

SAATHI HOUSE STORIES

A 40 YEAR JOURNEY **B6**

Mashkura Begum



**“What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments,
but what is woven into the lives of others.” - Pericles**

*This book is dedicated to
Liz Anderton, Ann Knight, Fareda Begh and Tahmina Islam;
and the many other staff and volunteers who worked tirelessly at Saathi House.*



SaathiHouse

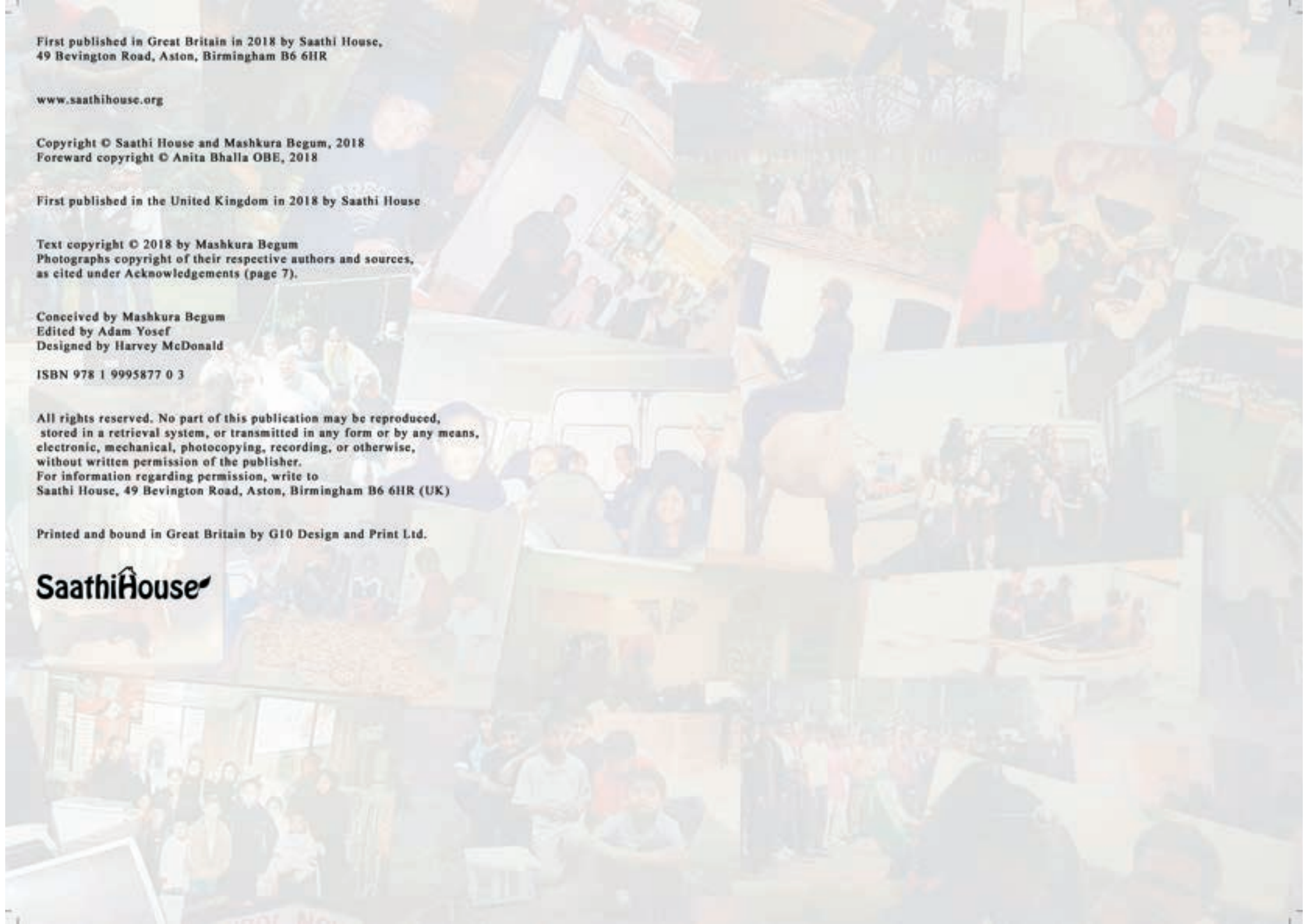
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49 Bevington Road, Aston, Birmingham B6 6HR

www.saathihouse.org

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SaathiHouse



Contents

Acknowledgements	07
Foreword	08
Preface	09
Ammo Talwar MBE	13
Rahima Ahammed	17
Afia Khatun	21
Basharat Najib	25
Kadeja Hussain	31
Shahak Miah	35
Habij Ali	39
Khusru Khan	43
Phil Hamilton	47
Thasmim Ali	53
Shahinul Islam	57
Apsana Khatun	61
Bahar Uddin	65
Suhel Obeda	69
Sue Ball	73
Shamsun Nila Choudhury	77
Dilbagh Dhami	81
Suraya Begum	85
Juma Begum	89
Rag Chand	93
Afterword	97



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Anita Bhalla is currently Chair of Performances Birmingham Ltd (Town Hall and Symphony Hall),
Board member of the Greater Birmingham and Solihull LEP, Council Member at Warwick University,
Chair of West Midlands Mayor Leadership Commission and Governor of the Royal Shakespeare Company

I was delighted to be asked to write a foreword charting the contribution Saathi House has made in bringing together the many diverse communities of Aston in Birmingham.

The Bangladeshi community were the last of the South Asian settlers to bring their families to join them in the UK even though the Sylheti male migrants were among the first arrivals in Britain since the turn of the last century.

Although one thinks about the contribution of Saathi House primarily as supporting vulnerable Bangladeshi groups, it in fact played a pivotal role in bringing together many other communities, people of all colours and all faiths. Over four decades it has provided practical support and assistance for those needing social, welfare, economic, housing and immigration advice. More significantly, it has also supported many hundreds of women and young people to find their voice in a safe and protective environment.

During this time those workers at Saathi House have managed to keep it relevant in a rapidly shifting inner city environment by updating their approach and interventions to engage with a vast range of groups and a complex mix of issues. It is for good reason that it has a reputation for always being known as a listening organisation.

Staff at Saathi House were truly multi- skilled – acting as advice workers, mentors, representatives, teachers and friends (saathis) to many generations, sometimes within the same family. Looking back we can trace a number of Saathi House's women and young people now making significant contributions to the civic, economic and cultural life of the city, region and even further afield – many of them say with pride that without that earlier support they would not have been able to go on to become engineers, civil servants, lawyers, entrepreneurs, community workers, teachers and the kind of citizens who give stature to the cultural, social, economic and political life of our city.

Saathi House's contributions to the creation of a tolerant and just society can neither be underestimated nor forgotten.

Anita Bhalla OBE



Preface

About this book

Reflecting on the past to prepare for the future is a valuable tool. This 40th anniversary allows us a timely occasion to reflect on the journey of Saathi House, and an opportunity to hear from users of our services in the form of their stories as outlined in this book.

This book is a collection of twenty stories from wide ranging individuals about their journeys and how Saathi House shaped their direction of travel. I have no idea how many people, adults and children we have worked with over the last 40 years, but it would be many tens of thousands over many hundreds of thousands of hours.

This book is not a history of our organisation, it is a snapshot of the personal stories of our users, and we have utilised oral history as a methodology to capture the stories.

Each individual story briefly details that individual's childhood, transition to adulthood, their aspirations and why they feel Saathi House was pivotal to their life.

Even within these narrow confines it isn't complete; there wasn't space for everything and everyone but big birthdays are a time for reviewing the big picture and for taking stock. Here, at 40, we look back, we reflect and we look ahead.

And so, over these four decades, Saathi House has shown what can be achieved by a small community organisation willing to act as a local anchor and work with the community, for the community.

We hope you will enjoy reading this book, and that it will encourage other organisations like Saathi House to realise the important role grassroots organisations play in nurturing their users.

Forty years on, we're still "still here". Much has changed around us, but many of the issues that we were founded to address continue to affect impoverished lives across Aston and neighbouring areas.

As long as the cause endures, this book is less reminiscence, more a reminder why it's crucial we do what we do. We hope it's useful.



Mashkura on a Saathi House trip to the Cheddar Caves





Preface

Introduction

Home is defined in the Oxford dictionary as "a building for any purpose". We want to tell you about a "house" that is based in Aston, Birmingham – Saathi House.

Saathi House is a charity situated in the heart of Aston. The organisation was set up in 1977 and was initially known as the "St James Language Project" because of its focus on teaching English to women and young children arriving mainly from South Asia.

In 1982 the organisation was re-christened as Saathi House. The name was a reflection of what the organisation meant to the people who used its services – "friendship"

"Saathi" means friend in most of the South Asian languages and that is what Saathi House became to personify. Friendship.

It would be difficult to talk about Saathi House without mentioning some of the key figures who were instrumental in setting up the organisation and its subsequent success. Liz Anderton was one of the founders and everyone who had anything to do with Saathi House in its first twenty years would have engaged with her; she was the backbone and was seen as a trail blazer. Her legacy lives through her work, and through the women and young people she worked with.

Other notable figures include Ann Knight, Fareda Begh and Tahmina Islam. These women worked in very challenging environments and had multiple resistances in particular from the patriarchal mindset of many of the men and community on the whole.

Yet they remained committed and resolute to bring about change in the lives of all those they worked with. These women knocked on doors to ensure the women and young people in Aston were participating in activities and were able to access opportunities. These women were pioneers!





Preface

During the last four decades Saathi House served thousands of families that lived in or around Aston. In fact it would not be an exaggeration to say that almost all families that lived in Aston during the past 40 years would have had some form of contact or know someone who accessed Saathi House's services.

One of the most striking aspects about Saathi House is its geographical location. Saathi House was based at the heart of Aston, a Victorian house situated in a residential heartland played a huge part in the organisation being a safe haven.

We all know Aston for many great things; including being the home of Ozzy Osbourne (Black Sabbath lead singer), the iconic Aston Hall, and the former HP Sauce factory (now home of East End foods). The ward also hosts Aston Villa Football Club and coincidentally gives its name to Aston University, a campus which is not in Aston but actually located to the far south of the area, in Birmingham city centre.

Aston Villa has played at Villa Park since 1897 and it has traditionally been one of the largest football grounds in England, staging many notable matches at club and international level. Aston even shares its name with a supercar, the famous "Aston Martin" that we all know and love thanks to James Bond!

Aston has a strong identity within Birmingham, both for positive and at times negative reasons. But most importantly the area is well known for its diversity and attracting migrant communities, it is an area where new communities felt welcome and made their chosen home.

Much of Aston consists of lovely terraced houses that were built during the Victorian era. The houses were for factory workers and their families who worked in the nearby manufacturers such as Newman Tonks, Crocodile Works, IMI and others.

Saathi House provided essential character building experiences for its users; the majority of young people and women that were asked what Saathi House meant to them stated it was an anchor organisation that changed the course of their life.

It filled the gaps that their parents couldn't fill in terms of advice, guidance and providing opportunities that were ordinarily reserved for well to do families, such as camping, sporting activities and day trips.

Saathi House provided safe space for young people and women. The staff who were seen as family members by most users, understood and had real empathy for the turmoil young black and minority ethnic people were going through growing up in Aston during the 1980s.

Saathi House has provided services/activities such as: Homework Clubs, English Classes, Computer Classes, Arts & Crafts, Youth Clubs, Parenting Workshops, Welfare and Benefit Advice, Counselling, Career Advice & Guidance, and Skills Development.

The main focus has always been in capacity building and raising aspirations; providing young people and women with hope, ambition and the self believe that anything was and is possible!

As well as nurturing doctors, lawyers, engineers, and accountants; Saathi House was a catalyst for inspiring many civic, political and business leaders, dynamic homemakers, dedicated teachers, inspiring community workers, energetic youth workers and all round great citizens.

It is never easy to articulate or quantify the impact Saathi House has had on the lives on the thousands of young people and women who have benefitted from the services provided.

Over the years Saathi House has organically evolved, has always been responsive to the needs of the community and kept itself relevant. Saathi House has been instrumental in building social capital. Everyone we spoke to is a testament to this.

As a final note, there are so many amazing local charities making a positive impact every day, and yet, oftentimes we don't hear enough about them or their needs. Opportunities like this publication provide us with a glimpse into their greatness.

Mashkura Begum



Ammo Talwar MBE

Tell us a bit about yourself...

I am the youngest of three, with an older brother and sister and an extended family spread across Aston and Handsworth. I have 56 first cousins and grew up on Beacon Hill, Aston, on the corner of the Trinity Road and Witton Road junction.

