

George's Park, Lozell's
Green Space of the Month July 2004

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Introduction

This is the story of how George's Park in Lozells, Birmingham, was saved from vandalism and dereliction by a group of remarkable people. Led by community activist and community development worker Fauzia Mumtaz, the women and children of this community deserve proper recognition for their involvement in revamping their urban green space and bringing a sense of order and cohesion to the whole area. These warm-hearted and characterful individuals have succeeded in galvanising a community into action, for the good of all. Here's how they did it.



Rupinder

I met Landscape Architect Rupinder Sogy in George's Park, Lozell's on a lovely sunny summer's afternoon. She had kindly arranged for members of the local residents' group to be there to talk to me, and I was immediately made to feel very welcome. I met a great many inspiring characters, all of whom are contributing to the renaissance of the park and to recreating a sense of community among these once blighted streets and open spaces.

Jacky

The first person I got to know was Jacky, a British Black woman who has recently started attending a training course and is looking out for opportunities to gain job experience and find meaningful work. When I told her about the work of BEN and how much I enjoy my job, she was very keen to know how she could get into a position like mine. She is very interested in community development and clearly has the initiative and people skills to do well in this field.

Jacky told me that although she is concerned about the management of George's Park and willing to be involved in the Friends' group, for mothers like her, it's hard to find the time to attend meetings. There is no child care provided and it's difficult to concentrate if you take the children in to meetings with you, even where that is allowed.

(I felt quite nostalgic for my early days in this field of work, in the autonomous child care collectives and women's self-help groups in Brixton in the early 80s. If we couldn't get funding for childcare, we organised our own on a voluntary basis, and if we couldn't do that we did what is now known as 'multitasking' ie took the children to the meetings with us. To many paid workers who are more used to a clear distinction between domestic and professional responsibilities, this may seem like chaos, but the degree of empowerment we experienced was immense and I sensed the same potential among these women.)

Jacky also pointed out a building next to the park, Malika House, which is used as "a school for drop outs", mainly African-Caribbean youngsters. Out of school time these young people often hang around the kiddies play area and don't seem to have anything much to do. She thought there was scope to organise some out-of school activities with them in the park, and felt that some kind of cultural heritage project would be very welcome. Then she had to leave to collect her daughter from school.

Fauzia

The next person I met was Fauzia Mumtaz, a warm yet commanding woman with real credentials as a community activist, and newly appointed Community Development Worker with Groundwork Birmingham. She has been involved in this project to improve George's Park since day one. There had once been an ice-cream factory on this spot, and some houses which were probably bombed during WWII. Margaret Anderson from Sutton Coldfield Reform Church has

photographs and documents relating to the pre-war history of the area, and has supported residents' efforts to develop George's Park – but more of her later.

The population in the neighbourhood surrounding George's Park is mainly Pakistani and a few Bengali residents. Apparently people from the different communities did not get on very well with each other to begin with. Fauzia has lived in this street for about 30 years now, and recalled what the site was like before regeneration work began. The entire area was overgrown, except for the football pitch which was used by joy riders. The play area was vandalised and everything but the slide was scrapped. For twenty years nothing was done to improve the situation.



In Fauzia's words, it was a "drugs den" with lots of crime going on. People didn't feel safe to walk here, even in the day time, and women would meet up on the street corner in the morning to walk together – the long way round, rather than across the park – to school. This level of informal community organisation is literally vital to many people in minority ethnic communities, yet often goes entirely unrecognised and unsupported by the mainstream. It would be easy to glamorise the courage it takes to face the daily threats these women have had to face, but there is nothing pretty about the bag-snatching, mugging and rape which have happened in this park. News of these crimes travels via gossip networks throughout the community and everyone feels threatened and at risk. The women's own efforts to organise for their self-defence are commendable, but this alone cannot tackle the root cause of the problem.

In 2000, when PC Pearce community police liaison officer, put a leaflet through everyone's doors about proposals to address these issues, Fauzia responded keenly. She was the only person to do so at first. After years of neglect, people had grown cynical and apathetic about any hopes of improvement. Fauzia admits her motivation was initially rather reactionary – if changes were going to happen, she wanted to make sure she could complain if they made things worse! A lot of people felt similarly at first, but didn't see much point in even saying so. Early meetings were quite poorly attended. But Fauzia observed that, as the meetings continued regularly, after a time people began to believe things could

actually change for the better. When folks began to see real changes happening in the park, they became more willing to get involved.

