CHANGEMAKERS
STORIES OF CHANGE
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LIFE
AFTER
HATE

PUTTING
PEOPLE
BEFORE
CLAN

FRIEND
OR
FOE

SPECIAL EDITION
FROM THE EDITOR

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Davina Patel, Editor
comms.uk@iofc.org

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Christian Picciolini tells Davina Patel how he turned his back on the largest white supremacist group in the United States.

**How did you become involved in the far-right movement?**

At 14, I was a lost kid. I was looking for community, identity and purpose. I felt abandoned by my parents. One day when I was desperate, a man promised me paradise. He said, ‘Come with me and we’ll be your new family and I’ll give you a purpose.’ The group I joined, the Chicago Area Skinheads (CASH), was the first skinhead neo-Nazi group in the US.

If a soccer coach had come to me at the same time, I would have gone with the soccer coach – I love soccer. Nobody ever gave me the opportunity. I was smart, talented and ambitious, but I was shy and adults were busy. That’s where we’re failing young people. We need to find out what they’re passionate about, reinforce that and give them the chance to succeed in a positive way.

**What did your family think of this ideology?**

My family didn’t understand what I was involved in. Once they found out, I was so deep in, there was no going back, I wouldn’t listen. At 14 and 16, I wasn’t mature enough to understand the nuances of the politics, or even the racism, it was a social movement for me.

When I was 16, the man who recruited me went to prison. I stepped into the leadership void.

**How did you recruit people?**

We looked for kids who were marginalised, who were acting out and angry, who came from broken homes. We would listen for what was missing in their lives, promise and deliver it. To a certain degree, we did provide a family, an identity and a purpose. I eventually became the leader of CASH and then the Northern Hammerskins. At that point, I was in charge of about 500 skinheads.

**‘I was a lost kid’**

**Was the group violent?**

We were more focused on marketing and music. Music was a propaganda tool. I started a band, because I...
knew it was a good way to indoctrinate young people. We’d clash violently with people who saw us the enemy – non-whites, but also whites who were opposed to us, the anti-racist gang, Antifa, and SHARP (Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice).

What triggered you to leave?

I had doubts throughout, because I wasn’t raised to be racist: racism was something that I adopted just to belong. Ideology is not what radicalises people, but a broken search for identity, community and purpose.

When I was 18 I met a woman who was not a member of the movement and we married. We were married for four years, and had two boys. She pressured me to draw back. My compromise was that I would keep the promise that I would tell my story.

Five years after I closed the store, I went through a massive depression. Finally, in 1999, a friend told me to apply for a job at IBM, where she worked. I was tattooed, I was an ex-Nazi, I hadn’t been to college, I had never had a meaningful interaction with anyone who wasn’t like me. I started to empathise with their situations like they empathised with mine. Ultimately, they got to me. They could have protested, they could have broken my windows. But instead they showed me compassion. Every person I have worked with, myself included, has changed through the compassion of those from whom they least deserved it. People can change.

‘They love violence against them’

What do we need to do to stop extremist groups?

These movements love violence against them. When protesters attack Nazis, it proves their rhetoric – that they’re being attacked and marginalised, that their freedom of speech is being suppressed. They use it as propaganda.

They love silence too. When we don’t speak out against them, it allows them to go unchallenged. The happy medium is to hold them accountable by a strong show of presence. A week after Charlottesville, two or three dozen neo-Nazis protested again in Boston, but 40,000 protesters surrounded them with candles. They said, ‘We’re here. We see you, but we’re not going to adopt your tactics. We just want you to know we’re here and we’re holding you accountable.’ That’s how you wage peace.

What can ordinary citizens do when terrorist attacks happen and what can we do to reintegrate former extremists?

Support the victims. When somebody is hurting, we need to rally around them.

More Americans are killed by white supremacists than by any other foreign or domestic extremist group. Yet we don’t say that we have a white terrorism problem.

We need to provide more opportunities for people to leave that lifestyle. When you’re in, there’s no way out – either your group will hurt you or the police will arrest you. We need safe ways for people to leave. Otherwise they just push down their fears and confusion and act more extreme.

We shouldn’t look at them as monsters, but as broken people doing monstrous things. The more we call them monsters, the more it pushes them down their hole. We need to bring them closer, to embrace them. Every person I have worked with, myself included, has changed through the compassion of those from whom they least deserved it. People can change.

