will'. For her it is important that the group gets talked about and that is what she sees as her lasting contribution as well as contributing to the Pan African movement's eradication of white supremacy as far as she can.

Mia Morris OBE

by Peggy Warren PhD



Leadership Journey

Mia Morris reflects on her leadership journey, which began in her teens, stating, *"I was known as little Mia. As I've got older, people often turn to me to say something at events."* She recognises that her role as a community activist has spanned over 40 years. Mia identifies strongly with her heritage: *"I'm a black woman first, without a doubt. That's the first thing that you see. No apology."* Her identity shapes her leadership style, particularly in her role with Black History Maker Black Speakers Bureau.

Mia credits her parents' influence on her activism. *"My dad encouraged us to use our skills... he said, if you're going to stay, do all that you can to make this country different."* This familial background encourages her ongoing commitment to community support.

Cultural Contributions

Mia coordinates historical projects, emphasising the importance of sharing stories from the Black Women's Movement: *"I said, no, come talk, share your oral history journey."* This work connects her to influential Black figures, like bell hooks, and recognises the contributions of women in her community,

including women like her aunt, who is now 80 and still working for Costco's. I am lucky enough to have worked with Professor Angela David and Dr Maya Angelou, Diane Abbott MP, Malorie Blackman and Professor Dame Elizabeth Aniwu.

Self-Care and Leadership

Under pressure, Mia values self-care: *"Black women just run ourselves ragged... we cannot serve from an empty vessel."* She advocates for personal time, emphasising small acts like wearing lipstick or spending time with friends to recharge.

She believes that comfort and resilience are key to building trust: *"You have to be very comfortable with yourself... If my gut does not take to a certain situation, I'm not going there again."* This instinctual approach informs her interactions within the community.

Support and Community

Mia discusses her network, which includes allies from diverse backgrounds: *"I'm not one of those black people that lives in a black bubble... I have white allies."* She cherishes shared experiences, such as attending fashion shows and community events.

"You have to be very comfortable with yourself... If my gut does not take to a certain situation, I'm not going there again."

“If I’m big out there, I’ll become exhausted... I’m like a Victorian courtship, revealing my ankle little by little.”

Learning and Growth

Mia constantly seeks knowledge, reading memoirs and history: *“I read a book a week... you have to get hold of [life].”* *“I’ve had a range of careers - you name it, I have worked with them. I just make it up as I go along.”* She attributes her confidence to age and experience, stating, *“As I get older, I don’t care; I just get on with things.”* A commitment to lifelong learning shapes her approach to personal development.

Advice for Younger Women

Her advice to younger women is simple yet profound: *“Take care of your heart and your soul... Don’t turn anything down.”* She emphasises the importance of embracing opportunities without hesitation.

Curiosity About Being a ‘Well-Kept Secret’

When asked why she’s a well-kept secret, she humorously replies, *“If I’m big out there, I’ll become exhausted... I’m like a Victorian courtship, revealing my ankle little by little.”* This self-awareness underscores her strategic approach to leadership and influence.

Legacy and Recognition

Mia wishes to be remembered for her support of community work: *“The good that you do comes back to you.”* She shares her experience receiving an OBE for her contributions to Black heritage, noting, *“King Charles said you are one of the people that work long and hard behind the scenes.”* She encourages us to look for positives in challenges: *“the toughest periods can help us reach important realisations.”* She also advises, *“keep your face to the sunshine and you cannot see shadow.”*

She remembers her involvement with Akyaaba Addai Sebo and Ansel Wong who created Black History Month in the UK. Community dialogue was woven into the Anti Racist Year Launch and it was continued by the London Strategic Policy Unit.

Her journey signifies resilience and a strong commitment to leadership, community service, and self-care. She embodies a commitment to bringing positive change while advocating for the empowerment of others.

Michelle Peterkin-Walker

by Hiikmah



Walking the Trodden Path: Michelle Peterkin-Walker's Leadership Journey

The beginning of her leadership journey: documenting her people

Michelle Peterkin-Walker's leadership did not begin with declarations or titles. It began with quiet resistance; the kind that takes root in community and grows through creative action. In the mid-1990s, she launched Sojourner Productions, a grassroots media initiative born from a desire to counter the negative portrayals of Black communities in mainstream media. Armed with analogue equipment and a deep sense of purpose, Michelle began documenting local events, celebrations, and everyday moments. Her goal was simple but profound: to allow her people to see themselves on screen, to witness their own joy, resilience, and truth.

This early work was not about ambition. It was about cultural survival. Michelle's transition from analogue tapes to digital artistry under Akoma Arts reflected not just a shift in technology, but a deepening of her mission. Through greeting cards, prints, and visual storytelling, she created spaces where Black representation could flourish, not as tokenism, but as everyday affirmation. She refers to herself as an *"artist"*; a blend of artist and activist because it speaks to her practice of using creativity to challenge, uplift, and transform.

Influences: Mother, Mentors, Movements

Michelle's leadership is rooted in a constellation of influences that span generations, geographies, and spiritual

traditions. Her mother, a single parent who raised four children with grace and grit, remains her most enduring role model. Michelle saw her mother embody both maternal and paternal roles, leading the household with quiet strength and unwavering commitment. That example of everyday leadership left a lasting imprint.

She also speaks with reverence about Dr. Hodge, a New Orleans activist whose Paul Robeson exhibition and community work revealed the power of individual impact. Dr. Hodge's words, *"You can't do everything, but you can do a great deal,"* became a guiding principle for Michelle's own journey.

The Rastafari movement played a pivotal role in shaping Michelle's identity and leadership ethos. Through Rasta teachings, books, and community gatherings, she encountered African history, spirituality, and liberation thought. This awakening was not just intellectual; it was visceral. Michelle describes it as a shift from cultural pride to consciousness — a moment when Africa ceased to be a distant idea and became a living, breathing part of her being.

Another defining moment came in 1997, when Michelle attended the Million Women's March in Philadelphia. Surrounded by thousands of Black women, she felt the power of collective action and historical presence. The march, organised by grassroots women rather than elite figures, affirmed Michelle's belief in community-led change and inspired her to return home and build something meaningful.

Inspiration and Motivation: Trodding as Practice

Michelle does not define leadership through structure or hierarchy. She defines it through trod; a Rastafari concept of walking one's path with spiritual and cultural alignment. Her inspiration stems from a refusal to replicate hollow leadership models that prioritise ego over ethics. She has witnessed gatekeeping in her community, where access and opportunity are hoarded rather than shared. This experience led her to a personal mantra: be the change you want to see.

Her leadership is expressed through creative expression, community connection, and archival stewardship. Whether she is designing greeting cards that celebrate Black womanhood, attending local events to build relationships, or curating oral histories for the Liverpool Black Archive, Michelle leads by doing. She is motivated by moments of transformation; seeing her mother speak boldly at public events, watching young creatives light up during intergenerational conversations, and feeling her community rally behind the archive project.

