

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: Uma Davamani

Interviewer: Dr. Anna Maguire and Eleanor Wright

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AM: We're recording there as well. Yeah.

ERW: What even is the app for the iPhone?

AM: Voice Memos, maybe. There we go.

ERW: Of course.

AM: Perfect. Okay, so we're recording this interview on Friday the 26th of May at the London Regatta Centre, and the interview is being done - is that picking it up ok - by myself, I'm Dr Anna Maguire, a lecturer in public history at UCL.

ERW: And I'm Eleanor Wright, I'm a student doing the public history MA course headed by Anna.

AM: So tell us a bit about yourself.

UD: I'm Uma Davomini, I work in the construction sector, in digital transformation lead. I transform organisations in their digital maturity including their process and system improvements.

AM: Very interesting. So we're sat here just outside the Royal Docks. I wondered if you could start by telling us a little bit about your relationship to the Royal Docks. How did you come to be in this area and to know this stretch of water?

UD: Yeah, absolutely. So I live in this area for the last seven years, but my relationship with Royal Docs is the last two years, I would say. I had a life-changing moment that led me to some of the mental wellbeing areas of it. So I had a bit of depression, so I had to go to therapy. So in 2021, I signed up for a one million step challenge for the UK Diabetes. That's when it started my journey with Royal Docks quarter, I would say. So one day, I know that every day I need to do 10,000 steps and it was a big change for me, for a person who is not into much physical activities. And going for a 10,000 steps is an hour walk and I need something as a treat for me to feel happy. So I discovered that I can walk via the Big Ten Park and land in the Royal Docks Canes and that motivated me as the reward of my end of my walk and every day when I looked into the Royal Docks it lifted my mood and it changed my life I would say. I finished my 1 million steps challenge and I continued to walk in the Royal Docks Park and one day I discovered the Regatta Center that I can get into Dragon Boat and now I'm doing the last one year of Dragon Boat training but I would say personally Royal Docks changed my mental well-being and my life.

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AM: Wow, that's an incredible story and thinking about the power of the water. What was it that you particularly found so therapeutic about being in this space?

UD: It calms your mind because the water is calm and you can also relate yourself that there can be many things happening in your life but still you can, if you want, you can be calm. It reminds me of the sea, you can see all the disturbance on the surface of the water but if you go deep in the ocean it's still calm. So that's the metaphor or analogy I would say it always comes to my mind that yes it can be many things happen on the surface but still you can you can drive yourself to be the calm, find peace. So whenever I see the Royal Docks, the long path of the water it reminds me about there is a past, there is a future but still you can be in the present moment. That's how I look at the Royal Docks.

ERW: And can I ask, do you experience the water on your own or do you go with others?

UD: So as part of the Dragon Boat training I go with my club, with my co-pedalers in the water, but whenever I have friends coming over I bring them to the Thames Royal Dogs Park. So this is one of my favourite places to bring my friends. We come here for a walk. We start from Cypress Station and we walk till the Custom House if it is open. Now it's closed but before that it used to be open. But another thing that you can see the Central London, you can see the Canary Wharf. It used to be open. So this is one of my favourite places to show my friends.

AM: I wonder if you feel a difference between being in this area as a pedestrian, as a walker, and then there on the water itself as a paddler in the boat. Is it a different experience?

UD: It's definitely a different experience. It started initially to feel outside the water. Every day when I come for the walk, I think like how it would be if I be on the water as a paddler. So it took almost three months to have a courage even going to the Regatta Centre. One day morning I did the same thing, Saturday morning I was in my walk coming for my reward to see the Thames. So at the end of my walk I came here and it was a Saturday morning and it was so busy because every rowers was out and I thought like how nice it would be to be on the water and I don't know swimming so I always had a fear can I be on the water. So I came inside the Regatta Centre and the people were amazing. They were so friendly and the manager who is working here suggested me that, yes, you can try. You don't need to know the swimming or anything. And he suggested me Dragon Boat and he introduced me to Windy Pandas, my club. They are really one of the friendly and social club, I would say. So he did use the coach of the club, Paul, is friendly. And the same day I said, they said there is a newbie session is there, do you want to try? And I tried and I just literally fall in love with the water. And I really felt the connection which I was longing for so long. That's how I felt. And then since then I'm paddling.

AM: The idea of connection is really interesting and kind of being in that space. Could you tell us a bit more about your experience with the Windy Pandas and how that's developed over the last couple of years.

UD: Definitely. This is my first team sport. You can wonder why I never had a team sport. I don't know why, because I tend to be more brain-related rather than the physical related, I think. So I never had a team sport. Yes, I used to play sports when I was in school. So when I joined the Windy Panthers, as I said, they are really social clubs and they keep this as a benefit both from a well-being perspective and health perspective rather than trying to be competitive and win it. Yes, we want to win it, but that's not our motto. Our motto is to bring many people into the waters and learn the art, learn the physical activities, learn something and enjoy with that.

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So it was an amazing journey. I would say there are days where I felt like I'm not doing anything perfectly. And there are days which I felt I am so happy to be part of the team and learn this new sports. And it personally gave me something to look forward for every week. It is part of my routine now. And I feel I'm part of a family called Windy Panthers where I can depend on people and friends to have some nice time and learn something. That's our field.

