

Experience with Flotilla Project, What Community means, Reflections on East London, Female Role Models, Histories of Liberation, Relationship with the Water

## Flotilla Oral Histories

**Participant: Julie Evans**

**Interviewer: Dr. Anna Maguire**

**Interview Date: 06/06/2023**

**AM:** So, yeah, the recording is started. Brilliant.

All right, so this interview is happening on the 6th of June, 2023, and it's just after 11 o'clock. I'm Anna Maguire and I'm a lecturer in public history here at UCL. And today I'm interviewing Julie. So Julie, I wonder if I could start by just asking you to tell us a little bit about yourself and your connection to the Royal Docks.

**JE:** OK, thank you, Anna. Good morning. Yes, so I've lived within the East End all my life and um started in Hackney, Stoke Newington and then I would say about 35 years I moved to Newham and um what happened is from there I've lived in various places within Newham and I moved to the Royal Docks about fifteen years ago, and honestly this is where I found the community. It's very strange because the other places I loved but where you had lots of houses of multiple occupancy you really didn't get to know your neighbours and if you did they didn't stay long. I moved to Royal Docks and at the time it felt like it was miles away from, you know, where I was in Forest Gate actually. But what happened is I got very involved in some, some say activism, I'd like to say campaigning and that's when I realised what a strong resilient community there was within the docks. Hence, you know, that's just the history of how I've arrived here and mainly why I've stayed here.

**AM:** Brilliant Julie. I've got lots of things I'd like to ask you about as a result of that now. The first thing is that kind of sense of community that you found in the docks. But I think some people maybe don't expect when thinking about the docks as compared to sort of other parts of the East End. So what was it, do you think, about that area that promoted the sense of community? Was it just about the housing and how it operated differently? Or were there other things?

**JE:** I think in some parts where I am in the docks, it's almost like a little island, you know, because there's a couple of bridges and then it sort of unfolds like that. And so most of the people that have lived locally to me, we've got some new builds going up, which has really been good it's brought in a lot of younger folk to the community. What I found though is through doing campaigning and doing stuff like working like voluntary on a local market, so you get to meet people that way, many people have lived here a very very long time. And that was really nice because I don't think, you know, we see that a lot now. So some of these people that I've known, they've lived here 40, 50 years, they've seen the changes and stuff like that. And then we've got people that have just moved in and so, and everyone seems to gel really well.

**AM:** Yeah, that's fascinating. It's interesting how an area kind of becomes, you know, welcoming and bringing in new people. So you've talked a little bit there about your campaigning and your volunteering. So can I ask you a bit about your campaigning first? So it's campaigning, not activism. So could you maybe explain what you think the difference is and then tell us a bit about the time of work you do.

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**JE:** Okay, okay. I just find activism has a certain connotation, I think that's the word, to it now, where people just think, as an activist I am going to chain myself to somewhere like London City Airport or something you know, stuff like that. As I've grown with growth I think (?).

So I campaigned, so my first bit, and this is when I found out what a community I was in, and that accepted me, that was another thing, because I'm coming in from an outsider at this time. And what happened, am I allowed to say the companies? Oh, okay, okay, okay. So what happened is Crossrail was being built, and it was going right across this community, but we were having no benefit for it. We wasn't even getting a station. We wasn't as popular as Custom House, you know, and but we were having all the headache of it.

And what occurred is they stopped our bus route in this like pocket. And so what I noticed is because my child was going to school at a certain area, there was this little, little line of children, right, and I'm talking about 120 children, not like just, you know, eight, tens. And I just got curious, so I said to them, North Woolwich, and they went, yeah, right. And what we realised is because they've taken this bus route off, right, people did not have the access. So to get to school, you were having to get two buses which would, it was a bit confusing, but you would get one up to the airport, right, but you'd have to walk like 15 minutes, one to the airport and then get another one all the way. So, because there was this big chunk of this area that wasn't being served. Then also people were taking shortcuts to get to this area walking at night and that was causing problems. A couple of people had been attacked because people knew that they were going to be taking shortcuts. So I was watching this and hearing this, and I went to meet with Crossrail and they were pretty, I suppose, uninterested. That's the word, uninterested. And one of them actually said to me, I thought the walk could do them good. Like, that's how, that is how, you know, uncaring they was to what was happening.