‘Not monsters but broken people’

‘I wasn’t raised to be racist’

I hadn’t told anyone, because I was scared of being judged. When I started to tell people, the burden lifted off of me.

Tell us about Life After Hate.

I co-founded Life after Hate in 2009, to tell our stories online. People wrote to us from all over the world, wanting to share their stories. They had thought they were the only ones who had gone through this. Life after Hate became a community which people could join, and so feel safe to leave the movements they were part of.

Now I’m starting a new global exit programme, which focuses not just on white supremacists but on all extremists. We want to be a beacon for people all over the world who are struggling. For instance, when I was in Slovakia, Bulgaria and Hungary, people said, ‘Nobody in our country has ever come out with their stories.’
Putting people before clan

Lajeel Abdirahman talks to Talia Smith about her passion to help Somalis in the diaspora and at home.

Lajeel Abdirahman is a community activist both in her birth country, Somalia, and in London, where she has lived for 25 years. Among the projects she runs in Somalia are a football team for boys at risk of radicalisation, an informal school for 115 children and trust-building training courses for youth groups.

She grew up in Mogadishu, studied in Somalia and Italy, and married soon after she returned to Somalia. Just after her daughter was born, civil war broke out and continued for more than 20 years. She lost her brother and a number of friends in the fighting. ‘I saw good and bad things in the war,’ she says. ‘The positive was the strength of humanity and the kindness given to strangers.’ One example is her own courage, crawling from one house to another, with bullets firing above her head, to find antibiotics for a pregnant wounded woman. The woman survived.

Lajeel and her two-year-old daughter fled to Kenya with her sister and cousins. In the refugee camp where they lived, she cooked for over 50 people a day during the month of Ramadan. ‘I thought one way of helping the suffering was through food.’ After nine months, she managed to get to Italy with her daughter, and then in 1992 to the UK with other members of her family. ‘The move here was not easy,’ she says. ‘There were constant obstacles and while we were waiting we could not access public services.’

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She worked for 15 years in mental health, family and children’s services in London, first as a translator and then as a social worker. ‘As a translator, I was never allowed to have a voice even though I could see solutions.’ She became known in her community for never turning away a person in need, and now runs an advice and support service from a room in the back of a shop. She often acts as the go-between for parents and children, and is not afraid to be accused of ‘westernisation’ when she confronts cases of negligence. ‘I hold my head high,’ she says. ‘We need to learn from each other.’

The civil war in Somalia has exacerbated divisions between Somalis’ different clans, says Lajeel. ‘Clannism is a huge barrier to community cohesion. I wish I could eradicate the tribal clan concept from Somalis’ souls.’ Encouraging young people to rise above clannism is a core part of the training sessions which Lajeel and her husband run in Somalia. They share their own story, as they come from different clans.

In these sessions, Lajeel draws on the training in dialogue facilitation which she received from Agenda for Reconciliation, a programme of Initiatives of Change UK. She is passionate about teaching young people how to talk and reach each other. ‘Dialogue gets rid of the grudges we inherit from our parents about other clans,’ she says. She and her husband are raising funds to run trust-building courses in 14 of Mogadishu’s 17 districts, with the backing of the city’s Deputy Mayor and district councillors. ‘This training can settle disputes before they lead to fights or court cases,’ she says. ‘It helps someone to not take revenge. It shows a path of forgiveness and values.’

Merka, the town in southern Somalia where Lajeel was born, has a high presence of Al-Shabaab militants. In response, Lajeel founded Ameb, an NGO which supports young local people with welfare, health and literacy training. It runs a football team to ‘distract the boys’ from falling prey to the militant group. With the help of Lajeel’s sister, Edna, Ameb was also registered as an NGO in Italy to provide operations in Milan for children born with abnormalities or heart complications. They organise dinners to raise money and ask for donations from family, friends and the wider Somali and non-Somali communities. With other Somalis who have been trained by the Agenda for Reconciliation programme, she also founded Nabad Curiye, a peace-building group which is active in Mogadishu.

Change in people’s attitudes is the key to reconstructing a Somalia which serves everybody, she says. ‘I want to teach people to do it for themselves, to make the changes and believe that everyone is a changemaker in his own way. I would like to see the diaspora bring constructive change – here and back home.’ Above all her dream is for Somalis to ‘put the person before the clan’.