Bilal

The first stage of improvement was to put up some railings to prevent vehicle access to the park, and to begin levelling the ground, which had been in big, rough mounds, obscuring sight-lines and providing cover for antisocial behaviour. A group of school children came together to form the Young Friends of George's Park, and the boys had designed an arched gateway for the park entrance. I was introduced to their chairman, Bilal, a very polite and sensible boy with a charming sense of humour. He told me about the consultation which had taken place with young people.



Originally the teens said they wanted a shelter as a hang-out space, but the women's group were not so sure about that. They were concerned about young people being allowed to congregate unsupervised near an area of woodland used by courting couples. So discussions were held and a compromise agreed. The needs of wildlife were also taken into consideration – the woodland is home to foxes, squirrels and birds, so rather than cut it down the community agreed it should be thinned out with pathways cut through it for children to play hide and seek. And a bandstand was created, which young people can use as a place to congregate, but they are still visible at a distance, so the adults need not worry about what they are getting up to.

Asfa

Asfa is a young mother with a small daughter and a young son. Both children are big enough to go and play on their own on the new play area equipment but need Mum on hand in case of bumps. The new seating area which residents asked for is well designed so that parents and child minders can do their own thing but just within sight and earshot of the playground. Asfa sits on a bench, watching all the comings and goings, filling me in on who is who and dispensing hugs and lollies as needed.

A skate park has also been created, in the part of the park where the play area used to be. Asfa tells me that local children don't use it all that much, as they're a bit young yet. They may sometimes take their mountain bikes down there,

although I've since learned that's not good for the concrete. But some young people come from a little way away with their skate boards and are really rather skilled at performing stunts on the half pipe. It's a good spectator sport and Asfa hopes that one day the younger ones can have some tuition, to learn some skateboard tricks without too much risk of getting hurt.



Imran

The next person I met was Imran, a new member of the Young Friends group. He has only recently come to Lozells from Pakistan and communicates using Pakistani sign language, which is rather different from the tiny bit of British Sign Language I know. He taught me signs for Pakistan, woman, man, marriage, and sewing – Imran is a skilled tailor. Bilaal has learned very quickly how to communicate with Imran and was able to share private jokes with him, much to their personal amusement. He helped to interpret between us, enabling me to ask Imran about his role in the Friends group and his ideas for the park. He replied that he is new to the group but looking forward to playing an active part. The women remarked how pleased they are that Imran has been able to make friends so easily, as he could have had a much harder time trying to fit in.

Sameed

Bilaal in turn introduced me to Sameed, the Vice-Chair of the group. Sameed is a bold, passionate and very caring lad who clearly enjoys his community commitments. He explained to me what the various officers' roles entail and told me all about the training courses the boys had attended, to learn about facilitation, budgeting and taking minutes. The boys are obviously benefiting personally from gaining sound skills for themselves and as well as benefiting many more people by applying these skills in the community. In a situation where ethnic community groups, through no fault of their own, often lack the capacity to develop their project ideas, it was great to see these young people being given the opportunity to get a head start in understanding how a group can be set up and run well in order to be really effective at achieving its aims and manifesting the dreams of their peers and their elders.

Sheraz

Bilaal then introduced me to Sheraz, the Young Friends' secretary, a calm, confident person well suited to his role. Sheraz explained that the group has only

a very limited budget but plenty of ideas for activities to develop and possible ways of raising funds to realise them.

The boys told me about the mature tree which used to be the children's climbing tree, but had to be cut down for health and safety reasons. They were considering how it might be replaced, as there is a wonderful climbing frame in the kiddies play park, but that's more for younger ones, and it's just not the same as having an actual climbing tree. The Young Friends are very conscious of health and safety: Fauzia's daughter was hobbling about on crutches having broken her foot recently. So there was talk of whether to try and level the grass better, filling in potentially dangerous holes. There are plans for First Aid training too, which a lot of the young people seemed keen to learn. This would give them the skill and confidence to deal with any accidents which may occur in the park, and help to increase the general feeling of safety.