Tell us about your childhood and how it was growing up in Aston?

Growing up in Aston, Prince Albert and Broadway schools were closest to me, but I was sent to Lozells Primary School because of Talwar family tradition. My walk to school was never boring, and the Six Ways Island was my daily challenge. Back then it wasn't the norm for anyone from Aston to navigate the Island for primary school and it felt like I was crossing a 'border'.

Aston Manor was my secondary school, with classmates of mostly Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage. Indian families in 1980s Aston was a minority within a minority, so my network of friends was naturally diverse. Hanging out in Aston Park, we were a mixed group of working class English, Caribbean and South Asian kids. It felt balanced; no-one group was in a majority, and because we lived in a naturally diverse community, racism was virtually non-existent at school.

Saathi House and my school reflected the area I grew up in, and everybody knew everybody. We used to play cricket on Grange Road, and if we broke someone's window, we knew our parents would ultimately find out; there was no getting away from it. There was a huge sense of community and unison in the area that cut across religion and ethnicity. We didn't really understand differences, and it was only when we started out at college transport travelling further on public transport that we began to realise the world wasn't just a bigger





***“Saathi House had a huge impact on me,
both personally and professionally.”***



Ammo Talwar MBE



Ammo with some of his family members

Young Aston lads from my generation would invariably be involved in "minding" cars on match days. Every Saturday when the Villa played at home, "away" fans who didn't know any better would pay us pennies to keep an eye on their cars. The reality was we never looked after anything, we just sat on walls and ate the Tip Tops and Jaw Breakers we bought with their money.

It was an amazing area that had a profound effect on my values and how we see things now in contemporary Britain. I mentioned we didn't understand racism but certain things made us uncomfortable. King Edward's Grammar School was on our doorstep but it was gated, so we never knew what was going on within the building. In essence in Aston we shared everything and most buildings, whether places of worship or businesses, they were open to all. The school was physically closed to us and that made us feel different. Aston Hall was another place that felt closed to the community during that period and we were happy believing it was haunted.

At what stage in your life were you involved with Saathi House?

Saathi House was a second home, growing up in Aston during the 1980s. My first home was obviously my actual home; our second home would be a tie between Aston Park and Saathi House. At Aston Park we played football, tennis, cricket, but we were on our own. At Saathi House there were planned activities and a sense of purpose and companionship.

Saathi House wasn't "Saathi House" to us back then; it was "Damien's". We didn't know exactly who Damien was, but we thought he was an Asian chap who worked there with a eye-catching curly perm. "Damien's" was where we spent our summer and Easter holidays. We learned to understand our bodies; our strengths and weaknesses, how to compete with and how to get along with our peers. Table tennis in particular was a great teacher. What people learn - or fail to learn - at school we learned at Saathi House.



Ammo Talwar MBE

Staff from Saathi House took us on our first trips to the city centre, the Ackers Trust, the cinema and the ice rink. I have a powerful memory of standing in a field at the Ackers and thinking I was out in the rural countryside. Obviously I know now I was in the middle of Small Heath, but as inner city kids, we had never experienced places like that. Had it not been for Saathi House, we never would. Those opportunities had a profound effect on me, shaped who I am today and ignited my passion to make positive changes in the city I love.

How did Saathi House make a mark on your personal life and professional career?

Saathi House has had a huge impact on me, both personally and professionally. Raw, authentic and beautiful, my experiences there were a powerful influence on me as I grew up. Families today have to pay substantial amounts to send their children to summer camps. For us, Saathi House was our very own summer camp, with more depth, feeling and soul. Saathi House's activities enabled me to discover the city I lived in and helped me to see Birmingham as a place of opportunity.

It was great to grow up there; great legacy and great values which without doubt shaped who I am today. I have had my own local business for over 20 years, and I follow the example set by the Saathi House team by giving back when I can, through voluntary, non-executive roles helping steer major institutions in the city, including chairing a Multi Academy Trust supporting over 4,000 children across Birmingham's diverse communities.

The openness, sharing and opportunities I experienced at Saathi House have become my values, values which I share with an extended family of new people. I plan to ensure those values stick with us and don't become just hobbies.





Rahima Ahammed

Tell us a bit about yourself...

My father migrated to the UK from Bangladesh in 1952 and worked in the steel factory in Sheffield. He moved to Birmingham in the 1960s, I was born in Birmingham's City Hospital, which was known as Dudley Road Hospital back then. I have a twin brother.

I attended Prince Albert school for a year and then my father decided to go and live in Bangladesh for a few years so that me and my siblings could learn Bengali and understand our heritage and culture.

We returned back to Birmingham in 1982, having spent eight years in Bangladesh. When I returned I was unable to speak any English and therefore had to go to a language school that was known as the Steward Centre before eventually attending mainstream school.

The pick up point for children going to the Steward Centre from Aston was at the front of Saathi House. A coach picked us up and then took us all to Harbourne where the centre was based. I found my time at the Steward Centre really productive. As well as learning English we were also taught how to use our cutlery and about British values and etiquette.

Due to attending the Steward Centre, I joined secondary school in Year 8. As soon as I finished secondary school, I got married. I had just turned 17 and moved to Cambridge where I lived for good few years before recently moving back to Birmingham.

At what stage in your life where you involved with Saathi House?

I started to attend Saathi House towards the end of 1982. During that period Farida Begh, Liz Anderton and Tahmina Islam were working there; for me Saathi house was my 'Sanctuary'. I clearly remember attending the girls club every Tuesday 4pm to 6pm. Although the sessions finished at 6pm we always took our time tidying up so that we could stay for an extra bit of time.

I had no issues attending Saathi House, my parents understood. However, many of my friends didn't have it so easy; they had restrictions, Fareda and Liz had to go and meet the parents and convince them to allow their daughters to attend the girls group.

I didn't have any qualifications when I got married, as was the norm for most of people I knew from my generation. Soon after I got married and had my children I wasn't satisfied with my life and living in Cambridge meant every time I went out I saw students with their books and their gowns on during graduation. I had a yearning for learning and eventually I was motivated enough to enrol for an access course which I completed and passed.





“The way I would describe it was like having our brains stretched, we were empowered to the extent that we actually felt and believed the world was our oyster.”



Rahima Ahammed

I then applied to Cambridge University and got a place there to read Sociology and Geography. For me one of the happiest and proudest moments was when I got accepted at Cambridge, the daughter of a factory worker, an inner city Asian girl with no former qualifications attending one of the most well respected educational institutions was what dreams were made of!

Whilst at university I found managing my family and student life balance challenging, I had very little support. That period was the most profound time for me; I discovered my faith, spirituality, identity and got to know myself.



How did Saathi House make a mark on your personal life and professional career?

Saathi House shaped our roots. The staff at Saathi House worked extremely hard on us; we were constantly introduced to new ideas and experiences. The way I would describe it was like having our brains stretched, we were empowered to the extent that we actually felt and believed the world was our oyster.

The staff ensured we did regular outdoor activities such as picnics at the local parks, visiting the Botanical Gardens, ice-skating and seaside trips. As young girls we experienced and explored the outdoors, that made us assertive and confident. We were also provided with practical skills such as sewing, arts and crafts.

All this made us self-sufficient and prepared us for adulthood. The staff at Saathi House allowed us to develop mentally and taught us how to challenge barriers and that was the key reason why I wasn't satisfied and couldn't settle for a life simply as a housewife.

Most of my friends that attended Saathi House - during the time I did - had a very similar journey as mine. We all got married young and had children but we were adamant to fulfil our full potential, Saathi House staff had sown the seed of curiosity and inquisitiveness and what most of us did was water the seed which eventually grew and flourished.





Afia Khatun

Tell us about yourself...

I am the oldest of six siblings; I got married at the age of 22 and have four children. My interests includes sewing, cooking and gardening. Recently I have started to enjoy running and I took part in a 5k run!

I attended the local primary Prince Albert and Yew Tree schools and then went on to study at Broadway Secondary School.

At what stage in your life where you involved with Saathi House?

I got involved with Saathi House at the age of eight or nine. I was involved intensely up until I went to college. Once I was at college although I was not a regular attendee at all the sessions, I got support from trustees and staff in motivating me to continue with higher studies and providing me with tailored career support.

My experience of growing up in inner city Birmingham was no different from that of my peers. The norm was for girls to complete their secondary school and then get married. Thankfully I did not have those restrictions. Saathi House allowed me to engage in things that I was not able to do at home. The trips, outings and other activities that we did shaped our world view and enabled us to think outside of the ordinary.

How was your transition into adulthood?

I always had the aspiration to study; I enjoyed studying and looked forward to experiencing college and university. My main driver was the prospect of having a professional career and being economically independent. Saathi House played a great role in helping me achieve that goal.



Afia and a friend enjoying camping.



“Saathi House gave me the confidence to be myself; it was the most basic things like the ability to go out on my own, take a lead on planning for activities and volunteering.”



Afia Khatun



I clearly remember when I turned 16 my parents were not keen that I continue to go to college. Although my parents were open minded and supportive they had pressure from neighbours and other family members to not allow me to go to college. At that stage I requested Fareda 'kala' (aunty) to talk to my parents.

Fareda kala came to my house and sat my parents down and explained the importance of girls studying. My parents took that advice on board. The reason my parents agreed was due to the fact that over the years they got to know Fareda Kala and trusted her judgement, in particular my mum who also attended Saathi House to learn English and for other activities, she knew Fareda Kala always had the best intention for us all.

I went to college and completed my A Levels and then went to university to read Chemistry. My degree was a four-year sandwich course. During my placement year I worked in a research and development laboratory and really enjoyed that experience.

Once I graduated, I went to Bangladesh and met my husband there, we got married. I stayed in Bangladesh for a while and then came back to Birmingham and had the arduous task of applying for my husband's visa. I needed to find work quickly! Fortunately the place where I did my placement offered me a job. I worked there for some time and then got a job with the Bangladesh Council.

The Bangladesh Council was an umbrella organisation, one of the achievements I look back at during my time there was that of setting up a community centre in Aston for marginalised communities. What really motivated me to set up the centre was my experience of Saathi House and how it shaped and nurtured me. I experienced first hand the benefit of having a place where I could go and feel safe and be supported. That project for me was a small way of giving back.



Afia Khatun

How did Saathi House make a mark on your personal life and professional career?

The key impact Saathi House had on me personally was it developed me.

Saathi House gave me the confidence to be myself; it was the most basic things like the ability to go out on my own, take a lead on planning for activities and volunteering. One experience that was a game changer for me was a camping trip to Derbyshire.

It was a surreal experience for me and all the other participants. It was the first time we were in the countryside. We found it character building, we gained some of the most valuable life skills during that one trip. What was small tasks like preparing the food, setting up tents and ensuring the group stayed together, required patience, organisation skills and the ability to communicate. Those skills that I gained allowed me to build on and helped with my personal and professional career.

Looking back, I have had a very enjoyable life, I have done things I enjoyed. I am not afraid to do things I desire. Having worked in research and development, I moved to community work and then I trained as a teacher and did my PGCE and taught for a number of years. I am currently taking a break and enjoying spending time with my children, but I am constantly looking for the next challenge!





Bashrat Najib

Tell us a bit about yourself...

My name is Bashrat Najib, I am 44 years old. I have eight siblings. I have lived and grew up in Aston, Birmingham, for almost all my life.

Tell us about your childhood...

I had a very happy and carefree childhood. I hardly faced any trouble at school. I had elder brothers who were all at school at the same time as me so I never felt isolated. I had a very strong support network, also socially I never felt lonely, I had my friends and brothers.

I know some of my peer groups at times faced racism. However, since I was of mixed heritage and I did not 'look' Asian or Pakistani, I did not encounter racism. On the other hand, all my peers knew I was Pakistani so I did not have any trouble from the Asian boys. During the early 1980s there was segregation; but that did not filter into schools. At school, my friends were of all backgrounds and to date I have had Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Punjabi and African Caribbean friends and of course, English friends.

I went to Broadway School; my education was different from how it is today. Back then it was mainly about just attending school. From a young age my life revolved around going to school and then after I'd go to Madrassa (mosque). I felt my entire day was spent on education. So I had very little recreational time.

How was your transition into adulthood?

After school I got a job in a factory, I was around people who were 40-50 years old, more than double my age. I was constantly around people who experienced much more than me; being in that environment made me mature rapidly. I also got married at a very young age. For me being in full time employment, getting married and having faith helped my transition into adulthood relatively simple.

Looking back, now I feel I was lucky to have several mentors who supported, guided and helped me transition into adulthood. At the time I did not realise or call them 'mentors', but now I realise that's exactly what they were.