ERW: And what is the demographic of the Windy Panthers?

UD: We have mixed, I would say. The club is of East and Southeast Asians and of course, Westerners, Britishers and me from India. So it's a mixed demographic, I would say. Of course, Dragon Boat is more of Asian games (?). It started there, but I think I see everyone involved in it. So I would say it's a mixed demographic.

AM: And when did you first hear about participating in Melanie's art project and the involvement that the Windy Pandas were going to play in the film?

UD: Yes, it was just two, three weeks before the event, I believe, so it came in our social group saying that for the women empowerment and they are, and sustainability, they are planning to do the art project and I thought like, okay, A, I'm a woman, definitely, and B, I'm part of the Windy Pandas and my club is participating, so I need to sign up. So I signed up. When I signed up, I was not aware of what they are trying to do and what the project is called also. The Flotilla is an amazing name of it. So I was not aware of the name, I was not aware of the project. So I came, I showed up, but when I came to know what we are trying to do, it was really fascinating to know the concept of it. And when I came for the preview when Melanie explained her thought process, what she brought into the art, it really impressed me and also inspired me I would say because the theme of empowering women need to continuously happen. It's not like people know about it, you need to create that awareness, you need to make people feel about it and what is the best way to make someone to relate to it through the water. I can't think of anything else that can be more pure and relatable than bringing those women on the water and I'm so glad I was one of the participants to actually peddle for them and show them.

AM: Can you ask a bit about what was the experience of being here on that day in March and being out on the water both in the daytime and then going into the night, what was that like for you?

UD: So that is a first time experience I would say for most of us because we do pedal in the evening but we have never pedalled that part of the Royal Dock so thanks to again Melanie and the team for getting that permission. So some of those peddlers from Windy Pandas, they said it's like a vacation or a holiday or a beach, but the experience is so fascinating. It started from in the late evening and then it went into the late night and you can see the transition of the sky, of the lights, and it also showed a kind of... Everyone felt a different nostalgic feeling about it, apart from training and the drones taking pictures. But what you felt is you are on the side of the Thames where not everyone would be there. And you're sitting there, you can see the central London, and you can see the lights, and you can see the sky falling into the darkness and the stars coming out. That's the best way of... Yes, there is a darkness, but obviously the light is going to come out. That's how it felt. So it was one of the amazing experiences. It's going to stay with me for so long in the future.

AM: And I wonder then how it felt to go and watch the film once it had been edited, having had that experience in the water, to then go to the village hall, the village hall and see the pre-screening?

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UD: Oh, it's, it's, it's, that's when actually the excitement sparked me more, I would say. Yes, it's an amazing experience to be on the water, to see it and the drones flying over. But seeing that as a seven to eight minutes video, it's more powerful. And the way Melanie has pictured it and tried to pass the message, it was amazing. And the construction sounds in the background, to use the theme of it, that women's were not allowed in the construction sector still certain days as such. So those are the hidden messages was very powerful and to see that as a theme and the floor and the boards floating on the Thames and the shape that it's trying to do, it's like something talking to you without words, that's how I felt and I was so excited to And it's one of those nice feelings when you go to the Britannia Village and everyone sees it in the booth and you can think to yourself, oh, I was also part of that. You can see that little tiny person, it's me. It's like that feeling. So I did share that with my friends. That person is me. Of course, they can't see that I can see it. actually brought me like a childhood kind of experience where you feel so happy that you participated in a sport and you are in the corner in the photo. So it's one of those feelings I would say.

AM: Great, that's so lovely. I think what would be interesting for us to maybe talk about now is the project obviously was thinking about themes of female empowerment. And I wonder what's your experience of being a woman who lives in this area, who engages with the Docks, do you feel a sense of community with this part of London?

UD: Yeah absolutely, I would say it feels of not only a community, it also gives you the feel of safety considering me coming from a person from India, I born and brought up in India, I came to UK eleven years back. So I can say that I feel more safe here compared to what I felt back in my home town. With all due respect, India is a safe place, but still, can I go alone in the night at 8.30 on a Thames path for a walk, relate with the water and be myself without being any disturbance. It's not something I can imagine in India, but that has happened and I can do it in this part of London. I can live in central London, but I prefer to live this side of the city, two reasons. Yes, it's close to my community also, that's there in the east end, which I can communicate, which I can commute and reach, but more importantly you have Thames and calm and the biggest thing is the pathway in Royal Docks, I love it literally. So it gives you the community, it gives you the safety and also it gives you the freedom that you can be as yourself. Coming to Women Empowerment, what more than this, than Women Empowerment where you can go on your own even at the 9 at night, at 9 o'clock and then walk on the Thames path and just have a time for your own me time or being with yourself. It's the basis of the woman empowerment. It starts from there I believe.

AM: Have you noticed a change in the Royal Docks over the seven years, I think you said, you've been living in and around there?