‘I hold my head high’

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‘Barrier to community cohesion’
Extremely together

Fatima Zaman tells Francesca Baker about her work to counter violent extremism.

As a British Bengali Muslim woman, Fatima Zaman knows what it’s like to be categorised and have her personal identity questioned. She says that her identity has had ‘a massive impact’ on her work, engaging young people in dialogue to counter extremism. ‘I witnessed the 7/7 bombings in July 2005, aged only 13. My Muslim background suddenly came into opposition with my British identity, and people interrogated it, as though the two are opposed. But I always say that I am a hybrid.’

Fatima is a young leader at the Kofi Annan Foundation’s Extremely Together initiative, a youth-based network which focuses on peer-to-peer engagement and education to bring about change. ‘My mixed background allows me to understand different grievances and begin to realise why someone might have been disenfranchised,’ she says. ‘When I’m in workshops I see people of an age that I was at that time asking similar questions to those that I asked, and can empathise with where they are coming from and help them to channel those questions and objections into a positive space.’

Dialogue is at the heart of Fatima’s work. ‘We have seen that when we don’t have open, honest and unbiased conversation and communication it inevitably results in violence and extremism.’ Her goal is to facilitate talking and develop alternative routes, so that extremism is no longer an option. It’s an informal, educative approach that equips young people with the skills and opportunities to create lives and communities in which they don’t need extremism.

‘Open, honest and unbiased conversation’

The Extremely Together – Countering Violent Extremism roadshow visits schools to work with marginalised youth who are at risk of accepting extremist narratives. Fatima and her colleagues help them to develop their own counter-narratives, replacing negative radical ideas with more positive ones. The aim is not to impose a new belief system on young people, but to enable them to feel confident enough to think for themselves. Rather than being given a new story, they are equipped with the skills to create their own.

‘Young people are bombarded with information, and we don’t teach them the cognitive skills and ability to develop religious, spiritual and moral literacy,’ says Fatima. ‘My work is about helping them to develop those abilities and make up their own minds. They need to know what is propaganda and what isn’t, and to feel empowered to reject narratives which they don’t feel comfortable with.’ Extremely Together offers a safe space for discussion, where tensions can be directed in a positive direction. This is far more effective than shutting young people down and creating a space where extremist ideas can thrive.

Extremism doesn’t begin in a vacuum, she says. It’s created within a context of social fragmentation and disengagement, and so alleviation of these issues may help to address it. This is something that is particularly relevant to the UK. ‘In my work with frontline communities I have seen evidence of disenfranchisement and that when these issues are not discussed young people feel disengaged,’ she says. ‘They might feel like they have more of a sense of a purpose within extremist organisations. We have to tackle the issues before they reach that point, because it’s harder to bring them back.’

Not that Fatima believes in giving up, once someone has started to engage with violent extremist beliefs. ‘There should always be the option of a dialogue,’ she maintains. ‘We find that sometimes young people become disengaged with the organisation they have joined and might want to come back. So, just like with Extremely Together’s work with communities, an impartial discourse is crucial.’ She sees grassroots change, starting at the personal and local level, as fundamental. But national and global entities also have a role. Again, informed debate is crucial. At the moment national policy is separate from global policy, and at a remove from local communities. Foreign policy teams are unaware of what’s happening on the ground. She sees her role as helping to break down the siloes that stop progress being made. Extremist narratives should never be the only option available to young people. By equipping them with the ability to question the stories they are given, and the hope that things can be different, Fatima Zaman and Extremely Together are helping to change lives on a personal and local, social and global, level. It all begins with dialogue.

‘Helping young people to think for themselves’

Fatima Zaman lives in Bethnal Green, London.
How one survivor fights extremism

Bjørn Ihler narrowly escaped death on the Norwegian island of Utøya in 2011, and now works to prevent violent extremism. He talks to Davina Patel.

In 2011, during his vacation from Liverpool University, 20-year-old Bjørn Ihler attended the summer camp of the youth wing of the ruling Norwegian Labour Party on the island of Utøya.

On the afternoon of 22 July, the participants were told that there had been an explosion in Oslo. ‘Norway had never seen terrorism,’ he says. ‘At first people thought it was a gas explosion, but it was soon obvious that it was something bigger. Luckily only eight people had died.’