Then I started to talk to elderly people and they'd stopped going out because from where we are, 20 minutes you could get to Asda on a bus, right? So, but it was taking us nearly 45 minutes to an hour to get these two buses. It was in the heart of Summer. So, if you've got anything frozen, you have to be careful with it. And it was so what happened, Anna, is I went out and I started to get signatures and I started to get people rallied up. But I didn't know where to go with it. And it's really weird because my mum's passed, but she was a camp-. She was an activist. She. But so it was I think it was always in my blood, but what had occurred is I'd got all of this stuff and I didn't know where to go with it, right? And it's just so funny how people are put in your path. And I was sat at the empty bus stop that wasn't being served. I just sat there one day and I was, you know, and a lady walked. She went, you alright?. And I just sort of told her. And she went, oh, you know you need to see, go and see this bloke. And I went to see him. And he was working on the pockets of, like, the old folk. So I started to work on the pockets of the children. And we brought somebody else in who was sort of just working on other pockets. So between us, right, we, there was an alliance forming.

So we met up with Crossrail in a local church, and at first there were seven people showed up, right, seven residents, and we were like, okay, okay. Then the next time there was 20 residents, and then it continued, and then it was standing room only. Yeah. And then there was even a police presence. I don't know what they thought, like, these children and old pensioners were going to do, you know, or whatever, but I wouldn't put nothing past them, you know what I mean? But, you know, when you're mad, you're going to get angry. And um anyway, what they agreed is to put on two free bus services that were going to run every 15 minutes that was going to-. But this is what I didn't get, Anna, because they were able to put on these bus services, but why take off our bus service? It didn't make sense. It wasn't because the road was blocked. So they gave us these free bus services every 15 minutes and for three months, you know. And it was, I must admit, it was really good when I looked out my window and all the bus stops that had not in service, not in use, not in use, their little

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sleeves were being taken off. And there was a sense of like, then I got on the bus and one of the neighbours went, oh you did this, didn't you? And I went, no, I didn't, we did this, we did it, you know. I was just, you know, I suppose the mouthpiece at the time, you know, but I couldn't have done it on my own and I couldn't have done it without, you know, the other people.

So that's the first bit that I got involved in and then it ended up, because word spreads very- in this community, so when there was another piece going on that people were fighting against. I said, could you help? And luckily enough, I've just been so lucky Anna, that the right people have fell in by path at the right time. So at the moment we are fighting against the expansion of London City Airport. I cannot speak for anybody else, I can only speak for myself. I'm not anti-airport. I knew what I was getting when I moved here, a lot of us did, but we can't take an expansion. We don't have the infrastructure, we don't have the room, and what their expansion wants to do is increase the flight times. So we get a bit of respite from Saturday afternoon to Sunday afternoon and in the evenings and early mornings. They wanted to strip that away. And I think it, all in all, this community has been fighting and pushing that back since 2009 now. And um, we still do, we're still doing it. So that is what my recent campaign is with a group called Hakan East that have been very, very, you know, helpful. They do stuff around Heathrow throw and all of that. So, you know, we've got the support. We're not just residents now on our own and we've got a backing of somebody that does that.

**AM:** Yeah. Thank you so much, Julie, for telling us about those things. It's clear to me that you are a kind of a real leader in your community. Do you think of yourself as a leader? What sort of role do you see yourself having within the community where you live?

**JE:** I'm just a gobby resident. You know, it's only when other people say to me, you're a campaigner, you're an activist, and I go no, I'm just someone that stands up for when I see an injustice, you know, or I see that people's voices are getting lost. And as I said, and I think if I'm truly honest, you know, that has been nurtured into me from my mum, you know, who like, who used to campaign for equal pay for women back in the 60s and 70s for night cleaners. So I think, you know, subconsciously it just evolved from there really.