Advice to Leaders — Young and Elder

Michelle's advice to leaders is layered and deeply felt. To emerging leaders, she urges them to stay true to themselves. She warns against waiting for validation, whether from institutions, peers, or community and encourages young women to let purpose be their compass. She cautions against ego,

“Mentor widely, share knowledge generously, and reflect honestly on your impact.”

reminding them that success should never come at the expense of community. For Michelle, legacy matters more than reputation. What you build should outlive you.

To elder leaders, Michelle offers a gentle but firm challenge: pass the baton before it's too late. She has seen too many elders hold on to leadership roles without creating pathways for succession. Her call is clear: mentor widely, share knowledge generously, and reflect honestly on your impact. Leadership is not about control; it is about transmission.

Sources of Strength: Ancestral Dialogue and Community Healing

Michelle's resilience is both spiritual and communal. She speaks regularly to the ancestors, trusting their guidance and witnessing their presence in everyday choices. This dialogue is not ritualistic; it is relational. She talks to them while walking, while working, while reflecting, allowing their wisdom to shape her decisions.

“I didn’t always listen...but now I do.”

She also prioritises wellness, seeing self-care as non-negotiable. Swimming, sauna visits, and music are part of her self-care practice. These are not indulgences; they are survival strategies.

Michelle maintains trusted networks of people who offer truth, not flattery. She acknowledges that she draws support from people and from the ancestors who speak through them. *“I didn’t always listen,” she admits. “But now I do.”* Whether it’s a friend offering honest feedback or a stranger validating her work, Michelle draws strength from collective energy. She’s fueled by the desire to see change in her lifetime, to uplift African people, and to create spaces where healing and joy are possible.

Success, Her Way

Michelle defines success in deeply personal terms. For her, success is happiness — the joy of doing meaningful work, the fulfillment of seeing her community thrive. It is not measured in accolades or income, but in impact. Success is seeing African peoples feel seen, celebrated, and whole. It is building structures, archives, and creative works that nourish future generations.

She dreams of a physical archive center in Liverpool, a space where Black stories can

live freely and be accessed by all. She also envisions a home in Ghana; not just for herself, but for her family and community. This diasporic return is about healing, reconnection, and spiritual wholeness. It is a legacy project, rooted in love and longing.

Legacy: Energy That Outlives the Name

Michelle wants to be remembered not just for what she did, but for how people felt in her presence. Her leadership legacy is energetic. She hopes that when her name is spoken, it evokes warmth, joy, and reverence. *“I want people to call my name and feel something good,”* Michelle says. Her legacy is not about ego—it’s about energy.

She wants to be remembered as someone who contributed to the healing and upliftment of African people. She wants her archive to outlast her stall, her projects to outlive her presence, and her journey to inspire others to walk their own path with courage and clarity.

She does not seek to be memorialised as a hero. She seeks to be remembered as someone who did good, who made people smile, who opened doors and held space. Her legacy is not about grandeur. It is about goodness.

// Conclusion: Leadership Without Performance

Michelle Peterkin-Walker is not a performative leader. She is a spiritual practitioner of visibility, truth-telling, and radical love. Her journey teaches us that leadership lives in choices, not titles; in consistency, not ego; in legacy, not applause.

She does not walk ahead of her community. She walks with them — documenting, encouraging, creating, and calling. Her trod is not linear, and it is certainly not easy. But it is hers. And with every step, she lifts others.

“
You can’t do
everything,
but you can
do a great
deal.”

Dr. Hodge, New Orleans activist

”

Dr. Peggy Warren

by Leonie Mills-Woanya



Honouring Black Women's Histories: Lessons from Intergenerational Workshops

From my younger years, my perception of leaders was of confident, out-front individuals. However, I prefer leading from behind. I think I recognised my leadership at around age seven, as I became a leader for my younger siblings when we lived in the Caribbean. I took on responsibilities that felt maternal due to the absence of a female figure.

I also led at school—I was a prefect. When I returned to the UK at 18, I engaged with my community, recognising needs, and leading within a Saturday supplementary school that's been active for over 20 years. I have developed programmes for women and led English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes. Although I displayed leadership skills, I struggled with the title itself.

I'm an introvert so I've never been comfortable being hyper visible. I ran a Christian women's group about a decade or so ago in Birmingham which was very successful and attracted women of all backgrounds and cultures. I enjoyed the challenges of organising from the back—ensuring plans were laid and everything was on track. While I teach in front of a class, I never felt comfortable with the title leader; I was more of an organiser, as I dislike disorder.

Initially, I didn't recognise myself as a formal leader. In my 20 years within the NHS, I taught leadership and management and learnt to live with the paradox of being prominent during facilitation and going home to plug in and recharge in isolation so I could return the following day and do it all again. An experience that stood out occurred when a former manager, with an army background would start team meetings with the phrase,

"I'm on transmit and you lot are on receive." Everyone just complied with him. I didn't like his approach; it felt as though we were relegated to the position of children. I challenged him, which interestingly both he and my fellow team members found frustrating. He would often come and stand by my desk interrupting my flow and his request would be, 'can I speak to my conscience?' I would banter, you don't need my permission to speak to your own head. His response always started witty but then he would say, seriously, you are the conscience of the team, I need to pick your brain on something. My 'pet' name for him was Spiky, which I called him to his face. I feel that was a trigger for him, as each time I called him 'Spiky' he would be embarrassed and would tell me that the reason he didn't like me asking questions in the team is because I was a thinker and sometimes, he struggled to answer. He also told me that he loved my questions as he would take them to his senior management meetings.

I started owning my leadership impact during my last four years at the NHS. I completed a self-funded PhD on black women's lived experiences of work-based learning and Higher Education. I did this whilst I was working full time, but I did not speak to any of my senior leaders about it until I completed. When I completed it, I announced it publicly in a meeting where they were all present. They were shocked, and in a subsequent meeting about a senior role which was coming up, my director told me, *"I will never promote you because you're too intelligent, and you will show me up."* The director's comment was a gift, revealing my potential. At that time, I felt undervalued; my contributions were

overlooked. Upon leaving, several colleagues followed suit, highlighting broader issues in the leadership structure that favoured social connections over competence.

One of my standout experiences as a female leader was delivering a programme called 'Elevate' for women of colour in five universities. The first cohort consisted of predominantly South Asian women, we all came with preconceived notions about the culture and experiences of 'the other'. We were intentional in building rapport and understanding. By the end of the programme, these women began greeting each other as "*sisters*," signifying a bond that grew over shared experiences. The progression from scepticism to sisterhood was powerful and demonstrated the importance of inclusivity.

Expanding Circles of Support

My initial support network consisted of people who depended on me—academically or financially. While it felt good initially, I reached a point of mild resentment. I recognised that I needed tighter boundaries, instead of being the perpetual giver. I've widened my network to include people across various backgrounds, allowing me to receive and give support in healthier ways.