UD: Yes, I would say there is lots of improvements made and considering the DLR is more frequent, which is helpful, now with Custom House connecting to the Elizabeth it becomes more easy to commute. And more importantly, what I have seen is the improvement they have made for the pedestrians to go on the Thames path with the kids coming and the people can come with their family and commute. I really feel there is an improvement made and there could be more done which is also would be great and people who come to University of East London they also benefit by the Royal Dock. So I would say in the last seven years I've seen the improvements that they make and it is always a progressive one.

ERW: And you speak of there being more improvements to make, what could you recommend?

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UD: That could be, initially they used to block after the UVL areas, you can't go for a walk after certain days. Nowadays they have opened it. So it would be good to have more, there are lights in the certain areas would be helpful. And in the Royal Docks also there is a space, I think there is a development is going on it is yet to be done. If it is done it would be more beneficial. And I would say that in the evenings having a bit more lights than what it is now in some and also some kind of control measures on people driving speedy cycles, like the water cycles that they are driving. Some guidance, everyone got a chance to enjoy, but if there is some guidance would be helpful. And also promoting people to know more about the Royal Docks pathway would be helpful because as I said that I live here for seven years and I only found or figured it out the last couple of years that I can go for a year walk. I have seen people but I never figured it out. So having some more signs from people who are going to the Becton Park to show that they can go into Thames Park would be helpful I believe. That brings more people to the water and as a symbol how I connected to the water. There may be people who live in this area but never thought that they can come here and feel the same peace and calm. So those kind of improvements will be helpful and again the development is already going on but there are some, I believe it has been put on hold, if they can renew that and make that development go further, I believe the people can move here and live here, that would bring a lot of more happiness, I think.

AM: So we're coming towards the end of our interview, and the kind of final things that we wanted to speak to you about were some of the points that you've raised about how the film kind of, and Melanies briefing and framing of the film, and what it was trying to do in the speech, this like history of women's empowerment here. Was this history something you were aware of before?

UD: No, actually, until Melanie said I didn't realise that there was a restriction this much. I know that women have many restrictions in many areas, but until she mentioned it I was not aware of that history. And also there is another important point that came out, is even in the preview some of the people said that people are not, they feel that they are empowered. Actually, yes they know there is an empowerment, but some of the fields are still behind the curve and we need to promote and create awareness through hot feeds like this and through promotions to create awareness for the younger women generations to come up and uplift some of the fields. I was not aware of the history and it is really good to know.

AM: Are there other histories about this area that you would like to see told or stories or voices that you would like to see told to help us understand the community better?

UD: There is definitely a story in Royal Docks and when I go via the Royal Docks exhibition I can say that I can see there are artwork that people painted of the different part of the Royal Dockss and gave a history about it. Those things I was not aware. Whenever we see the Spillers Mills I think like oh that's definitely history behind it. So it would be great to have those artwork that's there within the building to be kept outside, maybe an enlarged one so, so people can see it. And it would be nice to have some kind of history on the pathway of the Thames itself, embedded so that people can recognize the building, recognize the place and the origin of it. So I was not aware of all these origins, so it would be good to have those things. So it makes, it enables people to relate with the community and relate with the space. So yeah, those are some of the things which I should say and obviously the DLR is promoting the root of it but these things will help people to promote from the community perspective.

AM: Final question from me. Hearing the women here has inspired you. What are the stories that have inspired you in your life and your work?

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UD: That's a great question. There are a few people I would say in different spaces. Definitely my mom to begin with. And I think every one of us will have the same thing. As our mom says, she's a very strong woman and she's the backbone of our family. So obviously she is my first inspiring person or woman I would say. And I do inspire by Brené Brown because of her speech and thought process. Being vulnerable is the strength. You need to have courage to be vulnerable rather than it's not a weakness. I do have some of my work colleagues I have had opportunity to come across by inspiring from them. Few people to name, it may sound cliché, but sometimes you think of people who came, like Oprah coming from a different background and had challenges and how she come up with. So these are the stories that generally inspires me. But my look up is a teacher who taught me in my school days and my mom and definitely I would say Brené Brown.

ERW: And what were they inspiring you to do?

UD: Women empowerment comes with having the strength and the strength is not the physical only, it's a strength also as a mind. When you have a, if you're a woman with a strong mind, then you know how to empower yourself. And when women empower themselves, they empower the community. So it all starts for me, or from my perspective, women empowerment starts having a strong mind. And what we need to focus now in younger generations, and also including older generations, and any age of group is how to strengthen that mind. The reason those women inspired me is they were able to be strong and brave, even in the toughest situations. And sometimes people think women are weak when they show their emotions. Actually, it's the power that they have. So those are the hidden truths that made me to feel that empowerment starts with having a stronger mind and for that you need to have a clarity and you need people like that to tell to women it's okay to cry but you are a strong woman.

AM: I think we're coming to the end of the interview now. Is there anything that you'd like to tell us that we haven't asked you about?

UD: Nothing explicitly but I would like to take this opportunity to say big thanks to Melanie for having this great art project and coming to the Royal Docks and show the Royal Docks and relate the theme with water. And I want to say thanks to you guys focusing this on women empowerment because that's something definitely required and needed.

AM: Brilliant, thank you very much.

UD: You're welcome.