***"The best things in life are not free;
the best thing in life is to be free.
Saathi House, in my eyes, provided that freedom."***



Bashrat Najib

At what stage in your life where you involved with Saathi House?

At the age of 11, I got involved with Saathi House. During that period the place was unofficially known as "Damien's Place", this was around 1983.

It was strange, I never met this Damien person yet all of us that attended Saathi House during that period knew it as Damien's Place. We later found out Damien was in fact one of the very first youth workers at Saathi House and his name was Dilbagh Dhami, a Punjabi, Sikh man.

My first involvement was on a camping trip. This was a profoundly different experience for me, three days away from home, away from my parents and siblings. Out in the open with friends doing something that was unheard of in the Asian community.

Camping trips was not something we were familiar with, the experience is still etched in my mind. I enjoyed it so much.





Bashrat Najib

How did Saathi House make a mark on your personal life and professional career?

For me Saathi House became a place where friends could sit in comfort with security knowing we were in a protected environment. We had workers we looked up to and respected. The first youth worker I met was Phil Hamilton, 30 years later we are still best of friends; he was one of my earliest mentors.

At the age of 16, I came to the end of my time as a service user at Saathi House, at that juncture I was asked to become a volunteer; an opportunity I gladly took up on. I felt I had the ability to "control and manage the young people". When I said that to the senior staff Abdul Gaffar, he said to me we never use the word "control", we work with young people and try and understand their journey. That incident, though small, left an indelible mark on my mind, and has helped shape me personally and professionally.

One of Saathi House's main successes was in attracting some of the best youth and community development workers. Many people started at Saathi House and gained experience and moved onto much more high-profile and strategic jobs or roles.

Personally, I did not have high career aspirations. All I ever wanted was to be able to be happy in life. I just did whatever felt right at the time. I did not have a big master plan for my career. All my skills have been acquired from the variety of work I have done. But I have to mark out Saathi House for providing me with some invaluable skills and experience that helped me professionally.





Bashrat Najib



In 2003, I was made redundant, I was 31 years old and at that point I was approached by a group of young people who felt disengaged and did not have much to do. That is when I set up a charity called "Voice of Aston".

The ethos of my organisation stemmed from Saathi House. At Voice of Aston, there was cross cultural socialising, banter, and there was cohesion within the building so everyone got on.

We put in a pool table, table tennis table, dart board and various board games just like Saathi House. In essence, I emulated everything I did and learnt at Saathi House. During that period I found I was re-living my youth and, as the Youth Coordinator of Voice of Aston I realised I became who I was.

Saathi House has stood test of time, and that is because of its strong foundation. The founders Liz and Ms Knight had visions in the late 1970s that were ahead of their time.

For example, I recall during the 1980s, there were a group of young 16 and 17 year olds that were selected as board members. These individuals were part of the decision making processes. That was radical thinking in the 1980s!





Kadeja Hussain

Tell us a bit about yourself...

I was born in Birmingham at City Hospital in 1988. My father migrated to the UK from Bangladesh in 1962 and my mum and older siblings joined him in the UK during early 1980s. I am the youngest in my family I have five elder siblings. I am married with one son. I have lived, studied and worked in Birmingham.

I grew up in Perry Barr and went to the local primary school and subsequently attended Broadway Secondary School.

How was your transition into adulthood?

Whilst growing up I wanted to work in a job that involved working with people, I decided at a young age that I didn't want to do 9-5 office work where I would be desk bound. That early decision eliminated a fair few career options.

I recall when I was in year 11, as part of our work experience week, I had an interview with the Head of Youth Services from Birmingham City Council, while most of my friends chose to be interviewed by Managers from the corporate sector or those from medical and other related sectors. I was one of the very few that chose to be interviewed by a youth worker.

To this day I have my interview feedback sheet it was very positive. In many ways, that one incident gave me the drive and motivation to carry on doing the work I enjoyed.

My aspiration to work with people also stemmed from seeing some of my family members doing it and thoroughly enjoying it, at times I couldn't believe they were getting paid for something they enjoyed so much.

Looking back, it's apparent it was hard work but the effortless way some of my family members worked made it look simplistic.



***"Saathi House has
survived the test of
time because it
moved with time."***





Kadeja Hussain



At what stage in your life where you involved with Saathi House?

My involvement with Saathi House has been two fold. I was initially a service user and then I was employed by Saathi House. I had always known about Saathi House, my mum and my elder sisters were involved with the organisation even before I was born!

I initially started to attend Saathi House at the age of 11. I was part of the girls' youth group known as the Saturday Club, up until the age of 16.

My fondest memory of Saathi House was simply being able to come to the place. It may seem bizarre but I don't have any one fond memory, for me coming to Saathi House most Saturdays and feeling comfortable in a home like environment and being able to spend time with my friends in a safe space was some of my fondest memories.

At the age of 19, I started to work for Saathi House on part time basis. My role entailed working with women in areas of health and wellbeing. I was seeing participants for one issue but during the interventions so much additional needs were identified. I always felt I had to further develop my skills and equip myself to help clients in a more meaningful way.

Through my work at Saathi House, I realised there was a need for more trained counsellors who understood South Asian women's needs and experiences. At that point I had just completed my first year of an Architecture degree but my experiences at Saathi House catalysed my interest in doing a counselling degree. A few years ago I completed my degree and I now work as a fully qualified Counsellor.

My decision to make a career change was as a direct result of my involvement with Saathi House and working with some of the participants.



Kadeja Hussain



How did Saathi House make a mark on your personal life and professional career?

Saathi House did have an impact on me both personally and professionally. I have mentioned about my professional choices being influenced by Saathi House. On a personal level whilst growing up I was an introvert at school. I had a good group of friends but I was always the one who was listening seldom talking.

I felt Saathi House was a safe space where I was able to be myself and talk and relax. For me attending the Saturday Club empowered me to come out of my shell and be more forthcoming.

Working at Saathi house also made me realise I was not someone that was motivated by money, some of my most rewarding moments were when I was able to support someone and get them the results they wanted or just simply translating someone's letter.

As crazy as it may sound but often just seeing women come to Saathi house and feel at ease and for us staff to be able to offer a cup of tea felt much more rewarding than earning big money!

Saathi House has survived the test of time because it moved with time and always had experienced staff and volunteers and had great resources. The organisation always listened to its service users and tried its best to meet communities' needs.

Saathi House from the outside is just another building but the moment you walk through the front door, it transforms itself to a warm and safe space with familiar faces, a place that is homely a place that is fun where friends come together and learn together; and that's how we and all felt.





Shahak Miah

Tell us a bit about yourself...

I was born in Bangladesh; my family came to the UK to join my dad. I was seven years old when we came to Birmingham. I am the youngest of three siblings; I have one older brother and sister.

How was your transition into adulthood?

I lived in Aston for most of my growing up years. I attended Yew Tree Primary School and then went to Broadway Secondary School. Growing up in Aston was interesting there were the obvious risks but there were also opportunities, one had to find ways of navigating through them.

The norm when I was growing up was for young boys as young as 16 to start working full time in the catering industry, namely Indian restaurants, and earned what back then felt like a good wage. But my story was different; my father who I am eternally grateful to had aspirations for his children to become professionals. In terms of finances my father always told us not to worry about the finances, he will somehow manage, so he gave us the free will to choose a path we wanted to.

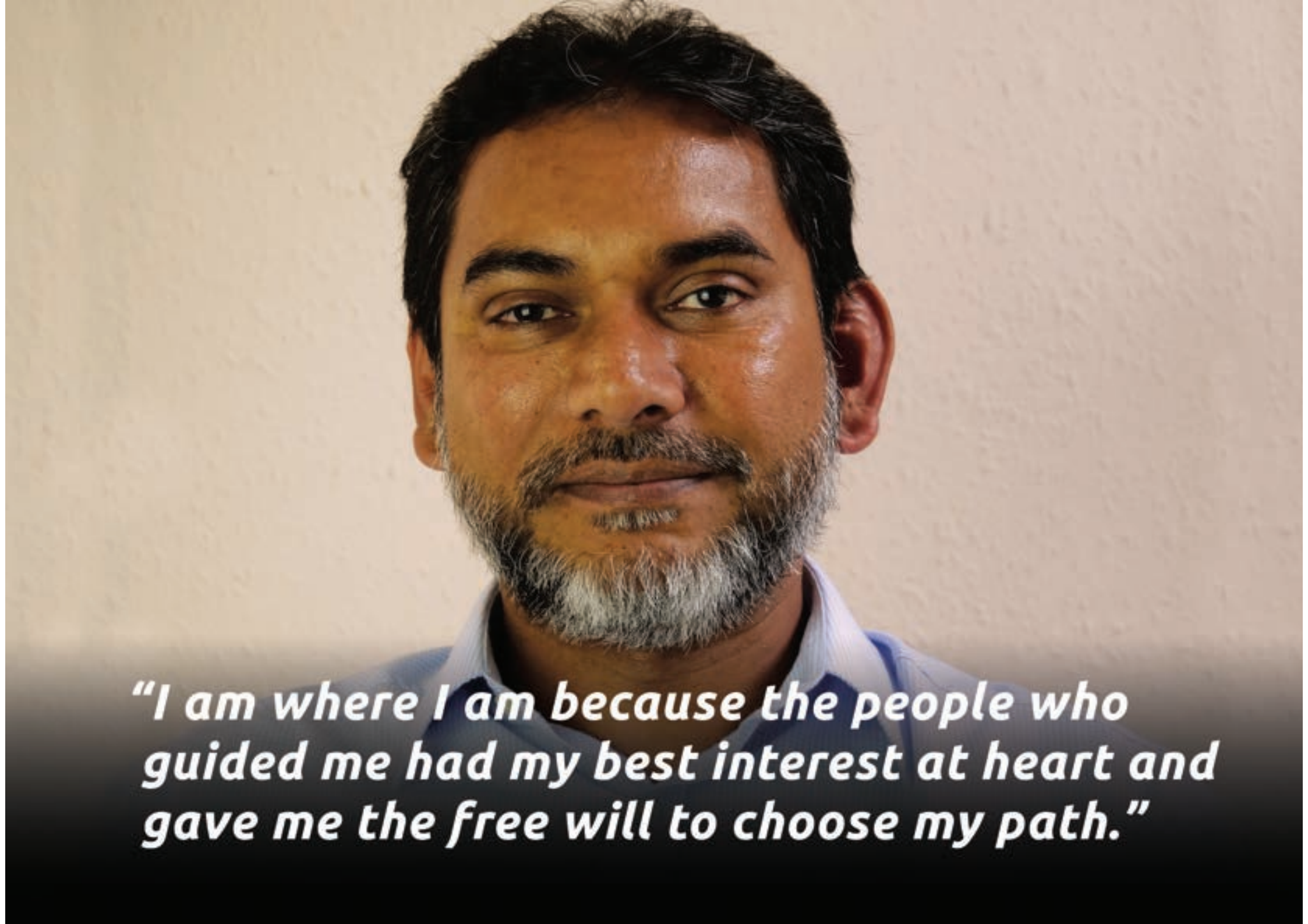
I recall when we were growing up there were instances when friends wanted me and my brother to go out and play with them but if we had homework or revision to do we would tell them we had to study, we got a lot of jibing by friends during those times and often friends said they will see where studies will take us with sarcasm. In many ways those instances motivated and drove us to do well.

As a family we struggled in terms of finances, my dad was the only one earning and he had a lot responsibility on him. My dad also faced his friends' and communities jibes and was often told why he didn't send me and my brother to work. We both were 'eligible to work and earn' so why was my dad struggling on his own?

At what stage in your life where you involved with Saathi House?

I got involved with Saathi House at the beginning of secondary school. For me, my father was my first inspiration; and if it wasn't for him I would not be where I am, and secondly, Saathi House played a key role in supporting me.



A close-up portrait of a man with dark hair and a grey beard, looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. He is wearing a light blue shirt. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

"I am where I am because the people who guided me had my best interest at heart and gave me the free will to choose my path."



Shahak Miah



How did Saathi House make a mark on your personal life and professional career?

At the time when I was being supported by Saathi House, it didn't feel like life was changing, although it did feel like a place I could get help. For example, with homework my dad wasn't able to support me so Saathi House had individuals that were able to help; we had meaningful career advice as well as many other snippets of things like morality, and providing us with discipline and understanding boundaries. All these aspects were initiated by Saathi House and were ingrained in all those that participated; be it at the homework club, youth club or other activities. We were taught life lessons but in a very light way so it didn't feel preachy.

Currently, I am a Telecom Design Engineer; I do some voluntary work and would like to do more. For me, Saathi House had both personal and professional impact. I simply would not be where I am without Saathi House's intervention. I had a very supportive father but he did not have the expertise to guide me in my education, and Saathi House did that.