I'm a relational person who cherishes interactions with people, especially those with extensive life experience. I make it a point to visit octogenarians weekly; they uplift me and provide valuable insights. Cooking for them and simply being in their presence brings me joy, often leaving me moved.

Evolving my social circle has been freeing. Rather than feeling the need to pay for everyone's coffee because of their earning status, I embrace the exchange of support without the financial burden. My interactions across diverse communities challenge my viewpoints and allow me to grow as an individual.

Personal Development as a Lifelong Process

As for my learning, the PhD was an unexpected journey which started when I saw that my students who had transitioned on to a 2-yr undergraduate, H.E. course were exiting at year 1. I knew they were capable, and didn't think

of questioning the systems they were working and studying in. I looked inwards, asking if I had set them up to fail. That was the question that took me on the PhD journey and the data from that has been published in a book about our lived experiences. I say ours, because my methodology was autoethnography, I included my own experience as I was a black woman working and studying in the same institutions as the women at the time.

Now, I actively explore new subjects to expand my learning. For instance, I'm enrolled in a week-long course on Enneagrams to explore personality types, which will be held out in the sticks in the countryside. Both the new knowledge and the context of the training are important to me. I have identified myself as an Enneagram Six, which highlights both my motivational capabilities and underlying fears. Understanding these facets of my personality is key to my continued growth and self-awareness. I also engage with two writing groups focused on the experiences of women of colour.

The desire for continual learning is a part of my identity. I am experimenting with audiobooks, I'm not sure how I feel about them yet, as I love to highlight texts to revisit and scribble my own thoughts in paper pages.

I also enjoy spending time outdoors, and I have a fondness for sweets, not all sweets, a special brand from a well-known high street food store. I am currently striving to find balance. I believe we have one body from God, and I need to care for it properly. Nature and companionship nourish my spirit far more than what I describe as superficial luxuries.

My faith is an important aspect of my life, yet the faith institutions are like any other, they have their systemic issues. I'm learning to be more open and understanding of others, though it continues to challenge my expectations regarding authenticity in relationships.

My response to criticism greatly depends on how it's delivered. I've faced lots of critique throughout my life, especially when I was younger, growing up in the Caribbean. I was different because I arrived there as a 7-year-old Brit, I was 'other'. I felt othered outside the home, by teachers, schoolteachers, parents of my peers and even in my own family. And during my formal studies, critique

“What truly inspires me is witnessing people believe in themselves and see their potential.”

is just a part of the journey. If critique comes without context, I tend to shut it out initially. However, I'll later reflect on it and sometimes dwell on the negative aspects. I've observed younger people using the term "*crit*" when requesting feedback, which I find fascinating. This suggests a need for a shift in how we communicate constructive feedback, particularly considering intergenerational forms of critique. I learned to recognise that my upbringing and experiences with harsh critics shape my reactions today.

What truly inspires me is witnessing people believe in themselves and see their potential. I refer to this as "*realignment*"—getting back to what's true. Watching people on their journeys to realignment fills my heart with joy. Running a women's group, I felt the same high when I saw women come in feeling down but leaving full of energy and laughter. That sense of community and transformation is what keeps me going.

Much of my work revolves around women, and I find that being authentic is vital. I do not feel the need to create a separate professional persona; I'm just me. If I were working with a male group, perhaps I'd be more reserved, but with women, my authenticity shines through.

Gender and racial discrimination in career

Working predominantly in the NHS, which is female-dominant, has somewhat shielded me from gender discrimination. My paid role was a year-long contract I took after my PhD, predominantly to strategise and network. My interactions with white women have been intriguing.

One day in the office, I was speaking with a female colleague, together we came up with a solution to an issue. As we were parting I called her name and said, 'Oh I could bottle you'. The whole office of white women gasped, downed tools and looked at me. The female colleague asked, 'you could do what?' I responded, 'I

could bottle you to be prescribed on the NHS'. The room lightened and some of the women started laughing, then they explained that for them 'bottling' meant that somewhat had a glass bottle smashed in their face. I hadn't heard of anyone being 'bottled' and I had to ask, how could you arrive there when we were celebrating a breakthrough?

This led to a very honest and vulnerable conversation with the female colleague I was originally speaking to, who we had the breakthrough together. She confessed that when I started my role she expected to 'dislike me'. She had heard about my credentials and simply made up her mind that she and I were not going to get on. She said all this as an introduction to telling me how much she admired and valued the way I worked; she specifically liked my strategy to question and probe, stating, "*Every day I drive home, I'm saying to myself, that bloody Peggy Warren is in my head again.*" From her prospective, what she expected to be negative resulted in a positive relationship, showing how perceptions can shift dramatically.

Messages to Younger Black Women

I would tell my younger self to let go of perfectionism. I vividly remember at 27, rushing to meetings and stressing about being on time. One day, while stuck in traffic for three hours, I cried and realised how detrimental my perfectionist mindset was. I took the rest of the week off to reflect. When I returned, I apologised to my team for my expectations, realising they needed different support. I told my manager I didn't want to manage anymore, just to do my job. Her response was, "*Now that you've reflected, I want you to lead.*" That experience taught me the importance of being human and flexible, and I continuously share this lesson with others including my niece, reminding them that perfection is not necessary.

Success and Legacy

My definition of success is possessing peace. I feel successful now, not because I have a PhD, not because of my possessions or where I live. True success, for me, is the deep peace I experience at night when I put my head on the pillow, I know that I have been honest, fair, and helped as much as I could where I saw needs; then I can sleep soundly. If something didn't feel right that day, I can reflect on it, reach out to address it as soon as I can. That ability to communicate openly is part of my personal growth journey. Raised in the Caribbean, I learned to thrive with very little and be creative. Ultimately, success is about achieving inner peace and doing as much as I can to help others find their own peace.

I haven't given much thought to my legacy. Since COVID -19 I've attended many funerals and realised that many people do not truly know their loved ones. This has motivated me to spend more time with the younger members of my family, giving them glimpses into my world. I want to be remembered as someone who saw and touched people, I hope some can say I made a difference in their lives. I focus on making genuine connections rather than leaving behind a grand legacy.

Key Themes in Peggy's Interview

Leadership and Identity: Peggy's narrative illustrates her non-traditional approach to leadership, shaped by her identity as a Black woman. From an early age, she recognised her leadership roles within her family, taking on responsibilities typically associated with maternal figures. This early adaptation of leadership styles emphasises the importance of relational dynamics, particularly in supporting and uplifting her siblings. In a professional setting dominated by largely white female leaders, Peggy often led from behind, emphasising organisation and community rather than visibility, reflecting a broader societal narrative where women, particularly women of colour, are often expected to take on supportive roles rather than leadership positions. However, she lives comfortably with the contrast of leading from the front to get the job done and resorting to quiet and nature-based spaces to recharge, she does not fear being upfront.