As the Oslo delegation frantically tried to get through to friends and family, the man who had planted the bomb, Anders Breivik, was on his way to the island dressed in a fake police uniform. He had decided to attack the camp because he thought that the Labour party was ‘in favour of the Islamisation of Norway’.

When the shooting began, the security team thought it was coming from across the lake, and gathered everyone in the centre of the island. ‘Then a man in dark clothing came towards us. Some people ran towards him, but he lifted his gun and shot people straight down. My friend and I ran in the direction of the forest.’

On the way he found an eight-year-old boy, paralyzed with fear. (He later discovered that the boy’s father had been one of the first people to be killed.) Bjørn carried him into the forest and they hid together, with gunshots sounding around them. As the shooting got closer, a crowd started running towards them, including another young boy who was on his own.

Meanwhile, Breivik had surrendered to the police. 69 people were dead. ‘Dealing with the trauma and finding my way back to life was extremely painful. I was somehow OK with being dead but I haven’t always been OK with being alive,’ says Bjørn. ‘I now work every day to stop violent extremism.’

Extremism is the violent denial of diversity

On the day of the attacks, Breivik issued a 2,000-page explanation of his actions. Bjørn read it and then, in November 2011, encountered Breivik in court for the first time. ‘I realised that he is just another human. We’ve got to figure out how he became an extremist and what we can do to make sure people don’t follow his path.’

‘Extremists remove the humanity from those they want to kill,’ Bjørn explains. ‘Psychologically you can kill cockroaches, but you can’t kill another human being in this sort of way. Extremists don’t see people as human beings. If we stop seeing each other as human beings then we’re at risk of becoming extremists ourselves.’

Demonizing Breivik gives him more power than he deserves. ‘We are all the result of the stories we believe to be true about ourselves,’ he continues. ‘We often forget that extremes grow out of every community.’ He criticises the media’s focus on Islamic extremism to the exclusion of far right extremism.

Bjørn uses social media and film to combat extremism, and share positive and diverse stories. ‘I find people with radical views online and I talk to them.’ The danger of such platforms as Facebook, he points out, is that people only select the information they agree with, and believe that’s the only truth. ‘Desmond Tutu says, “Extremism is the violent denial of diversity.” Diversity is about people being and thinking differently. If you have a strong, positive identity, you are not uncomfortable with someone else.’

Bjørn is currently producing a film about the radicalisation of a young Danish man who joined ISIS.

‘I thought I was going to die’

Bjørn picked up the two boys and ran with them. ‘At one point, I stumbled into a pile of dead bodies. I recognised my friends. In that pile, I heard a phone ringing. Someone was trying to contact their loved one. They would never be able to talk to them again.’

They ended up on the tip of the island. To their relief, a man who looked like a police officer appeared, but he lifted his gun and started shooting. Everyone jumped into the water. Breivik kept shooting at the swimmers, and Bjørn saw him taking aim at him. ‘I thought I was going to die. I came to peace with this very quickly. Thankfully he missed.’ He and the two boys swam around the corner and hid in the water under some bushes until it was safe to climb out.

‘I now work every day to stop violent extremism.’
My guitar is my Kalashnikov

Mer Ayang’s guitar is her ‘weapon of peace’. Yee-Liu Williams hears how song can overcome anger in the aftermath of war.

Before South Sudan gained independence in 2011, Mer Ayang journeyed to the capital Juba to help build a new nation after decades of war. In December 2013 fighting between militia factions erupted and another war broke out. Mer escaped to neighbouring Uganda in the back of a truck with seven family members and ‘Kalashnikov’ – her prized guitar.

Kalashnikov was so named because she was often stopped and searched. She recalls the scene at various checkpoints, with men asking ‘You have weapons with you?’ and holding real Kalashnikovs to her ‘big box’. ‘My guitar is my Kalashnikov,’ she explains, ‘my weapon of peace.’

Since civil war broke out in 2013, tens of thousands of people have died in the fighting in South Sudan and an estimated two million have been displaced to neighbouring countries. Mer’s songs are born out of pain, frustration and anger, and a belief that music is a ‘harmonious tool’ for healing. She did not plan to be a musician, but knew ‘I had a song in me’. Her soulful, jazzy songs carry a clear message of the importance of putting unity before tribe. ‘I was performing to a broken nation who only know about death on a daily basis,’ she says.