My initial years of study at secondary school were a challenge, but with Saathi House's support, I was able to overcome these challenges. Once I completed my GCSEs and went to college, I was in a much better position and got into a natural flow and excelled. At the end of college, I had achieved the National Diploma and also was the Student of the Year. I was recognised for my achievements. At this stage my secondary school found out and capitalised on my achievement, I remember they wrote about my achievements in their newsletter and were proud to call me their ex-student.



Shahak Miah



I am where I am because the people who guided me had my best interest at heart and gave me the free will to choose my path. Also it was important for me to see the individuals who were guiding me were 'living' the things that they were teaching us for example they had high moral values, were very disciplined and had utmost integrity. These aspects left a defining impact on my then young mind.

I have always put in a lot of hard work and effort in everything I did; it was not about taking the easy way out. It was a hard path but the journey was definitely worth it in the end.





Habij Ali

Tell us a bit about yourself...

I was born in Bangladesh; I arrived in the UK at the age of four. We lived in Lozells for 12 years I went to Lozells Primary School and then Holte School. During my teens we moved to Aston and I'm still in the area.

After I left secondary school, I took a gap year from studying I worked in restaurants and then attended Joseph Chamberlain College and then went to what is now part of the University of Birmingham and then Westhill College to do a Youth and Community Work degree.

I currently work as a Mentoring Officer at Birchfield Community School in Aston.

At what stage in your life where you involved with Saathi House?

I was around 12 or 13 when I first started coming to Saathi House. I initially came during the summer holidays mainly to play football and get involved in the other outdoor activities and trips.

I think if it was not for those opportunities and interventions whether through Saathi house or some of the other organisations I was involved with, I could have possibly been involved in negative things.

I wouldn't be where I am today; my experiences shaped who I am.





"For me if there is one thing that I learned from my involvement with Saathi House it would be my ability to understand and connect with people."



Habij Ali

How did Saathi House make a mark on your personal life and professional career?

Currently I am in a good environment; unfortunately many of my friends are not as lucky as me, I have had organisations and people to guide and develop me.

For me, the most amazing thing about Saathi House is its ability to stay relevant even after 40 years. Some time ago my mum attended Saathi House, and she participated in various activities. She acquired many interests from attending Saathi House, for example, she went fruit picking for the first time with the ladies' group, as well as swimming. She has continued with those interests. Now, every year, as a family we all go fruit picking. She organises a small group of ladies and they all go swimming together on a regular basis. Although she doesn't attend Saathi House as regularly now due to poor health, she has continued undertaking some of the activities she did with Saathi House, she has incorporated it in her everyday life. This demonstrates the behavioural and lifestyle changes Saathi House initiated through its programmes.

Now my children and nieces attend the Saturday Club at Saathi House, within my family three generations have used and benefited from Saathi House's services and anchoring.

After I qualified as a Youth Worker, I worked at Saathi House for two summers. It was a great opportunity for me to hone my skills and develop myself and also a great ground for understanding communities and people. For me, if there is one thing that I learned from my involvement with Saathi House it would be my ability to understand and connect with people in particular, young people - and interestingly that is a key area of my job now, to work and understand young people.



*Dilbagh Dhami (centre)
with friends*



Khusru Khan

Tell us a bit about yourself...

I was born in Bangladesh; my parents migrated to the UK in 1982. I was 11 years old when I arrived here. I did my primary education in Bangladesh. I come from a working class family; my father was a factory worker. I grew up in inner city Aston and Lozells in Birmingham.

How was your transition into adulthood?

I joined Prince Albert School in year 6 and then attended Broadway Secondary School. My year group were the first year that undertook the newly formed GCSE exams. After I completed my GCSEs, I went to Great Barr Sixth Form to do my A Levels.

Due to my age I didn't qualify for Language School I had to join primary school immediately after we arrived in the UK and, as a result, I struggled with English, in particular I found my GCSE's and A 'Levels challenging. Throughout my early and teenage years I struggled with English with little support from school. Once I went to university, I worked on improving my written English and had a much better understanding of the fundamentals.

Many of my peers from my generation went into the restaurant trade, I also worked in restaurants for a period. However, my parents were keen that me and my siblings get into professional jobs. On one occasion my mum visited a relative's restaurant and saw first-hand the hard work that one needs to do, especially the kitchen staff. After that visit my mother was adamant me and brother refrain from getting into restaurant work.



Boys from the Homework Club visiting the Houses of Parliament



***"Saathi House has had a profound impact on me;
it has been instrumental in providing
me the exposure to the voluntary sector,
and the importance of volunteering and giving time."***



Khusru Khan

I attended Salford University and read Mechanical Engineering. Once I graduated in the 1990s there was a recession, so I couldn't wait around for the right opportunity. I had financial responsibilities; especially as I was the eldest in my family I felt the pressure to start earning. At that point I decided to do PGCE at Warwick University. Undertaking the PGCE was a great challenge, it helped me improve my communication skills.

I worked as a teacher for a few years and in 1998, I decided to re-train as a social worker. I had a placement with Rochdale Council, who sponsored my studies and also provided me with a placement. I worked in Rochdale before moving back to Birmingham in 2003, and took up a Senior Social workers role with Birmingham City Council.



At what stage in your life where you involved with Saathi House?

I started attending Saathi House from 1983, I recall I had just started at secondary school and required help with my homework and that's how I got involved with Saathi House.

How did Saathi House make a mark on your personal life and professional career?

Saathi House has had a profound impact on me; it has been instrumental in providing me the exposure to the voluntary sector, and the importance of volunteering and giving time. After I had graduated I joined Saathi House as a volunteer; I was part of a small cadre that were trained for a full year to become trustees. Through this training I had the opportunity to learn about how charities operated and about roles and responsibilities of trustees. Once I completed my training I became a trustee of Saathi House and remained so for a few years. Following on from Saathi House, I have had a number of other trustee and non-executive roles. Looking back, my one year training with Saathi House provided me with all the crucial skills, knowledge and experience I required as a trustee. My training has enabled me to volunteer for many other voluntary organisations and has allowed me to set up my own charity.

I have many fond memories of Saathi House, in particular the outdoor activities were always so much fun but more importantly each outing provided us with immense life lessons. I recall in 1995, Liz drove a group of us to the Lake District for three nights, for most of us it was the first time away from home. Liz always used those outings to give us 'pep talk' and indirectly mentor us, back then we didn't realise the importance of those talks and experiences but now on reflection it is obvious that played a key part in shaping our personal and professional journeys.

I am really grateful for everything I have done and have achieved, but I have no plans to slow down. I've been inspired by Saathi House and as a result I continuously strive to do something for the community, I never sit still.





Phil Hamilton

Tell us a bit about yourself...

I am second generation migrant; my father came to the UK in 1951 from a small island called St. Kitts in the Caribbean.

I was born in the Caribbean in 1956. Not long after I was born, my father re-married again and I came to the UK with my father and step-mother. My relationship with my father and his wife was an interesting one, my father worked from 2am to 10am and my step mother worked from 2pm until 6pm, we hardly saw each other and the only time we all came together as a family was on the Sundays.

I grew up in Aston, Birmingham. I went to both primary and secondary school in the area. I was not very academic, but on the insistence of my father who was keen I study, I tried my best at school. I recall growing up in Aston during the 1970s early 80s. It was a profound experience.


Every Saturday we had to get all our shopping and chores done by 2pm because the football fans would be out. We had to stay at home from 2pm till at least 6pm every match days.

Our life came to a standstill on match days. In case we went out we would be abused racially by skinheads.

I vividly remember an incident as I was walking back from the Aston Park I encountered some boys from King Edward's Grammar School in Aston, they were all white. I was on my own and they decided to pick on me, I ran for my life and managed to get home.

My dad saw the incident from his bedroom window and asked me to go out and deal with the situation. I guess we had to learn the hard way, those were tough times. I feel those events made me more resilient and helped me in my work.



A man with short dark hair, wearing a dark blue polo shirt, is smiling broadly with his eyes closed. He is positioned on the right side of the frame. The background is a soft-focus outdoor scene with green foliage.

“Saathi House for me was an ‘Open House’, a place that was open to all from all background and with different interests.”



Phil Hamilton



Saathi House Football Team

How was your transition into adulthood?

As soon as I completed secondary school, I did not pursue any further studies and got a job in the nearby Lucas factory. The factory made nuts and bolts amongst many other things; I was paid a handsome sum of £50 per week.

I eventually got fed up of that role and moved onto working for Land Rover in Solihull. Whilst at Land Rover, I got involved with the company football team; I was really good at football and loved it. During one of the matches I injured myself and had to have metal plates inserted in my leg and, as a result, I was off from work for a very long time. The guy that coached the football team had very good relationship with the Land Rover management team and he managed to get me full pay whilst I was off from work and recovering.

At what stage in your life where you involved with Saathi House?

My recovery period post operation was fairly long and I was getting bored staying at home and that is when I came across Saathi House. It was during early 1980s that I started attending what was back then known as St James Language Project, the organisation was based at Frederick Road Church. Initially, I just attended to play table tennis and pool. As the organisation got busy, it moved to Bevington Road, the current site. And it was during this period I started to spend almost all my free time at Saathi House.

The founder of Saathi House, Liz Anderton, saw my involvement and encouraged me to do the Foundation Youth Work qualification, she felt I had a natural ability to work with young people and I would personally benefit from the qualification. On Liz's behest, I did do the Foundation Course and once completed Liz offered me 2 hours paid work at Saathi House. Very rapidly, the 2 hours increased to almost full time and both my career and passion for youth work was born!



Phil Hamilton

One of the most significant things about Saathi House was that everybody felt welcome to come through the doors. I remember the name of the organisation was initially called St James' Language Project, but within a few years Liz encouraged the participants to come up with a more holistic name to reflect the diversity of the work and activities. It was the ladies group that came up with the name 'Saathi House'. Everyone embraced the name immediately and forty years on, the name still remains as iconic as it was during its infancy stages.

I don't know if there is something about Saathi House that attracted people, in essence it's only a building in a corner of rows of terraced houses but it's amazing how it shaped hundreds of people's lives and how, in a multi-cultural area, it managed to impact the whole community not just one ethnic group.

I find it amazing how back then people didn't realise the paramount importance of Saathi House's interventions on their lives, I guess that was the beauty of the organisation, it's work was unassuming but the after effects can be felt today.

From councillors to barristers, from teachers to doctors, from engineers to entrepreneurs, from youth workers to homemakers, Saathi House shaped so many young people's professional and personal life.

How did Saathi House make a mark on your personal life and professional career?

Saathi House gave me, a young man who left school with very little qualifications, the platform to find and express myself. It provided me with direction and an ability to harness my talent into something that I profoundly enjoyed. I didn't have a clue what I wanted to do with my life. But attending Saathi House and talking to the likes of Liz and Ann Knight helped me shape my career; I got a fundamental feel for what I was good at and what I enjoyed. The process was not easy or straight-forward, a lot of soul searching took place, I was challenged and so was the staff but eventually I found my sense of being.



Phil posing at his youth club!



Phil Hamilton

I have several fond memories of Saathi House, but one incident comes to mind. Saathi House had a football team and we desperately wanted a team kit. Ann Knight got us all kits from her Brazil visit. I recall on a bitterly cold morning during winter, we had a match in Sandwell Valley. Back then we travelled everywhere via bus, we got the number 74 bus from Lozells to Sandwell Valley, we had no bag to put our kit, so we put everything in a bin bag.

Due to the cold weather when the bus arrived we forgot the bag at the bus stop. Once we went to Sandwell Valley we all realised we left the kit bag at the bus stop, I decided to jump back on the bus and back to Lozells. Much to my delight the bag was still at the bus stop all covered in ice.

I got the kit and went back to Sandwell Valley and helped all the players to put the kit on, tying their laces, tightening their shin pads. Looking back, some of those boys are now barristers, engineers and in many other professional fields. It was those small incidents that help build all their characters.

As a final point, I would like to say I am just a common man, I now have children and grandchildren, I hope and pray there are places like Saathi house for my children to go and find themselves and find causes they want to focus on. I pray they find the attentive and kind spirited staff that I encountered at Saathi House during my youth.







Thasmim Ali

Tell us a bit about yourself...

I was born in Birmingham in the early 1990s. Both my grandfathers migrated to the UK during the 1950s and early 1960s. I am the eldest in my family, I have four younger siblings. I had an amazing childhood surrounded by family and friends.

I am currently in my final year of university undertaking an Engineering degree.

How was your transition into adulthood?