Other project ideas were for a roll up cricket pitch, "because the main area of grass in the park gets very boggy in the rainy season", and for recycling bins for paper and aluminium. We wondered if this might be a way to raise funding?

Margaret Anderson

I was told the story of how the pensioners group from Sutton Coldfield Reform Church, encouraged by Margaret Anderson, had made a collection of funds to support improvements to George's Park and the boys from the Young Friends group had visited the church to thank the pensioners. They had training in how to give a presentation, and although they were nervous beforehand, it had gone very well and they now felt more confident about public speaking.

Women's group activities

By this time the afternoon was wearing on, the children had all come out of school and were beginning to congregate in the park. Mothers were walking with babies and toddlers. Fauzia told me that the park becomes a hive of activity by about 6pm when everyone comes out to take the air. Old and young women can be seen most days going round the park exercising. They want to organise a group for 'power walking'. A leader has been recruited who will measure the distance with a special kind of wheel and decide on a two mile circuit to begin with. There is already a basketball team. The boys took up basketball first, then the women decided to start a team. They have had funding from Sport England.

Other activities which the women are undertaking, beyond the focus of the park, include computer training ("the kids can all do it, now the mums want to do it too") and debt management courses, health and safety, first aid and child care courses. The women have also organised trips for the whole community, including an outing to Barry Island in South Wales. The next trip will be to Blackpool later this summer for the fun fare and illuminations.

Community Resources

The women's group have a tiny room in the school where they can meet during school hours, but it only accommodates about 15-20 at most. There is an empty house which they have their eyes on as a potential community resource, but it would need a lot of work doing. Meanwhile they have identified a site adjacent to the park where they would like to have a community space. There is talk about getting a "pod" on this spot – a two storey structure which could be used for a crèche, youth club and meeting space. There is no loo in the park, and that's a problem for a parent with two or more children of different ages, having to run back to the house or call on a neighbour to use their facilities, so the pod would include a loo and washroom.

The week before my visit, there had been a launch event in George's Park with some of the Board of Directors of Groundwork and some of the funders, like sport England, present. It had perhaps been a little premature as work on the railings is not yet complete – still going on behind us as we sat talking – so there are plans for a repeat in September. Residents are generally fairly pleased with the input of Groundwork to regenerating the park, although there was some strong feeling about particular issues, including the planting scheme. The women's group had freshly planted up the flower border with a bright display of red geraniums especially for the occasion and I could feel the sense of pride and ownership the women now have – that this is their park and they have the power to make a difference to what happens here – it is their environment.



The sense of empowerment is reaching out further now into people's lives within the community. Fauzia is trying to identify a nearby nursery and greenhouse where children and adults can raise their own plants to improve the park. A lot of the houses in these streets have their own gardens but many are paved over. People are interested in gardening, but would rather get together and do it in the park, instead of on their individual plots. It's more sociable and enjoyable that way, they can support and encourage one another. They would like to have fun get-togethers with a tea party, as a way to tackle isolation. They've thought about growing fruit and veg too. The kids are very excited about it. Flowers are pretty but they don't last. If children can grow food to bring home to their mums to cook, it gives them something to show for their efforts and becomes a source of respect within the family.

Mrs Begum

An older lady who had been sitting all this while on a nearby bench, with her husband, watching the proceedings, came over to offer me a cup of tea, which I accepted gladly. Mrs Begum speaks only a little English, so I quickly learned how to say “thank you” in her mother tongue – Urdu - “Shukria”. Fauzia explained that this was her mother – the driving force behind all this activity. “Mum is pushing everyone”, she explained.

Then my hosts pointed out to me an image which will stay with me always. An old, old lady, dressed in white was walking very, very slowly with her zimmer frame down the street beside the park. Since her illness she had remained house bound for some time until a neighbour had encouraged her to learn how to raise her foot over the door sill and step outside. Now she was able to take a little stroll each day, just a few paces at first but gradually increasing day by day. This gentle exercise was helping her to regain strength and aiding her recovery. It was evidently improving her sense of wellbeing and quality of life, to be able to stretch out in the sunshine. Everyone agreed that if the park had not been opened up in the way it has, this grandmother would never have felt safe enough to come outdoors again in her life.

This is how much difference ethnic community participation in green spaces can make.