Encountering Systemic Biases: Peggy's experiences in the NHS highlight the systemic biases prevalent in leadership structures. The comment from a director stating that she would never promote her due to her intelligence exemplifies how race and gender interplay in the workplace, limiting opportunities for women of colour based on misguided perceptions about leadership capability. Peggy's decision to pursue a PhD, without seeking funding from or informing her managers illustrates her determination to assert her professional identity and disrupt existing power dynamics.

Interpersonal Relationships and Community Formation: The development of relationships is a key theme in Peggy's narrative. Her interactions with a range of women, including South Asian women in the 'Elevate' programme, reveal complex layers of racial dynamics, preconceptions, and eventual solidarity. Peggy describes the transformation from suspicion to sisterhood among the participants, demonstrating how community-building can defy racial divides and foster mutual understanding among women of different ethnic backgrounds.

Support Networks and Boundaries: Peggy discusses her journey of establishing healthier boundaries in her support networks. Initially seen as a perpetual giver, she accepts the importance of reciprocity in relationships. Her relationships with older individuals, particularly octogenarians, offer a contrasting source of support that nourishes her spirit, showcasing an intersection of age and race in her personal development journey.

Redefining Success and Legacy: For Peggy, success is fundamentally about achieving inner peace rather than conventional markers of achievement, such as educational credentials or financial wealth. This perspective is particularly significant for women of colour, who may face societal pressures to conform to rigid success narratives. Her focus on connection and impact rather than legacy indicates a shift toward valuing relationships and personal fulfilment over traditional notions of achievement, reshaping what it means to leave a meaningful mark on the world.

“
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Dr Peggy Warren

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Portia Roberts -Popham

by Olivia Joseph



Resilience, Resistance, and Renaissance: The Transformative Leadership of Portia Roberts-Popham

In a world that often celebrates leadership from the top down, Portia Roberts-Popham offers a model built from the ground up, one where courage meets community, and legacy is stitched through lived experience.

Her leadership is not a neatly packaged narrative of accolades and boardroom promotions. It is a mosaic: fierce, radical, reflective, and deeply collaborative. Through decades of struggle and innovation, Portia has shaped spaces where Black communities could thrive, where women could lead unapologetically, and where equity wasn't just a value but a lifelong fight.

The First Scar: Leadership Born in Resistance

Portia's leadership literally began with a fight.

"I carried a scar under this eye," she recalls. "That was my introduction to life. You fight for belonging, sometimes literally."

As the first Black girl at Saint Gregory's school in Yorkshire, she endured daily challenges to her presence. Even the bus stop became a battleground for legitimacy. But Portia didn't buckle. Encouraged by her mother, a woman who never tolerated injustice, she learned to push back against invisibility.

"My mother didn't drop no nonsense. I was reading before I got to school, and the teachers didn't recognise it. She was livid."

This early defiance laid the foundation for a life of principled disruption.

Threading Culture Into Cooperative Economy

Grassroots spaces became Portia's workshop for leadership. At the Huddersfield Caribbean Association, she helped reimagine Carnival not just as celebration, but as enterprise.

"We had fire in our belly. Carnival was sewing, woodworking, artistry. It was enterprise, Black unity."

With sewing collectives and youth clubs as incubators, Portia co-created systems for community empowerment. She became the Association's youngest chair—building intergenerational alliances, though often in tension with elders resistant to change.

Her thinking was innovative and strategic. Carnival costumes? A revenue stream. Woodworking? A skill with market value. These weren't extracurriculars—they were economic blueprints.

Betrayal in the Collective: Lessons in Leadership Ethics

Though community was her canvas, it wasn't always safe. Portia witnessed betrayal within movements she helped build. In one instance, after her team sacrificed salary increments to ensure fairness across new recruits, a colleague secretly signed a contract in their own favour.

"I never forgave the people who did that. They dismantled something powerful. One of them couldn't even look me in the eye at the end."

This heartbreak didn't deter her—it refined her understanding of leadership ethics. Equity wasn't a talking point; it was non-negotiable.

Finding Her Voice: Activism Born of Silence

Portia's political awakening came during a rally. A young Black man had died under suspicious circumstances, and a local defence campaign was forming. At the event, the crowd waited for someone to speak. No one did.

"Everybody looked away. So, I stood on the box and said: 'They believe they can murder our children.' I couldn't be silent anymore."

It was the moment she found her voice—not planned, but necessary. From then on, her public leadership took shape as a relentless call for justice.

"I hadn't found my voice before. That was the start."

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Mentorship as Movement: Planting Thousand Seeds

Portia doesn't just lead, she multiplies leadership. Her mentoring of Black women through cooperative training empowered dozens to build businesses, become public servants, and reclaim agency.

"Step into your light," she tells mentees. "You're doing it anyway. Just acknowledge it."

One of the trainees became a local council leader. Another launched her own enterprise.

Portia doesn't track these outcomes for ego but to remind us of leadership's ripple effect.

Civil Service to Systemic Struggle

Her stint as one of the few Black Grade 7 managers in the UK civil service laid bare institutional racism. Boxed into performance ratings designed to limit advancement, she filed a grievance.

"It was upheld. But nothing changed."

Even her coach warned her of the inevitable block but taught her to *"work in her shadow,"* refining overlooked skills to become a more complete leader.

It was this experience that steeled her resilience—later guiding projects in economically neglected areas like North Solihull.

"I got the connection with the community. That's what grounded me."

Philosophy of Change: Blueprint for Black-Led Organisation

Through Locorum and various initiatives, Portia crafted a living blueprint based not on hierarchy but collective power.

"No leaders. Everyone's valued. That's where I'm happiest."

Her vision is rooted in a profound commitment to equity, authenticity, and lasting impact. She champions shared leadership and distributive models that decentralise power and foster collective agency. Her approach to cultural competence is unapologetically anchored in the lived realities and rich traditions of the Black experience, offering depth and resonance beyond surface-level inclusion. She prioritises intergenerational collaboration, recognising that wisdom flows across time and that meaningful change is most powerful when guided by elders and fueled by emerging voices. For her, intersectionality is not a buzzword but a guiding framework that must be embedded into policy and practice. And above all, she is driven by a belief in sustainability over symbolism; choosing intentionality, accountability, and legacy over performative gestures.

"We don't pass the burden. We pass the baton."

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The Black Survey: Data as Liberation

Her latest venture is a survey capturing the lived experiences of Black residents in Kirklees can be regarded as pure grassroots genius. With limited institutional support, she's building it herself.

"We're doing it on SurveyMonkey. Thirty thousand pages and counting. But we're determined."

This is data sovereignty, collecting truth from the people, for the people, to influence policy long-term.

Legacy, Not Applause

Portia eschews recognition. She measures success by impact and integrity.

"I don't need awards. I've been in the press. Got the T-shirt. What matters is: did you leave something meaningful?"

Her definition of success is deeply personal:

"Going home, shutting the door, and knowing I have family, community, and people who care—that's success. Not everything will grow. But if you scatter enough seeds, and nourish the soil, something beautiful will emerge."