Having parents who were second generation migrants meant they had high aspirations for us and also had a good understanding of the education system and encouraged us to fully maximise all opportunities to develop and better ourselves. I have had a liberal upbringing and growing up, I did have the usual 'soppy teenage' years but I was fortunate to have the support system to nurture and mentor me.

I didn't have a definitive idea of what I was going to do whilst growing up, due to a house move, I changed secondary school; I initially went to Broadway School and then from Year 9 onwards I went to Handsworth Girls School. I then attended college and took a year out before I commenced Engineering School. My gap year helped me immensely; I worked and focused on things I was interested in.



"For my mum it was a way out and meeting friends and having fun, for me it was about developing my skills and enhancing my life opportunities, but in the end if you look at it, we both gained the same thing."





Thasmim Ali



*Saturday youth Club outdoor trip
Thasmim fourth from the right*

Yours is an interesting but not unique case, your mother was one of the earlier attendees of Saathi House during the 1980s. Can you explain how your experience differed from your mums, if at all it did?

My mum always encouraged me to attend Saathi House and other youth organisations that really helped and shaped who I am and understand about identity. Interestingly my mum was one of the earlier attendees of Saathi House during the 1980s. In many ways she was supported by the likes of Liz Anderton and Farida Begh and Tahmina Islam.

My mum speaks very fondly of her experience of attending Saathi House Girls Club. During her time in the 1980s there were very limited opportunities for young people to engage in social and recreational activities, Saathi House provided her that opportunity, she shared her stories with me of times when she did all her chores and was on best behaviour so that my grandparents would allow her to attend the girls group!

This was a place where my mum was able to be herself, have fun, meet friends and visit and experience new places and activities. It is a fact my mum's interest in fashion and textiles was born out of the sewing club she attended as a young girl, she is now a successful entrepreneur and owns her own clothes shop amongst other businesses.

How did Saathi House make a mark on your personal life and professional career?

For me, Saathi House was about developing my skills and bringing the best out in me. I knew that from the outset. When I was growing up, many of my social needs were being met through school and family were also organising activities which allowed me to experience different things. However, what Saathi House provided was character building, confidence, it empowered me to have the confidence to speak out and articulate my views and opinions.



Thasmim Ali

In summary, both my mum and I attended Saathi House during different periods, the social-economic environments were different. We both attended for different reasons, for my mum it was a way out and meeting friends and having fun, for me it was about developing my skills and enhancing my life opportunities; but in the end if you look at it we both gained the same thing. Confidence and self believe to be able to do what we want.



Thasmim facilitating the Saturday Club

You were initially a service user and now you deliver sessions at Saathi House, what are you doing for the young people?

I facilitate the Saturday Club and work with young people from the ages of 9 to 15 years old. I am providing the young people time away from school and home where they can be relaxed and have fun and be inhibited. I sometimes feel like a therapist, the young people will confide in me about things that they wouldn't ordinarily share with family members.

So I find that to be a big honour that they feel they can trust me but with that also comes responsibility, I have the chance to help shape the young person's world view or think about things impacting them differently. I can already see changes in the young people we work with, some have become confident, resilient and others have acquired the ability to be more expressive or vocal.

I feel I have become an all-rounder, people can be academically bright but you need to take part in social activities to develop your skills as an individual. Attending Saathi House has allowed me to speak and think confidently. It's given me the motivation to help people around me.

Simple things like looking out for my neighbours, getting involved in fundraising, that's what Saathi House has inspired me to do, it's a place where you develop both mentally and morally. I feel Saathi House has taught me to live my life with free spirit and help others without expecting anything in return.



Shahinul Islam

Tell us a bit about yourself...

My father migrated to the UK from Bangladesh in the late 1950s; we joined him when I was 11 years old. I was born in Bangladesh. We have always lived in Aston, Birmingham since arriving to the UK. I am married and have four children.

How was your transition into adulthood?


Upon arriving to the UK I was unable to speak English, I had to attend a specialist language school known as the Steward Centre before I was able to attend mainstream secondary school. I joined Broadway School in the second year (Year 8).

I completed my GCSEs and as was the norm for young boys from my generation, I joined the restaurant industry and worked at several restaurants for a number of years.

My initial experience of life in the UK was very traumatic, I had a care-free childhood in Bangladesh. However, once I came here I was unable to speak English and because of my age I wasn't able to go to primary school, I felt I was 'pushed' into secondary school with very little support. Fellow pupils made fun of those of us that couldn't speak English. Even teachers treated us differently from those that were able to speak English. There was a sense that we were dragging the school down because of our lack English proficiency.

At home I was the one of the youngest; my elder siblings are considerably older than me. My parents were aged during my formative years, so I couldn't really turn to them for support, there wasn't the culture back then of parents supporting their children with education or career guidance.



A man with dark hair, wearing a blue suit jacket over a light-colored striped shirt, is standing outdoors. He is positioned in front of a black metal fence with decorative finials. Behind the fence, a residential street is visible with several parked cars and a row of brick houses. To the right, a larger brick building with a gabled roof is partially visible. The sky is overcast. A quote is overlaid at the bottom of the image.

“Success is not an accident, it is about putting in a lot of hard work and that brings success.”



Shahinul Islam

At what stage in your life where you involved with Saathi House?

I discovered Saathi House at a pivotal phase of my life, during my transition into secondary school I struggled with 'fitting in' and completing homework. One of the things I looked forward to whilst in my early and mid-teens was the Saathi House weekend sessions. Most of the attendees were of similar background, newly arrival second generation migrants.

The two individuals that stood out for me at Saathi House were Liz Anderton and Ms Knight. Both were extremely supportive and understood what young people like us were going through. They had a real sense of empathy for us; it was easy to talk to both of them of our struggles and challenges.

Whilst I was working at a restaurant, my business partner had enrolled onto a part-time course and he encouraged me to do the same. I was 21 years old when I enrolled to do a National Diploma. Those were some of the most challenging periods for me. During the daytime I was studying, and from early evening onwards I was working. My life for those two years was work, study and a few hours of sleep.







Apsana Khatun

Tell us a bit about yourself...

In 1982 I arrived to Birmingham from Bangladesh with my mum and two elder siblings. I was one year old when we arrived. I am married and have two sons, aged eight and four.

Tell us about your childhood...

I went to Canterbury Cross Primary School and later attended Broadway Secondary School. I grew up in the Aston area of Birmingham.

During childhood and almost all my adult life I have lived in and around Aston, I have a real attachment to the area.

I had an amazing childhood, care-free and full of fun. I have five siblings, three sisters and two brothers. We lived in a small two bedroom end terraced in Aston; looking back, those were some of the most joyous times of my life.

My older two siblings were considerably older than me so I had a period when I was the youngest and made sure I took advantage of that opportunity.

How was your transition into adulthood?

I always wanted to study; my elder two siblings did not study due the environment and circumstances. However I had the opportunity and my parents were keen so I was the first one in my family to enter further and higher education.

Similarly, community work was not something that I planned on doing, rather it happened to me (as a result of a summer job I had at Saathi House).





"Saathi House prepared me for adult life. Professionally, for me, it is here where I began my journey of community work."



Apsana Khatun



Apsana with her younger sisters

Ever since I can remember, I wanted to work in the community. When I was at school, whenever there were natural disasters anywhere in the world, I got together with my friends and organised fundraising events, that yearning to help and empower people stayed with me from a young age.

At what stage in your life where you involved with Saathi House?

My involvement with Saathi House started at a very young age. My mum was a user of Saathi House's services. Back in the early 1980s, there was a team of outreach workers that knocked on our door to see if they could engage my mum in some of the activities that were on for women.

The outreach worker realised my mum had three children under the age of five (me and my two younger sisters were a few years apart) and was concerned that my mum was not getting any respite, my dad worked long hours at a manufacturing factory.

The worker arranged for a child minder to come to our house a few times a week to help look after us whilst my mum did the household chores and allowed my mum to have a much-needed break. I vaguely remember an English lady coming and playing with me and my sisters, she used to bring the most amazing toys for us. My mum thanked her by regularly giving her plate full of rice and curry which she thoroughly enjoyed!

In essence, my mum, my elder siblings, me and now my son have and are using Saathi House's services. Three generations have benefitted from the organisation. Only a few months ago, I discovered my older brother who is in his mid-forties taught at Saathi House. So it would be safe to say for us it truly was a family affair.



Apsana Khatun

How did Saathi House make a mark on your personal life and professional career?

The summer job I had at Saathi House whilst I was studying was an amazing experience; that was the catalyst for me to get into community development work. I fondly recall I organised an art exhibition with other colleagues at Saathi House, the Lord Mayor of Birmingham attended the exhibition, that was a proud moment for us all and left a positive impression on my young mind.

The primary impact Saathi House had on me was it provided me with that nudge to dream and think big and prepared me by providing essential life skills. Almost 20 years, on I am still on this journey through sixth form, university and then my professional career; I have been in #community work. A three month summer job at Saathi House prepared me, I got to understand how an office was managed. The trustees were dynamic, I learnt about managing people and working in teams.

The interesting thing about Saathi House is many charities have been set up using its model and approach. The longevity of the organisation is due to its robust systems. It has stood the test of time.

I have now re-engaged with Saathi House after a considerable time and needless to add have yet again fallen in love with what the organisation stands for and its commitment to its service users.

The only difference now for me is my son now attends the Saturday Club so now I think more like a parent service user.





Bahar Uddin

Tell us a bit about yourself...

I arrived in the UK in 1988 at the age of 11 with my mum and siblings. My dad arrived in the UK in the 1960s but unfortunately, before we could join him he passed away. Since arriving in the UK, I have lived and worked in Aston, Birmingham.

Tell us about your childhood...

I was too old to attend Primary school on arriving to the UK. However I was unable to speak English so I had to attend a specialist language school known as the Steward Centre. I attended the Steward Centre for three months and then I had to attend mainstream secondary school.

I went to Broadway School, initially I found it very challenging I was not able to speak English, all the other children went to Primary school and spoke English fluently and had friends. At times, I used to feel left out, but as time went by I made friends and overcame that.

After I completed my GCSEs I went to Matthew Boulton College (BMet) and did my A Levels. I did not pass GCSE Maths so had to re-take Maths at Sutton College. Once I completed studies at college, I secured a volunteers placement at the Bangladeshi Community Development (BCD) in Nechells, after I completed a six months volunteering placement I was offered full time employment.

At what stage in your life where you involved with Saathi House?

I started to attend Saathi House when I started at secondary school. It was a lifeline for me! I accessed the Homework Club since my family members were unable to support me at home with school work. Saathi House had the resources to help and guide me. Initially I attended just the homework club but once I found out there were other activities I got further involved.



Reading Club!



“Saathi House provided me with much needed support at a time when I had no one else to support me.”



Bahar Uddin



How did Saathi House make a mark on your personal life and professional career?

Saathi House provided me with much needed support at a time when I had no one else to support me. I had the opportunity to get involved in regular residential trips and many other activities. All this helped me come out of my shell, gain confidence and make friends. In fact, I met most of my childhood friends I met through Saathi House and my first volunteering and employment opportunity was as a result of the Saathi House network.

Currently, I am involved in community development work. I organise trips and residential activities that bring communities together. I use the Saathi House model to help me organise these activities. I do this because I know first-hand the difference these activities make on the participants lives.

I work as a mentor at a local Aston-based primary school, my interest in working with young people stemmed from Saathi House, it's difficult for me quantify the impact Saathi House has had on me. To summarise, it I would say both my personal and professional life has been shaped by the things I did at Saathi House.

To be honest because of Saathi House my family also had peace of mind, they knew if I was at Saathi house I would be in a safe environment, it was reassuring for them that I was not getting up to mischief as was common in the area for boys my age.

Saathi House has been an inspiration for me; I have tried in my own way to emulate some of the activities that I experienced through Saathi House I want my children and other young people in the Aston area to have those experiences that shaped me and allowed me to think differently and meet people from different backgrounds.

I, along with other friends who also benefited from Saathi House, organise trips, activities and other events for young people and families, it's my way of giving back.





Suhel Obeda

Tell us a bit about yourself...

I was born in Bangladesh and arrived in the UK at the age of 12 with my mum and younger brother. We moved to UK to join our father who had arrived earlier and was working. Me and my wife live on the outskirts of Birmingham with our three children. I am a Chartered Engineer and currently work for Atkins.

Tell us about your childhood...


When I first came to the UK, I was too old to go to primary school and did not have the ability to speak English, therefore was unable to go to mainstream secondary school immediately. I had to initially attend a specialist language school known as the Steward Centre.