**AM:** And I think, you know, that kind of, both that family history and the amazing work that your mum did. Do you also draw from the history of the area where you are? The Docklands has always been a place where campaigns have been fought, where women particularly have gathered together in struggle for new freedoms and for justice. Does that help? Does that play a role in the work that you do?

**JE:** I think it spurs me to go forward. I think it does. I think when I got involved with the Crossrail thing, it wasn't my intention. When I moved here, before that, it really, none of it was my intention to get involved with stuff. I just wanted to move here and, you know, have a quiet life, you know. But when I'm seeing stuff and I'm hearing stuff like, you know, the elderly people that were suddenly isolating themselves because they couldn't get to ASDA, they couldn't do this, you know, because it was taking too much out of them, you know, people taking sort of shortcuts and stuff like that. And I was like, no, no, enough's enough now. You know, as I said, I can understand if you're fixing that bit of the road, needs to be done. But to watch cars go backwards and forwards, but we were taking, a bus service was taken off. And to see children's education being disrupted because they're getting in late. So and then parents having anxiety because some parents here may have had their children in different classes, different schools, you know, and also even appointments that couldn't be met. So because the buses that were, you know, we've taken the buses off, then the little ones that were coming, because they put lowdeckers on, some of them were full and we would have to wait 15 minutes for the next.

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So there was all of that, you know, and it was just, I felt, and this has been said and I cannot tell you who said it because I don't know actually, but it was said. I just felt we'd been forgotten about and it was just, because this was said actually, this is a true, that the guy from Crossrail, he didn't expect the resistance. He did not expect the resistance from this community. And I was at an election cam one year in Olympic Park around there and somebody asked where we represented and we said and he just went oh the dumping ground. You know so and we're going back now probably 10 years so you can see if people had that idea then that's what they thought they could get away with and I thought, no, no, this isn't, you know, because people didn't see that, you know, what I see, what I see, which is a firm, solid community, you know, that you walk out and you do have a little chat over your garden fence. This isn't a myth. You know, it happens here. We have a coffee, or we did have a coffee morning in the library and you know, cheesy bingo and stuff like that and people needed that. They needed that, especially like, you know, after COVID as well when that fragmented a lot of people and made people very fearful. So to give people that stuff back was very important.

**AM:** Yeah, and it's really clear from how you talk about the work that you've done that community is really at the heart of it. It's where you draw your energy from, but it's also what you're trying to protect and what you're trying to improve for people. I wonder if you could say a little bit about, if you can give us an idea of that, where do you think that kind of idea that there's an absence of community in this part of London has come from? Is it to do with regeneration? Is it to do with all of these things that have been, you know, disrupting life around the docks and changing it? Do you think it's part of that?

**JE:** Possibly, possibly. And I think what happens now is you know people move out so the families are here but then they have like younger people and it filters out like I go back to a place Stoke Newington where I lived, you know, basically I was brought up there and I wouldn't know anybody there now. It's completely changed. Yet when I lived there, you know, you always knew someone who knew someone who knew someone. And um I don't even recognise in a place called Church street, the shops anymore, it's like you have to go down into sort of, I don't know, Dalston to get those shops where you can get stuff at a reasonable price, dare I say it. I think I'm being a bit elitist here, but you know that type of stuff.

So I just think like the flats that are going up, some of them are just bought by sort of landlords and then just private let. And so with that, you're not going to have people that are long term here anymore, and you're not going to have people you know that you actually recognize because, people at- these rents are quite high so you're going to have people that are working and just coming in going out and shutting the door. And I- that's what I find is, yeah, and the multiple occupancy, we just don't know. I'm lucky, I'm quite lucky, our neighbours my surrounding neighbours we've all been here quite a long time. You know, that's just how I find it.

So I'm not 100% sure why, plus some people, dare I say it, and I'll stop here, who wants to buy property or rent a property when you've got planes flying past you every 90 seconds. And, honestly until you're actually within that community and you hear it you just don't, you can't imagine, it's okay in your house, you're in your house. But, um you know when you're outside, even the schools, the parks, gardens if you're lucky to have one, you just have to just stop because it's like... so it's very hard now for people to sell and especially when we don't know which way the expansion's going, people don't want to buy a property not knowing whether the flights are going to double.