A Blueprint for Generations

Portia Roberts-Popham reminds us that leadership is a practice and not a position. It is seeded in resistance, watered by community, and bloomed through purpose.

Her journey is not just historic; it is instructive. A blueprint for what Black leadership can be: grounded, intergenerational, unapologetic, and legacy-led.

Salha Kaïtesi

by Yvonne Field OBE CF



A Leadership Journey Rooted in Community, Courage, and Care

In a world where leadership is often measured by visibility and accolades, Salha Kaïtesi offers a radically different blueprint, one rooted in integrity, lived experience, and the quiet power of showing up. Born and raised in Rwanda and now living in the northeast of England, her leadership story is one of resilience, vision, and unwavering commitment to uplifting African and Black women. As the founder of Teakisi, a social enterprise born during the pandemic, Salha has carved out a space where community healing, empowerment, and advocacy thrive. She has become a force for change in the northeast of England, creating opportunities for African and Black women to connect, heal, and thrive.

Salha's leadership journey didn't begin with a title but with a mindset. As head girl in her school, she unknowingly laid the foundation for a life of leading by example. Her instinct to empower others, especially women, was present even before she understood the language of empowerment. Today, she leads with integrity, creating spaces where marginalised voices are not only heard but celebrated. Her leadership is not about titles; it's about impact, *"I've always wanted to push others and encourage others... I lead by example. My integrity is everything to me."*

Her leadership is deeply personal, shaped by her own migration journey from Rwanda to the UK,

and by the racialised experiences that followed. She speaks candidly about the moment she became aware of her Blackness, not in Rwanda, but in Britain, and how that awareness has shaped her leadership style and advocacy.

Personal Development and support

Salha's growth has come through hard-earned lessons in trust and self-care. A self-described perfectionist, she's learning to delegate, to trust her team, and to accept that leadership doesn't mean doing everything herself. Her blog, once a global platform with millions of readers, is now a personal sanctuary, a place to reflect, recharge, and reclaim joy. *"I blog about anything... food, how I felt in a space. It helps me switch off from the crisis, the demands, the constant need to respond."*

Salha's growth as a leader has been shaped by her willingness to reflect, adapt, and trust. She has learned to delegate as a perfectionist and is building a support network that not only includes her husband but a circle of close friends who walk the high street with her, laugh at nothing, and remind her that rest is revolutionary. Her blogging, both personal and professional, serves as a therapeutic outlet and a tool for connection. *"I struggle to find my own space... but blogging gives me a good feeling. It's how I channel my energy."*

"I blog about anything... food, how I felt in a space. It helps me switch off from the crisis, the demands, the constant need to respond."

Career: Navigating Barriers with Grace and Grit

Despite holding two degrees and leading impactful initiatives, Salha has faced racial and gender-based discrimination that has hindered her career progression. Yet she continues to show up, challenge inequities, and create platforms for others. Her work with Teakisi and the African Woman Collective is a testament to her refusal to be sidelined. She speaks her truth on what this discrimination looks like, pointing out who gets preferential treatment, *"I've noticed groups that started yesterday are right there... but the difference is they're white or male."* She also describes the dissonance between how she's perceived online, articulate and professional, and how she's treated in person, once her race and gender become visible, *"you meet in person and it's like a shift... the energy changes. Suddenly, nothing comes through."*

Rather than retreat, Salha responds by creating her own spaces. From coffee mornings to WhatsApp groups, she builds environments where Black and minoritised women feel seen, heard, and safe.

Legacy: Building Beyond the Founder

Salha dreams of a future where Teakisi thrives without her at the helm because she is clear that Teakisi is not about her but about the community. She's actively cultivating leadership within her team, ensuring the organisation can thrive without her, pushing staff and volunteers to step forward, take ownership, and lead.

Her legacy is not just about what she builds, it's about who she builds it with and for, *"Teakisi is not Salha. If I step away, I want them to believe they can carry on."* Her vision is one of succession, sustainability, and shared leadership—a rare and powerful stance for a founder.

Success: Redefining Balance and Boundaries

For Salha, success isn't measured in accolades; it's found in the elusive work-life balance she's striving to achieve. It's about setting boundaries, being able to say *"I'm off"* and mean it, *honouring rest, and creating joy outside of crisis*

"...success is having a work-life balance... where when you say you're off, you've switched off."

response. Her definition of success is deeply personal, and refreshingly honest, "success is having a work-life balance... where when you say you're off, you've switched off."

She's working toward that balance, even as the demands of leadership pull her in multiple directions. Her honesty about the struggle is itself a form of leadership—modelling vulnerability, self-awareness, and the courage to change.

Final Reflections

Salha's journey reminds us that leadership is not a destination—it's a daily practice of showing up, speaking truth, and holding space. Her story is a beacon for those navigating the intersections of race, gender, and community work. And as she builds toward a future of shared leadership and sustainable impact, one thing is clear: Salha is not just leading, she's lighting the way.

Salha's story is also a masterclass in community-rooted leadership. She leads not for recognition, but for transformation. Her work is shaped by the resilience of Rwandan women post-genocide, by the laughter of women in WhatsApp groups, and by the quiet strength of those who show up, even when the world doesn't make space for them.

"There are so many people like me in our communities... but our stories are not shared."

This blog is one small step toward changing that. Toward making sure that Black women's leadership is documented, celebrated, and remembered—not just in archives, but in the hearts of those who follow.

Victoria Barrow-Williams

by Remie Lawrence-Warren



Building a Collective

I'm Victoria Barrow-Williams, co-founder and director of People Dem Collective, a Margate-based organisation dedicated to dismantling systemic racism through empowering programmes in arts, culture, and community wellbeing. Established in response to the murder of George Floyd, our focus is on joy, civic pride, and creating spaces for Black and Brown communities, as well as engaging allies across different backgrounds. Our mission also includes advocating for policy changes to challenge systemic barriers.

Growing up in Dalston, Hackney, and raising my family in London and Margate, my diverse experiences shape my work. As a mature student and creative producer, I strive to make arts and culture accessible.

Being near nature in Margate ignites my creativity and inspires my leadership journey. Engaging in new experiences, whether it's trying alternative practices like sound baths or exploring new restaurants, pushes me out of my comfort zone and contributes to my growth. I recognise that these experiences are often limited by systemic barriers, yet they play a crucial role in broadening my perspective.

Reflecting On and Redefining Leadership

Looking back, I can identify moments that shaped my leadership. Initially, my corporate role as a creative producer revealed the limitations imposed by systemic racism. Recognising that my efforts could not yield the resources I needed led me to pursue opportunities that aligned with my community-focused values. This transition marked a pivotal moment in my leadership journey, reinforcing my commitment to community empowerment.