My journey to the Steward Centre itself was a challenge, I had to catch two buses from home to get to school, as a young person with very little ability to speak English, it was a daunting phase. I had to leave home at 7am, often when it was still dark, my dad showed me the way but eventually I had to make the journey myself.

Having attended the Steward Centre for six months, I had picked up sufficient English to be eligible to attend mainstream secondary school. I went to Broadway School in Perry Barr. I along with the other young people that came from the Steward Centre, were known as the "Stupid Centre kids", this title was bestowed on us by our English speaking peers.

I was initially put in all the low sets for all my core subjects, I pleaded with my teachers to put me in higher sets. However I was told that with poor English proficiency, I was suited to the low sets. Through a lot of hard work, I managed to convince my teachers to move me from the bottom sets but this was over time.





“Saathi House was influential in what I am, where I am and how I do things in my life.”



Suhel Obeda



Liz engrossed at the homework club

How did Saathi House make a mark on your personal life and professional career?

During my formative years, Saathi House was an environment where I got help and support. There was a culture of encouraging each other; I was amongst like-minded young people with adults believing in us. Most people who attended Saathi House wanted to do well. In terms of the personal impact it had on me, I was provided with support at the homework club that helped me progress from lower sets to the top sets.

During my university application phase I was given the support to complete my UCAS form, and once I graduated I was able to learn about interview techniques at Saathi House. There were people who were supporting me by doing mock interviews and sourcing interview materials.

The key impact for me was the motivation and self belief that we could do whatever we wanted to, but we had to work hard to achieve our dreams. Saathi House was influential in what I am, where I am and how I do things in my life.

In terms of my professional career, I found being a volunteer and subsequently a trustee helped me with giving me the edge over other candidates. I was able to talk about my involvement at Saathi House at interviews and demonstrated how I had transferrable skills.

During my time at university, I realised young people from well off backgrounds had more opportunities such as public speaking, horse riding etc. I realised that by growing up in Aston, me and my peers missed those opportunities. So when I joined Saathi House as a trustee after I graduated, I wanted to introduce some of those opportunities for our service users.



Suhel Obada

You have been both a service user and a long standing Trustee, what has been the challenges and highlights?

As a trustee, the biggest challenge was always about sustainability and having funding to do the innovative work. The thing that has kept us going is the diversity of our work, quality of delivery, remaining agile, and keeping up with changing times. We have been in tune with the communities' needs and have been able to provide programmes that resonated with our users.

The other challenge we face is finding committed trustees, the nature of the sector is such that trustees have to give up considerable personal time with no remunerations in return. It has not been easy finding those committed folks. However, the fact that we are here forty years since inception proves there are albeit a handful of committed people.

There are several highlights for me but once comes to mind. During one of our early camping trips we discovered that we had run out of gas and were unable to cook our food, we were out in the woods without any food. At that moment a few of us put our village skills to use and collected wood from the area and set up a fire using bricks to prop up our saucepans. Liz and the other staff were immensely impressed and praised our on-the-feet thinking.

The longevity of the organisation is another highlight. We have been able to provide services for four decades in an area that suffers multiple deprivations. I find it extremely rewarding when I come across someone who have used Saathi House's services and have benefitted from it. Even after all these years, it motivates me that Saathi House still has the ability to shape peoples' life choices and chances!



Suhel (First on the left) with friends at Aston Park



Sue Ball

Tell us a bit about your personal and career background...

I grew up in a small village in Lancashire near Manchester. I lived there up until I was 18 years old; I then went to university in Nottingham.

In 1981, I moved to Birmingham. My first job was as a Community Service Volunteer and it was with Saathi House, it was a 12 month role as I had no intention of staying in Birmingham for long. As it happened after my 12 months ended with Saathi House, I loved the city so much I decided to stay and here I am 36 years on!

I have worked in several areas although it has been all people-related; I worked in community work, education as a multi faith RE teacher, and community teacher. Currently, I work for Church of England as a Coordinator for a project called 'Places of Welcome'.

How and when did you get involved with Saathi House?

I graduated at the height of the 1980s recession, there were very few job opportunities. I could not find any work and decided to get into voluntary work and, as it happened, my first placement was in Aston with South Aston Reform Church.

One of the organisations I was placed at was Saathi House, I recall at that time it was called St James Language Project.

The work I did was around supporting young boys learn English, it was conversational English, there were other activities but I mainly focussed on the learning English project.

I also did some work with the ladies group and again it was teaching English and I helped with the sewing sessions.



***“The entire
experience,
for me, was
exciting,
interesting
and
energising.”***





Sue Ball

How did you find Birmingham?

It was massive move for me moving from the North West of England. It was the first time for me living in a big city. I was hugely excited, it was also the first time for me living in a very mixed, culturally, socially, and ethnically diverse area, I've loved living here!

Did you feel you were part of something important whilst working at Saathi House?

At the time we just got on with it, but there was a sense that we were working on something significant. The Handsworth riot had just happened; it felt right to bring people together to develop their skills and equipping them to speak English.

You have to remember I was fairly young myself, but it felt what we were doing worthwhile work. The other profound thing for me was I felt I was giving but I was getting something far more important in return, I learnt a lot from the young people and women I worked with.

How did Saathi House make a mark on your personal life and professional career?

Being part of Saathi House during the early part of my career energised me and was a key factor for me to get into community work and more importantly to stay in Birmingham.

Saathi House did have an impact on me, the fact that I went on to become a multi-faith Religious Education teacher and continue to do community development work. I felt my formative years were hugely important in shaping my career also the people that I was around were also impacted by the work of Saathi House. Incidentally, many of the people I worked with during that period remained in Birmingham and went on to do community work in areas of social work and within the third sector.





Sue Ball

Would you like to share with us any memorable moments from your time at Saathi House?

I recall we were provided with accommodation whilst we were doing the voluntary service. I was placed in a house on Victoria Road in Aston, the house was known as the 'Sand House'. A group of us stayed there, it was such fun times. Our stay at Sand House was short, the house was in very poor condition and had to be demolished. We were then moved to the very top floor of Barry Jackson Towers in South Aston (I think those were recently demolished).

I can't identify any one memorable experience from my time at Saathi House, for me it was a sense of what was happening overall. The entire experience for me was exciting, interesting and energising.

The uniqueness of Saathi House was it was a house and not a large community centre or building. The fact that it was a house, people felt it was like coming into someone's home when you walked in, there was a sense of as you were walking into a warm living room. I always remember Saathi House as a safe and welcoming place.





Shamsun Nila Choudhury

Tell us a bit about yourself...

I was born at Dudley Road Hospital now known as City Hospital, in Birmingham. I am 47 years old and have three daughters and one grandson. I grew up in Aston; my family have lived in the area from 1950s. I have three brothers and three sisters we all live in and around Aston. I have a real connection with the area.

Tell us about your childhood...

I had a great childhood; ours was one of the few families that arrived from Bangladesh to the UK in the early 1960s. All my siblings including myself were born here. We had the good fortune of helping families that arrived newly to UK to get settled.

My father was a well known within the community; he was an educated and a published author and was able to speak English so we always had queues of people in our house that wanted help read and write letters and other advisory support.

I went to Prince Albert Primary School and attended Broadway Secondary School. I was very mischievous as a child. My sister, who is a year younger than me, was a year below me at school; all our teachers were surprised that we were sisters. She was well behaved and studious; on the other hand I was like a tom boy, getting into trouble and less focused on my studies.

How was your transition into adulthood?

I had ambition to be a police officer as I was growing up, but found little support from my school. During the 1980s it was not the norm for girls like me to have high aspirations; school did not nurture our ambitions. It was more about going to school and back home; there was less emphasis on studies or extra curricular activities.





“Women still need a safe haven. The issues have changed but the need is still there. That is why it is crucial for organisations like Saathi House to operate and provide services to individuals who often have no where else to go.”



Shamsun with her daughters

At what stage in your life were you involved with Saathi House?

I think I started coming to Saathi House at the age of 13, this was around 1983-1984. I fondly remember my time at Saathi House, Liz and Fareeda khala were working then.

I loved going to the girls' session, it was a safe place a place, where I was able to be myself. My father encouraged me to get involved at Saathi House; he knew it would help keep me occupied.

My earliest memory of Saathi House is of Liz and Fareeda khala always encouraging us girls to dream big and have ambition and aspirations; they wanted us to want more from ourselves.

I recall one incident when I 'wagged' school and when Liz found out she sat me down and advised me not to do that as it will impact my education. She advised me to try and make something of myself.

How did Saathi House make a mark on your personal life and professional career?

My father was my role model; his love for helping the community filtered to me. As I was growing up I was drawn to community work. I also saw first hand the impact staff at Saathi House made on all our lives.

That always stayed with me and subconsciously I made up my mind to follow in my father's and the staff of Saathi House's footsteps.

For me, staff at Saathi House were mentors, friends and guides. We were able to tell them things we couldn't tell our parents or teachers, there was a deep level of comfort.



Shamsun Nila Choudhury

The key impact Saathi House had on you?

Saathi House for me was a safe haven where I was able to be myself. I met many friends there. If there was one thing that I had to pick I would say I learnt the importance of helping ones community from the heart and with real authenticity.

Staff at Saathi House taught me it is always about the people, put people first everything else will fall into place.

Currently, I work for a charity as the outreach and engagement worker. I mainly work with women who would be deemed marginalised and hard to reach.

I recall one incident which has stayed with me; when Fareda 'khala' started working at Saathi House there was outcry from the local men; they felt she would 'corrupt' their female family members.

There was hostility towards Fareda 'khala'. During that period my father called a meeting and requested all those who attended the meeting to allow the staff to work, and in fact encouraged them to allow their female family members to attend Saathi House.

Throughout my adult life, I have always volunteered and that has stemmed from Saathi House.



Shamsun with her mum and younger siblings



Dilbagh Dhami

Tell us a bit about yourself...

I like to describe myself as made in England, designed in Punjab! I was born at St Chad's Hospital on Hagley Road in Birmingham. I grew up in Smethwick; my family lived in an old Victorian house opposite the Vicarage. During the time I was growing up, there were many Punjabi families coming into Smethwick from India to work in the nearby factories.

How was your transition into adulthood?

I do not know how but somehow, without any preparation or training, I managed to pass my Eleven Plus exams and got a place at Holly Lodge Grammar School. I had an amazing experience at school. Once I finished school I did four A Levels and then went to university.

In 1976, I registered to read Law at university. However, I did not like the subject and transferred to the School of African and Asian studies at the University of Sussex. I graduated in 1980 and spent that year in Brighton spinning records, and it suddenly dawned on me that I needed to get a proper job. I applied for several jobs including that of a youth worker at the St. James' Language Project. What intrigued me was the fact that the post was funded by 'Inner City Partnership Project'. At that point it did not mean anything to me but later, I realised it was part of a regeneration programme.