**AM:** Yeah. Where do you go for peace in your area, Julie?

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**JE:** Where do I go for peace? I... Do you know what, Anna? In my area, I can go anywhere for peace really. It's a bugbear, right? The planes are a bugbear. But to be honest, my peace is within. I don't know if that makes any sense. It might sound, about, a little bit, you know, hippie. But it is, it's within. So we've got lots and lots of green spaces, you know, we've got lots of water. I love the water, see, so you know I can sit there and I can just have maybe my headphones on or whatever, but also it's nice, sometimes I like sitting there and you're just hearing the laughter of children and stuff like that, that's quite therapeutic. And as I said, we've got, I can't remember what it's called, I think it's called Cundy Park or something, there's a lovely big environmental place not too far from here. We've got Pontoon Dock, you know, we've got a lot, we have in fact, in all honesty, we've got some green space which some residents don't ever have. So I really knock where I'm at and for me, yeah, I have to find the peace from within because I'm not going to expect London City Airport to give me it.

**AM:** You spoke then about your kind of love for the water and I wonder, was thinking about the water, was that part of the reason you were interested in getting involved in this project?

**JE:** Yes, yeah, and also it was somebody got in touch with me and I actually didn't know why and I read it and I thought that's really, really interesting. I wouldn't mind doing that. I've done some other bits before around Royal Docks that was shown over by the Millennium Mills and that. That was a very interesting part to be involved in. And so I saw that and I thought, yeah, yeah, this is... And then I thought, why am I here? It was really weird, you know, because I knew someone had put me forward. And then when you were explaining it on, you know, that day with Melanie, I thought, ah, probably because of my campaigning. Because it was about, and I didn't see it like this, and someone said, oh, it's because we're influential women. And I was like, what? Because I don't see that. I just see myself as a normal run-of-the-mill mum that, you know, sort of thinks, okay then, you know, I've got lots of connections, I've built those connections, and I'll ask these people whether they'll support me on it, and some can and some can't.

**AM:** What was it like being in that room then of influential women and maybe seeing yourself in that light for the first time on that day we gathered together?

**JE:** Yeah, I still didn't see what the hell I was doing there, to be honest. And especially when I spoke to some of the others, you know, like there was the lady that was leading the football team. There was, oh, there was so many women and it was, but um, it was an honour. That's how I would look at it. It was, yeah, it was an honour and it was an honour to sort of get to know them and I'm just sorry that that day I couldn't follow it through because these were women that, um, I would like in my life, you know. It's, I think there's something powerful when you are in a room with women that are, well women of any type, but strong women as well, that want to see a change or want to be part of a change. I think that's really important and I'm going off topic here but I went to a play last night and it was a cast of five women and it was set around these two women meeting on Greenham Common, right? And it was, I didn't realise this, it was opening night and when I looked back it was just a sea, the whole theatre was a sea of women. And we stood up, give them a standing ovation, because, you know, and we were crying and they were crying. But there was just this special moment of, you know, and even the women that were too young to remember the days of Greenham Common, and the protest songs and all that went with it, they were learning. And our history, for me, the history was not being forgotten. You know, because as I was growing up, you know, I was looking to these women and to people like, you know, May Hobbes and people like that, you know. And then suddenly, without any sort of direction of my own or meaning to, I suddenly become one of them women. You know, but that's all I can do is, you know, I just thank the women that have gone before me and the women that will go after me, because I think there is you know, there is a lot of protesting and campaigning to be done.

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**AM:** Absolutely. Oh, Julie, thanks so much. It's been such a pleasure to interview you this morning and that's a really lovely note to finish it on. I wondered if there's anything that I haven't asked you about that you'd like to tell us about before we come to an end.

**JE:** I can't, I can't think of anything, you know. I just, as I said, I'm just honoured to be, you know, a woman and a campaigner within, you know women that are campaigning, for whatever reason, no big or how small, just stand up and be counted. You know, because each individual voice makes an amazing choir.

**AM:** That's lovely. All right, thank you so much Julie. I'm just going to stop the recording now. Okay.