My identity as a Black woman directly influences my work. Kelly Abbot and I have faced the complexities of navigating systems that often overlook or undermine Black and Brown women. However, I choose to focus on how my identity enriches my leadership and allows me to create inclusive spaces. I recognise that my experience is only one of many within our diaspora, and it's imperative to amplify diverse voices. To me, leadership is not about power but collaboration. It involves inspiring and mobilising communities to engage in collective actions towards

dismantling systemic racism. My leadership style centres on building relationships and amplifying the voices of others rather than controlling or gatekeeping. I am committed to fostering a supportive environment where individuals can tap into their potential, drawing from shared experiences and collective healing.

Kelly has been instrumental in my growth, fostering a symbiotic relationship that allows us both to thrive.

Jess Search, the late CEO of Doc Society, profoundly influenced my approach to leadership. Her dedication to connecting people and creating opportunities for those less privileged resonated with me. I aspire to continue her legacy as someone who encourages collaboration rather than exclusivity within leadership roles.

Building Trust

Trust is a cornerstone of my leadership journey, particularly in collaborations with fellow Black and Brown women. Historically, I've worked in environments where our contributions are overlooked, leading to a culture of distrust. I had to navigate my ego and learn to step back when necessary. For example, during the Black Lives Matter protests, I realised that leadership is not about always being in the spotlight; it's about supporting one another.

Many organisations also struggle with distrust, fearing that collaboration may undermine their position. I believe the antidote is to consistently demonstrate our commitment to collaboration, understanding that building trust is a complex, ongoing process requiring patience and empathy.

Navigating Leadership and Self-Care

Recently, I enrolled in a massage course—not for financial gain, but as an act of self-care and a way to support my family. This stems from personal challenges, including my brother's schizophrenia, which has strained our family dynamics. By learning to give massages, I hope to offer healing not only to my family but also to friends and community members who may be financially constrained. In Black and Brown communities, systemic barriers often inhibit access to self-care. Reflecting on my recent experiences, both I and my colleague Kelly Abbott have felt the harsh realities of these systems. I envision my massage training to foster well-being, and as a commitment to dismantling the perception that self-care is a luxury rather than a necessity. As leaders, we must vigilantly safeguard our well-being amidst systemic pressures. Kelly and I support each other in recognising when we need to prioritise self-care, reflecting on our triggers to avoid burnout. Engaging in my massage practice serves as both self-care and a reminder of its importance. I encourage fellow leaders to explore healing practices, fostering a culture of support and wellness within our communities.

I have participated in Vipassana, a meditation technique involving ten days of silence and focused practice. The experience is entirely donation-based, emphasising accessibility and personal benefit. This environment fosters a sense of community and allows for inner reflection, which is especially vital for someone like me with an active mind. Meditation helps me cultivate equilibrium and creativity amidst the chaos of daily life, enhancing my thoughts on leadership and community engagement.

Intergenerational Collaboration

Reflecting on legacy, I resonate with Yvonne Field's notion of "*passing the baton*." While it feels premature for People Dem Collective to fully embrace this concept, I value my experiences mentoring young leaders. Working alongside a young person for the We Out Here festival reignited my excitement about becoming an elder in my field.

Intergenerational collaboration enriches our work, allowing for a hopeful exchange of

knowledge and perspectives. It is essential to cultivate spaces where emerging leaders can step into roles and share their innovative ideas.

Despite the challenges of leadership, I find joy in fostering these connections. It's crucial to discuss the sustainability of leadership and actively seek ways to facilitate knowledge transfer. Leaders need to learn to share responsibility, as refusing to do so perpetuates cycles of repetition and stagnation. I consciously work on this aspect of myself, embracing the idea that relinquishing control can lead to greater collective progress.

Defining Success and Legacy

To me, success equates to legacy. Initially, I underestimated the demands of building an organisation from the ground up. My vision of success is tied to the tangible impact we make in our community, evidenced by the development of new organisations and initiatives. Financial stability, such as the ability for Kelly and me to be compensated for our work, marks an essential milestone in our journey.

The ultimate goal is to establish the National Cultural Centre, which would stand as a lasting legacy for People Dem Collective. The ability to step back and allow others to carry on our work would represent true success and sustainability. While that may seem far-off, it motivates our daily efforts.

Reflecting on Victoria's interview through the lens of race and gender reveals several significant themes and implications regarding leadership, community engagement, and personal development within the context of predominantly Black female communities.

1. Intersectionality of Identity

Victoria Barrow-Williams emphasises the profound influence of her dual identity as a Black woman in her leadership approach. The concept of intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, highlights how various aspects of a person's identity (such as race and gender) combine to create unique modes of discrimination and privilege. In this context, Victoria's experiences as a Black woman navigating systemic racism and gender biases inform her leadership style, which prioritises collaboration, trust, and community solidarity.

2. Redefining Leadership

Victoria's definition of leadership opposes traditional views that equate it with authority or control. Instead, she promotes a collaborative leadership model that allows for shared power and collective decision-making. This approach is especially relevant for Black women in leadership, who often confront stereotypes related to the "*strong Black woman*" trope, which can limit expressions of vulnerability and collaboration. By encouraging a leadership style based on mutual support and shared responsibility, Victoria challenges existing notions and advocates for a more inclusive and empathetic leadership framework.

3. Systemic Racism and Trust Issues

Victoria addresses the systemic challenges that Black and Brown women often encounter, particularly the tendency to have their contributions overlooked or misattributed. This issue of "*credit*" is prevalent in many professional environments, particularly where marginalised groups seek recognition. Victoria reveals how this background fosters distrust among individuals and organisations within these communities. By acknowledging these dynamics, she illustrates the need for conscious efforts to build a trusting, collaborative environment that empowers all voices, especially those from marginalised backgrounds.

4. Personal Wellbeing and Self-Care

Victoria emphasises self-care through practices like meditation and engaging in new experiences—an essential component often overlooked in discussions about leadership, particularly within racial and gendered contexts. The culture of overwork and the stigma surrounding self-care can disproportionately affect women of colour, who often feel pressure to bear both personal and professional burdens. By advocating for self-care as a necessary tool for effective leadership, Victoria addresses the unique pressures that Black women face and the importance of fostering an environment that prioritises mental and emotional wellbeing.

5. Intergenerational Knowledge Sharing

The concept of "*passing the baton*" speaks to the critical importance of mentorship and

intergenerational dialogue in leadership within Black communities. Victoria's reflections on her role as a mentor to younger leaders illustrate the necessity of fostering relationships across generations. This practice not only empowers young people but also ensures the continuity of cultural knowledge and community activism. It affirms the interdependence that characterises many Black communities, where collective growth and support are foundational to overcoming systemic challenges.

6. Community Building and Legacy

The discussions around success and legacy highlight the cultural and social responsibilities that come with leadership in racially marginalised communities. Victoria's focus on establishing the National Cultural Centre as a legacy project underscores the importance of creating spaces that uplift Black and Brown voices. This aligns with the broader need for initiatives that not only address systemic inequities but also celebrate and advance the cultural heritage of these communities. The legacy, therefore, becomes a way to dismantle historical barriers while empowering future generations.