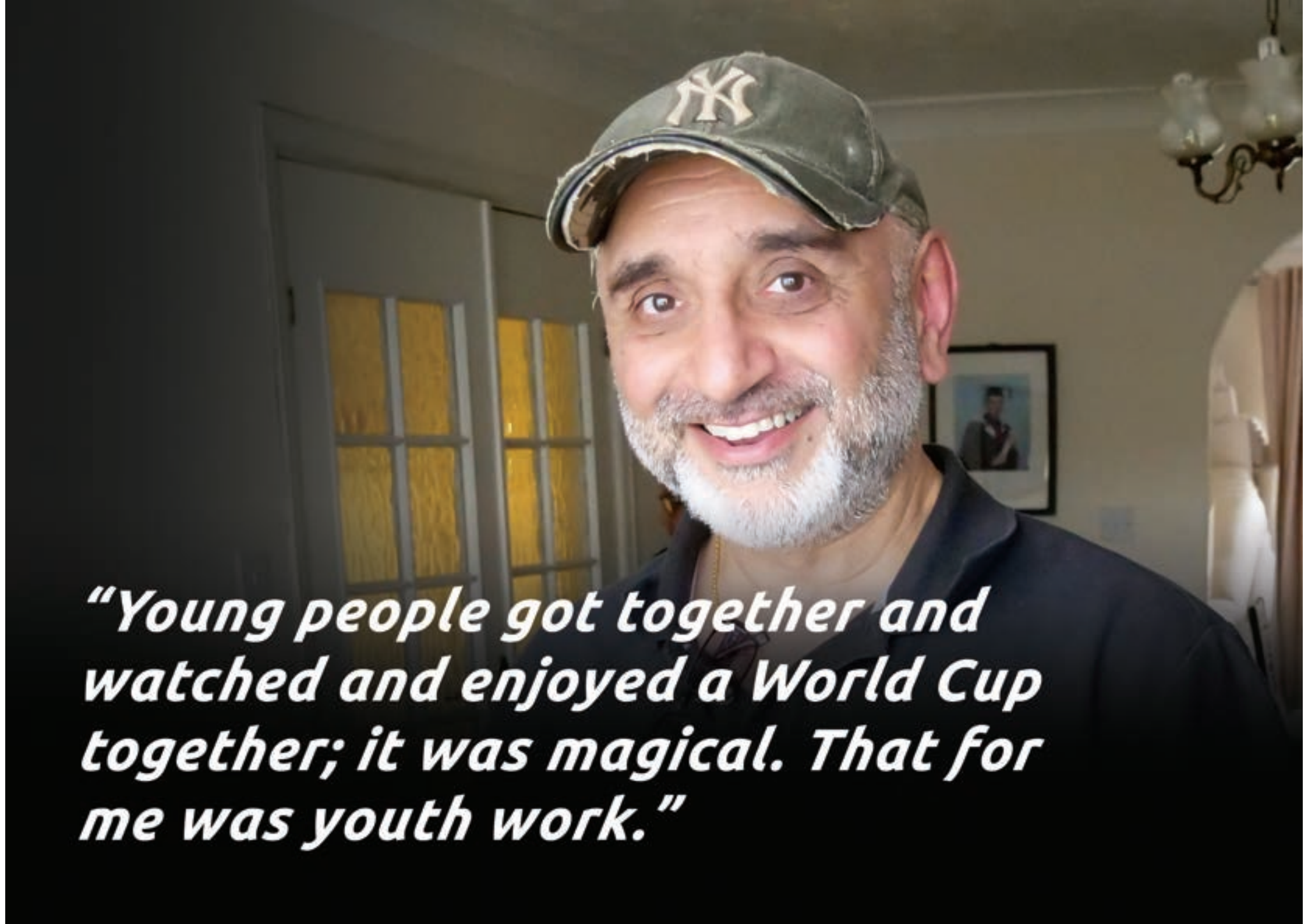
At what stage in your life where you involved with Saathi House?

In 1981, I had a job interview in Aston, a place I had heard of but never visited, for the Youth Worker role. I hitch-hiked all the way from Brighton to Birmingham and, to my surprise, I got to my interview well in time. The interview itself was held at Ann Knight's house.

I remember clearly when I walked in, there was no place to sit other than the floor, so I perched myself on the floor. There were a small group of young boys sitting on the floor with me; we all started talking about everything from football to music to university life. Later on, I found out that was part of the interview as was sitting on the floor!



Dilbagh during his youth work days

A middle-aged man with a grey beard and mustache is smiling at the camera. He is wearing a dark green New York Yankees baseball cap with the 'NY' logo in gold. He is also wearing a dark blue polo shirt. The background shows an indoor setting with a white door featuring glass panes, a framed picture on the wall, and a chandelier with multiple light bulbs.

“Young people got together and watched and enjoyed a World Cup together; it was magical. That for me was youth work.”



Dilbagh Dhami

How was your experience of working at Saathi House as the first Youth Worker?

In 1981, I was appointed as the first Youth Worker at Saathi House. It was a very bleak time, it was the era of Margaret Thatcher, the National Front were resurging and I was looking for an opportunity to work in an organisation that was addressing these issues in particular with young Asian people. The only organisation I knew of was the Asian Resource Centre. But when I started at Saathi House I soon realised the community in Aston were different. In fact, there were two groups. One was the older traditional Asian men who had the sole focus of working and keeping their heads down. And then there were a group of younger men who went to the local school and wanted to 'fit in' but were torn between cultural identities. I was interested in working with the younger group; they were interested in their Asian heritage but also wanted to explore and engage.

Working as a lone wolf in Aston, I missed the intellectual buzz of the School of African & Asian Studies, and to compensate I spent Friday afternoons at the Asian Resource Centre on the Villa Road chatting about race, class and heritage.

Interestingly even within the Asian groups there was tension between the young Mirpuri boys and the Bangladeshi boys and I figured (over time) the best way to deal with that was to set up football teams and youth clubs and in the process of doing activities; the young people got to interact with each other and became friends.

When I started at Saathi House I had a blank canvass. There were no other previous youth workers nor was there any youth clubs in place other than homework clubs. My experience was in football, cricket, chess and walking. I was hugely into active things; therefore it was only natural that I started doing those very activities at Saathi House as part of the Youth Club. I remember the very first time I did a camping trip; it was in partnership with the police. It was the first time the young boys went outside of Aston, outside of the "concrete jungle" and reconnected with the countryside; it was deeply satisfying seeing the joy on all the boys' faces.

One of the things I discovered very early in my role was the level of interest the boys had in football, especially being so near to Aston Villa Football ground and Aston Park. We joined a league in Sandwell, because it was mid-season we could not join a Birmingham league. Broadway School was our training ground.

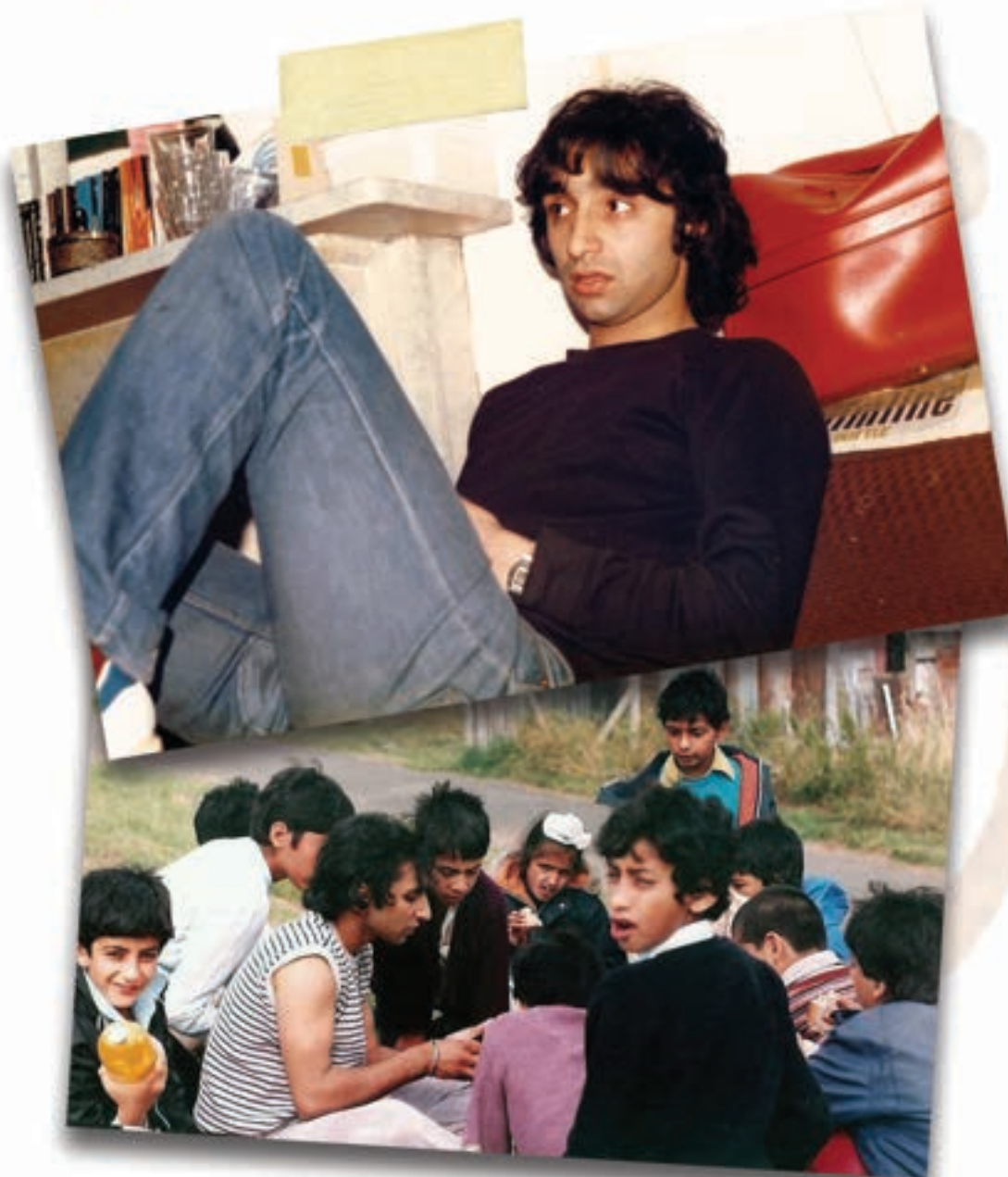
We also set up a cricket team and I did one-to-one squash with the boys. I helped Liz run the Homework Club, my role was mainly to manage the second hour of the Homework Club which essentially was the Youth Club for those who concentrated and focused on their homework. The Youth Club consisted of table tennis, board games and we engaged in extensive discussions. The first floor where the youth club was held was designed and decorated by the young people - this was known as the 'youth space'.

One of my fondest memories was during the 1982 football World Cup. Brazil was playing some dynamic football and I wanted the young people to enjoy it, and had an idea of getting a television for the youth club. I went to my manager Liz and put in a business case. She had to convince the trustees; God knows how she managed to persuade them but eventually we got a colour television for Saathi House! All the boys from the various youth clubs watched the matches sitting on old sofas at Saathi House. So many young people got together and watched and enjoyed a World Cup together; it was magical. That for me was youth work. Fun, edgy, gripping young people learnt by doing, enjoying and participating.

When I look back, I think Saathi House was able to do some of the work it did because Liz and Ann were white, they could get away with things that black and Asian people would have struggled to get acceptance for. Liz and Ann were tolerated by the community as a result of the way they navigated their way around and by doing great work with young people in education; and by supporting women in learning English and organising recreational activities. If Liz and Ann did not build trust in the community, I would not have been able to do the type of youth work I did because it was edgy and pushed the boundaries. We had sessions where boys were in youth clubs upstairs and girls had activities in the lower floor at the same time; if it was not for Liz and Ann's goodwill in the community, we would not have been able to deliver dual sessions.



Dilbagh Dhami



After five years studying away from home at the Universities of Kent & Sussex, coming back to Birmingham was a bit of a shock. Aston felt like a bit of backwater. I arrived as a single recent graduate in his first full time paid job and left as a married young man eager to move on to bigger and brighter things.

How did Saathi House's youth club get the name 'Damien's Place'?

I grew up in an era where Punjabi's anglicised their names. I was watching the Omen one day and liked the name Damien, as it was an extension of my surname Dhami, so I adopted that name with a bit of play on words. I called myself Damien and that is how during the early years, Saathi House Youth Club was known as "Damien's Place!"

How did Saathi House make a mark on your personal life and professional career?

During the early 1980s there was a radical edge about Saathi House, the work I did was fun and exciting. I had the opportunity to create an entire community and youth programme from scratch, which provided me with great learning. When I started working at Saathi House I was not a youth worker, but by the time I left I was one of the very first fully qualified JNC Level 3 Youth and Community Worker, and that was due to Saathi House.

This Youth and Community Work qualification, together with project coordination experience at the Asian Resource Centre in Smethwick subsequently, was a valuable passport for entry into Birmingham's Social Services Department in 1981 and a 20-year career in local government as a policy officer.

Organisations like Saathi House provide great opportunities and it would be a pity not to take up those opportunities!



Suraya Begum Khan

Tell us a bit about yourself...

I came to the UK in 1979 with my eldest son. I have two sons, one was born here. When I first arrived here in Birmingham there were only a handful of Bangladeshi families.

How was your transition to adulthood and what at what stage in your life where you involved with Saathi House?

Initially, I found it difficult to adjust to life here, it was lonely and I had left many of my family members in Bangladesh. By chance I met Fareda Begh at a common relative's house and, as it happened, we both realised we were related. Fareda was working at Saathi House during that period; she informed me about Saathi House and encouraged me to attend. She informed me about the weekly English classes they organised and knitting sessions.

I was keen to learn English and more importantly wanted to make friends so decided to attend the classes. I think it was around 1982 that I first started attending Saathi House. My association with the organisation continues to date.

I enrolled for the English and knitting classes and very rapidly got involved with other activities. I vividly recall on the days we had Saathi House sessions, we got up early, dropped the children off to school and completed the household chores so that we could go to the sessions early.

There was a sense of excitement amongst all the ladies, it was our chance to get together and learn together, there was a real sense of solidarity. We looked forward to summer holidays, Saathi House always organised an annual seaside trip for the ladies and their children, and throughout the holiday arranged many other outdoor activities. For most of us that attended, it was the only opportunity to go out of Birmingham and experience the outdoors. Staff at Saathi House were aware of this and ensured there was no barrier to us accessing the activities.