// Conclusion

Victoria's interview reveals a rich tapestry of challenges and opportunities within leadership, particularly in the context of racial equity. It requires navigating a complex system while prioritising both personal and communal well-being. It also emphasises the importance of trust, collaboration, and self-care while highlighting the need for systemic change. Victoria's experiences and philosophies present a model for inclusive leadership that honours intersectionality, fostering resilience and community engagement essential for enacting social change.

“
I've worked in environments where our contributions are overlooked, leading to a culture of distrust.

Victoria Barrow-Williams

”

Yvonne Christie

by Macey L. McMullen



Canerow Threads of Intergenerational Leadership with Yvonne Christie

When did your leadership journey begin?

I started community work as a volunteer in 1980. I began thinking, if everybody's equal, how come this man makes all the decisions, with another male as his second in command? I asked these questions because when I joined the organisation operating in Peckham, SE London, I was told 'there was no hierarchy, and it operated as a collective'.

Why were they making all the decisions in the pub - outside of scheduled collective meetings? These questions I aired, and I realised I was allowed to speak and challenge unequal things. I guess on reflection, that was the start of my learning and growth in leadership.

How do you feel your identity informed, influenced or hindered your leadership journey?

My identity as a Black woman is an integral part of who I've grown up to become. I come from a Jamaican household, where my leader was my mother. My dad was there throughout my life, but my Mum ran and managed the household amongst other things. Guess we could say she was definitely our family's matriarch.

As a young woman I observed, women did all the practical work and planning, whilst the men got away with minimal household duties. I'm sure witnessing inequality and bias in favour of my brothers, definitely shaped my identity because I questioned even way back then, why dad and the boys got special treatment and got away with coasting through life. But also got all the pleasures.

My observations of being a woman, and I hope it's past tense. labelled us as too talkative, hysterical, excitable, nagging, bossy. I think these stereotypes are engineered to keep us quiet. Yet, what women have to say creates important balances. I don't think you can do community work and not notice sexism, racism and class in the UK. Once your antenna is up you start noticing who society is keeping down and who gets elevated.

"I come from a Jamaican household where, my leader was my mother."

As a Black school kid, I probably experienced racism, though our parents never used that direct term. They never said negative stuff happens because you're Black. They were, however, more likely to tell my brothers off when they were stopped by the police as though it was their fault they got stopped walking home. In those days, I believe Caribbean parents thought the authorities were honest, so assumed my brothers must have done something wrong to be noticed.

My life's observations and personal experiences definitely informed and influenced

“I’d like my two children to remember me as forever evolving – and a not too awful cook!”

my leadership. I started seeing it as my responsibility to speak up and advocate for people who do not always have a voice. In relation to whether being a black woman hinders me of course it can- but I recognise that and go forward anyway.

How have you learned to trust and build on trust on your journey?

When I walked into the room as a tall, attractive woman who loved colourful stuff and who secretly thought she was the bees’ knees, with my Birmingham accent and weird attire, sometimes some women acted like they didn’t like me. This was not a good vibe when trying to work on women’s and/or girls’ issues! Lol.

Being young and naive, I felt intimidated in my early days of community development. So, I learned how to lower people’s suspicions of who I am, or who they thought I was. So many of us walk with undisclosed trauma and anger towards each other and once I understood this, working with women became easier and less intimidating for me. As my anxiety lessened so did that of the people I connected with, thank goodness.

I realised I had to undo the unsubtle messages that are often directed at women. Instead, I notice who is really working the hardest, yet gets the most blame. I look at how many things women are handling and notice how they are the consistent bedrocks of the family and the community. I started to realise there’s nothing to mistrust - women are the best.

Where has your support come from?

When I was younger, my family was very important. Family can be beautiful, but it also has challenges and can drive people crazy. Family was my biggest support because if something happened, I could go to my mum or sister. I wouldn’t necessarily tell mum the

entire story, but she could tell by my face when I was sad.

I also get my support from the people I work with; they support me, and I support them.

How do you continue to learn and expand your knowledge?

When I got involved in a range of different organisations, I would notice how people spoke in abbreviations, assuming we all understood. Feeling excluded through language is a massive barrier to understanding, learning and development. In certain professional settings, I would look around and notice that people may be reluctant to expose themselves as ignorant just for asking for clarification or wider understanding of things not understood so, I would ask, and I would see relief on others’ faces. I feel that’s how I continue to develop, by not minding being the slow one. I class it as one of my skills, to be brave and not to worry about how I come across and, of course, asking questions can sometimes annoy others. I come to realise my questioning is helpful for others.

How do you want to be remembered and what are you doing to work towards that goal or outcome?

When Yvonne Field and I sat and talked about Ubele before Ubele became Ubele, way back when, we talked about women like Sybil Phoenix and others, who maybe didn’t get wider recognition. There are so many Black women out there who people don’t know about. When we do our work, we do not often think about leaving legacies.

If I am pushed, I’d like to be remembered as a soldier. By that I don’t mean going to war but being prepared to be out in the trenches. Not necessarily leading from the front but beavering away and being reliable and responsible for getting work highlighted and

operational. I recently co-produced a magazine called Seasons for Ubele, which highlighted some wonderful women aged 60 plus who had done great work within our communities for many, many years.

I don’t particularly like talking about myself; let the work speak. On a more personal level, I’d like my two children to remember me as forever evolving - and a not too awful cook!

What advice would you give to older women in your space?

Young people look up to us as elders so we must be real about ourselves. We should be open and admit our mistakes. I hear youngsters say we don’t tell them things. We leave them to struggle on alone. Let’s guide and share more.

If you were to speak to your younger self, what would you say? What advice might you give and why?

I think I’d say just be more confident. I was quite shy. I had to decide in my 20s not to let shyness stop me moving forward. I’m much better at promoting other people than I do for myself.

How do you handle criticism?

I’ve had to deal with criticism; I’ve learned to take the punches, and it helps me to reflect.

During the Covid transitional years, I attended an in-person workshop on women and equality. Participants were all white women, bar myself, and I was also the oldest by at least a generation- so my perspective could be seen as outdated, as I just didn’t agree with all the things they were saying. I felt it was just too extreme.

I consider myself a ‘womanist’, but I was totally unceremoniously hammered. I was silenced by women and felt unable to swim through the verbal and nonverbal criticism I was feeling. My lived experiences were different from theirs.

Men have done a lot of harmful things to women, and still do, but I don’t think a lot of men know what the new rules are. Who teaches them how to be respectful to young people and women, when for years they were

allowed to wolf whistle unabashedly and be incredibly sexist. There have been a lot of recent court cases of workplace misbehaviour, usually by men, but who is re-educating both men and women of these statutory changes in relation to behaviours, attitudes and oppressive practices? And how are young men and women able to connect when there is so much fear and criticism around?