*Suraya enjoying sewing sessions at Saathi House
circa 1985*



“The staff at Saathi House had nothing to gain by engaging us yet they went the extra mile and as result we can see the impact four decades on.”



Suraya Begum Khan

How did Saathi House make a mark on you as an individual?

The main reason I attended Saathi House was to meet other like-minded women and engage in activities that enabled me to develop my skills and have fun. It is really difficult to articulate how we felt about Saathi House, suffice to say it was a place that enabled us newly arrived young women the ability to express ourselves. The staff at Saathi House were inspiring, we all saw them as our role models. Liz, Ann, Farida and Minara Islam were real trailblazers; often they went against the grain in order to engage women that needed support. They were relentless in their approach and never gave up.



Ladies out on the beach (Suraya first on the right)

Although Saathi House was not set up to provide advice and guidance, inevitably it did just that. Women always came to the staff whenever they required letters translated or needed to write letters or forms filled out; staff went the extra mile, we all felt at ease when confiding in the staff, there was a real sense of camaraderie.

One of the main impact Saathi House had on me was it provided me with confidence and the ability to help others. Women from my generation that arrived in the UK during the 1970s and 1980s were isolated and did not have much support due to being the first groups of Bangladeshi migrant women to come to the UK, and were introverts and lacked confidence, but I was markedly different. I had an innate sense of fearlessness and til date, I have no hesitation to do things independently including travel on my own. I credit Saathi House for nurturing me and enhancing my confidence and encouraging me to always do more of the things I enjoyed doing.

I have instilled some of the values I gained from Saathi House and have taught them to my sons. One of the things I learnt was to be selfless and not expect things in return. The staff at Saathi House had nothing to gain by engaging us yet they went the extra mile and, as result we, can see the impact four decades on. That is why I tell both my sons to "always be the first to help and the last to eat".

I hope and pray Saathi House continues for a very long time, it is an anchor organisation in Aston; it enables the diverse groups of women and young girls in the area to come together under one roof and do things that they enjoy but more importantly builds their skills which they will benefit from for years to come.





Juma Begum

Tell us a bit about yourself...

I grew up in New Oscott, just on the outskirts of Birmingham. I have three siblings. I got married when I was 17 years old; at that point I did not want to study and was keen to get married.

At what stage in your life where you involved with Saathi House?

Immediately after I got married I was pregnant with my son. I was content being a mum and a housewife. However, life had other plans for me. At a family gathering, I met Rahima, who is a relative of mine. She was working at Saathi House back then and encouraged me to do something with myself. She encouraged me to attend Saathi House and get involved with some of the training and courses they were delivering.

All my life I have lived in New Oscott which is a middle class area, very few Asians lived there in fact... growing up we were the only Asians on our street.


I first got involved with Saathi House at the age of 22; I enrolled onto a one year diploma 'Access to Social and Community Work'. Initially it was difficult for me to adjust to Saathi House. For me, the culture was different from the area I was used to. I remember the first time I came to Saathi House, I was introduced to Liz Anderton and Ann Knight, having met all the staff I decided to get involved.

Coming into Aston was an eye-opener for me, for the first time I started to appreciate how people in inner city areas lived and gained understanding about communities.

I recall getting back into education after a five year gap and, having been through motherhood, it was not easy. I found the first few weeks daunting. However, the staff created an environment where it was easy for us to learn. I was the only 'outsider' in my class; everyone else lived in the area and had been attending Saathi House from a young age. Liz realised this and she ensured I had the opportunity to engage and got others to interact with me. That really helped with my transition back into studies and, more importantly, I felt I was part of something worthwhile.



"Access to Social and Community Work" programme in action!



“The experience I had through Saathi House was amazing, it helped me with who I am and where I am at the moment.”



Juma Begum

How did Saathi House make a mark on your personal life and professional career?

The experience I had through Saathi House was amazing, it helped me with who I am and where I am at the moment. I have to give credit to Saathi House for encouraging me and getting me out of my comfort zone. The course I did enabled me to access the job market and become financially independent.

My closest friends are some of the people I met on the course at Saathi House, we now have been close friends for over two decades, our children have grown up together almost to the point they treat each other as siblings.



Once I completed the course at Saathi House I got a job at NHS, my role involved undertaking health promotion campaigns with BME communities. Had it not been for the course I would never have considered that as a career option. Attending Saathi House and gaining an understanding about the community empowered me. I felt I was equipped to deal with issues that were not ordinarily discussed in the BME communities such as depression, mental health and self-care. The job at the NHS was followed by various advisory/advocacy roles in organisations based in Aston and Lozells.

Prior to getting involved with Saathi House I was only exposed to life in the suburbs; my view of life was very limited. However attending Saathi House and getting to know and understand the community in Aston provided me a first-hand experience of how people in the inner city lived. My misconception had been replaced with admiration, I began to appreciate the people and their tenacity and resilience; I saw the beauty of inner cities. For that reason alone I have continued to stay committed to working in these areas.

In summary, Saathi House made an enormous impact on me both personally and professionally. On a personal front it made me a stronger person, gave me the opportunity to evaluate things and not settle for mediocrity, we were encouraged to always reach for our full potential. The other key lesson I picked up from Saathi House was not to be judgemental and support people without questioning how they got to that situation, as long as they want to change, show willingness and are motivated, you should provide the best support you can.

On the professional front, I pretty much owe my career to Saathi House. Was it not for the access course, I don't think I would have easily infiltrated through the job market. By doing the course I was able to improve my chances of getting employment and develop my skills. Going forward, it is important Saathi House doesn't lose its identity, its brand, yet remain fluid and adapt to changing needs and times. I hope the organisation stays true to itself and continues to shape the lives of many more over the coming years.





Rag Chand

Tell us a bit about yourself...

I was raised in Aston and lived in the area until I was 26 years old. I have four brothers and two sisters. My parents migrated from Punjab, India, to the UK in the late 1950s.

Tell us about your childhood...


My aspirations whilst growing up were to principally stay out of prison and not get into too much trouble and to get a job. To get any job at a warehouse would have satisfied me and was the height of my aspirations. For me it was literally living from one week to another, a life without ambition and I was happy, or at least I thought I was happy.

I didn't face any racism neither did I get embroiled in the ethnic divides living in Aston. My friends were mainly Pakistanis and Bangladeshis. There were few Indian families in Aston, we all got on in the area and looked out for each other.

How was your transition into adulthood?

Growing up in Aston wasn't easy; my friends and I didn't have any male role models to look up to. We didn't know anyone from the area that went to university; hence our role models were our fathers who worked in foundries, factories and warehouses. From the age of 14 to 25, the idea of studying or going to college didn't even occur to me for a second. It just didn't figure in my life.





“The single most important person in my life that changed my life was Liz Anderton. Liz was a pioneer and changed many young people’s lives in Aston.”



At what stage in your life were you involved with Saathi House?

I think I got involved with Saathi House from its inception, or at least from its very early days. I was one of the notorious members of Saathi House, and many of my peers will remember me for being mischievous, most of the naughty things that happened during that period were mainly instigated by me and my friend Zulfiqar Hussain!

An incident is clearly etched in my mind, Saathi House had organised a camping trip and I was desperate to go; but my dad was a very strict individual and not the easiest person to convince, so I requested Liz to talk to him. I remember Liz coming to our house; I was sitting and listening from the top of the stairs whilst Liz was persuading my mum and dad to allow me to go on the camping trip. My mum instantly agreed but my dad needed some convincing. He eventually agreed.

That one camping trip liberated me. It also allowed my dad to give us a bit more freedom. It was only a camping trip, nothing earth shattering but it broke the barrier of what we could do and what was available for us to do. I was in my teens but that experience planted a seed in me which ultimately helped me at later stages.

I was involved with Saathi House initially as a participant, I later became a volunteer and for a period I worked during school holidays as a 'Youth Leader'. Those experiences prepared me for later life.

At the age of 25, having been through numerous manual jobs, I decided to do an Access course for mature students. The Access course was for those individuals who had no formal qualifications, for example, me! Much to my amazement and shock, I passed the access course and then went to university and subsequently trained as a solicitor and then as a barrister.

I feel a little embarrassed and sad that I actually never told Liz Anderton what an inspiration she was and was it not for her support and guidance I would never have thought of entering education as a 25 year old and, more importantly, persevering through the challenges as a mature student.

As Shakespeare wrote; "Content is the crown I wear, a crown seldom few kings wear". My point here is, ultimately, you have to be happy with yourself. I would encourage young people of this generation to dream big, chase your dreams, there will be people who will be negative but ignore those people because if you want something, with hard work and having the fire in your belly, you can fulfil those dreams. If someone like me, a son of a migrant a young person growing up in Aston with no aims and ambitions in life - can achieve and make something of myself, then any young boy and girl growing up in Aston who have far more opportunities and are far more intelligent than me also can!





From its origin as The St James' Language Project in 1977, Saathi House has come a long way! One of the oldest charity organisations in Aston began by teaching new arrivals English. Ann Knight used to teach men who worked in the local factories at evening classes. She recalls many tired faces looking at her and trying their best to learn this complex language after a tiring day at work. We can now only imagine how that must have felt for them.

When the families started to join these men in the late 70's, needs changed and Saathi house quickly adapted and rose to the challenge. The focus changed to cohesion, immigration and social support. New arrivals felt isolated and needed companionship. This was when the name changed to Saathi House - meaning 'Friends House' - both in Urdu and Bengali, which were the two major languages of the immigrant population in the area.

As families settled into their new environment, the children, needed activities to keep them engaged so Saathi House opened the first Asian Youth Club in Birmingham. The need to support children with school work was acute, as many of them had very little English language experience. This was when my life crossed paths with Saathi House.

As a shy teenager, I had to be encouraged to join the homework club at Saathi House in the 1980's. Initially the motivation to go was the games session after the homework. Liz Anderton used to run the sessions, I recall calling her miss but she insisted on being called Liz. When there was no homework, it called for creative thinking. Some homework had to be invented, something not too difficult or it would eat into the games session and not too easy as then Liz may give alternatives, the latter to be avoided at all costs!

Through the 80's and 90's Saathi House thrived in providing a range of activities to meet the needs of the newly forming community, from women-only swimming clubs to family day trips, camping, as well as educational and health programmes.

Deprivation and underachievement were recognised as key issues within the community, we adopted a dual approach to try to cure and prevent. From 90's to 2000, we worked on a range of programmes which tackled the deprivation and also looked at preventing future re-occurrence through education and awareness raising initiatives.

During the period from 2006 to 2016 the Big Lottery Project played a significant role enabling us to work on health and education programmes and the empowering of women. When the charity sector was hit by the financial crisis in 2008 funding was very limited so we had to focus on the key priorities.

We wanted to have the highest impact on the community but with restricted funding and after much research we concluded that we should concentrate our efforts on women's work as we learned that educating a woman, you educate the whole family. Currently our most popular session is creative English, so we have gone from teaching English to teaching English.

As I reflect on the past 40 years of our achievements and listen to the many stories we have collected, I get a sense of satisfaction to know that we have touched so many lives. We have played a key part in generating Barristers, Solicitors, Engineers, CEO's, Social Workers, Entrepreneurs to list but a few. From a personal perspective, I have a great sense of gratitude towards those who started Saathi House and those who subsequently gave the hours and hours of effort to keep it running. From a boy who could hardly speak English to someone who is now a Consultant Engineer, working for a multi-national company and travelling the world. This achievement is partly due to Saathi House and the support and aspiration it gave to me.

Where next? The future is as bright as we can make it! There is huge potential within the community, many young women are being educated, and they are ambitious and confident. Our effort should now be to harness these talents into making the community a better place for everyone and motivate the next generation.

Suhel Obeda
Chair of Trustees



Although Mashkura Begum has a legal background, she followed her passion and pursued a career in community development work. She was one of the youngest Chief Executive of Birmingham Leadership Foundation; a Birmingham based youth leadership incubator hub.

Mashkura co-authored the ground breaking 'Old Wives Tales', documenting stories of Bangladeshi women who settled in the West Midlands during the past fifty years. She is currently leading 'Grandma's Story', a European initiative documenting the stories of migrant grandmothers from all over Europe. As part of the project Mashkura has published a heritage trail toolkit.

Mashkura completed her MBA at Aston University and now provides management consultancy in areas of social and economic regeneration, business development and growth, primarily working with third / public sector, government regeneration programmes and housing associations.

The main motivating factor for Mashkura to document 'Saathi House Stories' was her commitment to paying homage to the efforts of all those associated with the organisation, often the unsung heroes.

SaathiHouse