Certainly, many things that were acceptable back in my day, are not deemed appropriate now. I am open to criticism and learning on this and many other issues, but only if my viewpoints alongside others, are listened to as well. Currently my despair is we have to follow prescriptive lines with no discussions or queries of ‘why’ and ‘what does that mean in practise’.

“I’ve had to deal with criticism; I’ve learned to take the punches, and it helps me to reflect.”

So yep, I can handle criticism...by the same token, are we allowed to criticise others and changes that come along in our worlds of community development or are we being more and more coerced into acceptance without critique? I am just asking.

Yvonne Christie’s interview provides rich insights into the challenges and triumphs faced by Black women leaders. Her journey underscores the powerful impact of identity and lived experience on leadership styles and approaches.

Yvonne Field

OBE CF

by Barbara Ojei



Entrepreneurship as Resistance: Yvonne's Journey Through Barriers and Breakthroughs

In a world where Black enterprise is often undervalued and underfunded, Yvonne's entrepreneurial journey stands as a powerful act of resistance. For over 30 years, she has navigated a landscape riddled with systemic bias, institutional neglect, and cultural erasure—yet she continues to build, lead, and inspire. She has been involved in community building work for 45 years and 30 of them has been as a social entrepreneur as she said, 'I have been self-employed since 1996'.

Her story is not just one of business success; it's a testament to the transformative power of vision, community, and persistence. *"Entrepreneurship is not just about building a business. It's about building a future our communities can thrive in."* — Inspired by Yvonne's journey

The Roots of Resilience: Family as Foundation

Yvonne's leadership is inseparable from her family history. Born into a large family of ten siblings—five born in Jamaica and five in England—she holds a unique position as the youngest daughter and the only girl born in England. This layered identity shaped her early understanding of belonging, responsibility, and cultural duality.

Her mother's entrepreneurial spirit left a lasting imprint. From cooking and sharing food to fostering others formally and informally, her mother modeled generosity, resourcefulness, and community care. These values became the bedrock of Yvonne's leadership style.

"My mother's entrepreneurial spirit shaped all of us. It's in our blood." — Yvonne

Yvonne also recalls the fight to access education—a campaign waged by her parents and Black students from Goldsmiths to get her admitted to a school of their choice. During that time, she was homeschooled for three months. This experience of racial injustice and collective resistance planted early seeds of activism and self-determination.

"Fighting your corner, learning to share, being open to all people—those were lessons from my family home." — Inspired by Yvonne's reflections

The Barriers: A Landscape of Inequity

Yvonne is candid about the challenges she's faced. Access to finance remains one of the most persistent obstacles for Black entrepreneurs. Despite decades of advocacy and innovation, Black-led businesses are still perceived as high-risk and less robust than their white-led counterparts.

"Black business ideas are not regarded as robust as those espoused by white-led businesses. That hasn't changed in 25 years." — Yvonne

This perception isn't just harmful—it's a reflection of deep-rooted structural racism. She notes that many Black entrepreneurs are risk-averse, not because they lack ambition, but because the stakes are higher. The margin for error is thinner. The support systems are fewer. And the scrutiny is relentless.

"There is a real big space to set up companies and to kind of really work collectively." — Yvonne

But Yvonne didn't let these barriers define her. Instead, she used them as fuel.

The Breakthroughs: Building with Intention

Yvonne's approach to entrepreneurship is deeply intentional. She advises aspiring business

"Entrepreneurship is about...building a future our communities can thrive in."

owners to be sure of their commitment, to work consistently on their ideas, and to build a viable plan—including a budget and a strategy for seeking funding. Her wisdom is grounded in lived experience, not theory.

What makes her journey remarkable is not just what she built, but how she built it. Her leadership is rooted in generosity—mentoring others, sharing opportunities, and opening doors to networks that might otherwise remain closed.

“Leadership is about being generous—with your time, your knowledge, and your networks.” — Inspired by Yvonne’s leadership style

Her work with Ubele, a social enterprise focused on community sustainability and intergenerational leadership, exemplifies this ethos. Ubele was born from a question:

“What do we need to do to become really, really strong communities here as Black people?” — Yvonne

That question became a concept note, then a movement, and now a legacy.

“Leadership is about being generous—with your time, your knowledge, and your networks.”

Entrepreneurship as Activism

For Yvonne, entrepreneurship is more than economic participation—it’s a form of activism. It’s about reclaiming space, asserting value, and building systems that reflect the needs and aspirations of Black communities. It’s about challenging the narrative that says Black ideas are less viable, less fundable, less worthy.

Her journey reminds us that every business launched by a Black entrepreneur is a declaration: *We are here. We are capable. We are visionary.*

“England may be one of many homes for some, but for most Black people, it’s the only home.” — Yvonne

Staying the Course

Entrepreneurship is not for the faint-hearted, and Yvonne is honest about the toll it can take.

“Being an entrepreneur takes a lot from anybody—it’s hard work and it’s definitely not for everybody.” — Yvonne

But she has developed strategies to stay grounded. She surrounds herself with other entrepreneurs, draws strength from her family, and keeps herself excited about the work. When things get tough, she reminds herself of who she is and what she’s overcome.

“When things get hard, I tell my problems who I am, what I’ve done, and how I’ve overcome before.” — Yvonne

“If Plan A doesn’t work, Plan B might be even better.” — Yvonne

Her story about ending up at Wits Business School after a failed job application in South Africa is a perfect example of her resilience. Plan A may falter—but Plan B might be even better.

A Legacy of Resistance

Yvonne’s journey is a blueprint for those who see entrepreneurship not just as a career, but as a calling. It’s a reminder that resistance can take many forms—and that building something lasting, inclusive, and community-rooted is one of the most powerful forms of resistance there is.

Her legacy is not just in the organisations she’s built, but in the lives she’s touched, the leaders she’s mentored, and the spaces she’s reclaimed.

“I want Ubele to be here past my lifetime.” — Yvonne

“There’s a palm tree somewhere in the world with my name etched on the trunk, saying: everyone come and sit here.” — Yvonne

Entrepreneurship, for Yvonne, is not just about profit—it’s about purpose. And her purpose is rooted in family, community, and the unwavering belief that Black futures deserve to flourish.

“
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”

// Conclusion

The themes of race, gender, identity, and leadership are deeply intertwined in the lives of these 14 women. Their stories challenge dominant narratives, traditional paradigms, prioritising authenticity, care, creativity, and collective empowerment. Their stories illuminate a leadership that is rooted in lived experience, driven by values, and focused on legacy. They challenge traditional notions of authority and visibility, instead modelling leadership that is relational, resilient, and

transformative. Their stories are not only testimonies of personal growth but blueprints for inclusive, values-driven and sustainable leadership.

They show that leadership is not a title—it is a practice of showing up, speaking truth, and holding space for others.

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The Ubele Initiative
Wolves Lane Centre
Wolves Lane
London N22 5JD

www.ubele.org.uk

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