Her best-known song ‘Southern Sudanese’, composed while jamming with friends, went viral because it expressed ‘what we are all feeling’. It called for an end to division and tribalism, at a time when people were being subjected to unspeakable atrocities based on tribal ethnicity. She is emphatic: ‘The world needs to know the realities of what is happening in South Sudan.’

‘Tickle the empathetic sensors’

Before 2011, she and her family lived in Khartoum in northern Sudan. ‘It was home but not home,’ she says, because she ‘never fitted in’. Ethnic background was enough ‘to destroy trust, create fear, prejudice and discrimination’.

Mer has special refugee status, sponsored by the Red Cross, and is fortunate to have been granted asylum in Switzerland. The mental scars have not healed and the time is not right for her to tell her full story: the memories are overwhelming and ‘numbing’. The fear of reprisal still hangs over her. But each time she takes to the stage she gets stronger. She mourns for the many thousands of women who have suffered, and asks, ‘What about other women like me?’

She acknowledges that the horror of war is ‘beyond the understanding and experience of most people’ who live in peaceful Europe. She talks of the ‘unspeakable horrors’ inside refugee camps where the consequences of mental trauma and breakdown are significant. She observes that ‘music is a language that taps into faith’ and can help in the healing process. Her aim is to ‘tickle the empathetic sensors’ through music and song and to raise awareness so that those who ‘don’t know our story’ will take action. Her songs cry out for the women and young girls who suffer in silence. The aftermath of war, where ‘it is the bullets that speak’, leaves mental scars of hatred and division, as well as physical scars. ‘We cannot address anger without an approach to healing,’ she says. ‘We have to question ideologies and to ask “what can I do about it?” and “what can you do about it?”’

Mer campaigns for professional support to help refugees deal with post-traumatic stress resulting from their war experiences. The problems of those whose mental health breaks down is exacerbated in refugee camps, where mental trauma is often viewed as extreme behaviour, associated with terrorism, especially for single, young men.

As an ambassador for peace, Mer’s voice is strong. She calls out to religious and political leaders and each one of us to take responsibility for what is happening in her country and across the world.

She sits with Kalashnikov and crescendos into song. Her hope is that one day she will be able to sing in freedom, in her home country, a united South Sudan, and feel accepted for who she is.

‘I knew I had a song in me’

Mer was part of a movement of young artists and musicians, who used their talents to express their anger and frustration at what was happening in South Sudan.
They sit side by side over dinner at the conference on Addressing Europe’s Unfinished Business, during the Caux Forum, where they have shared a platform this morning. Jo picks some of Pat’s leftovers from his plate. ‘Pat has helped me move on from enemy to friend,’ she says. She acknowledges that their friendship makes little sense to most people.

Jo’s father, Sir Anthony Berry MP, was one of five people killed when Patrick Magee planted a bomb in the Grand Hotel, Brighton, which was hosting the 1984 Conservative Party conference. At the time, Jo was 27. Her peace-loving life, with time spent in an ashram in the Himalayas, was shattered in an instant: ‘I lost the me that was a free spirit and became part of the war.’

Jo met Pat 16 years later. He did not conform to her idea of what a ‘terrorist should look like’. She had been told on several occasions he did not want to meet her and admits they broke all the rules of restorative justice. ‘I knew he wasn’t going to kill me.’ Her hope was to ‘look into his eyes and put a face to him’.

‘I knew he wasn’t going to kill me’

‘If I had lived Pat’s life, I might have had to make the same choices,’ says Jo. ‘I am always going to be against any violence, but if I understand why he, and others, chose to use violence then that can help me to look at how we can make the world a place where people are less likely to use violence.’

I ask what it is that connects them. Is it forgiveness? Jo finds the word misleading, as it suggests an absence of anger. ‘For me it is more about empathy and understanding.’ She sees humanity as a golden globe made up ‘bonds of human connection’ and absolute love. Their friendship is a healing element in the broken globe.

‘At the point I killed Jo’s dad, I severed the “globe of human connection”,’ says Pat. When they met for the first time, he expected to see ‘hurt, pain and anger’. Instead, there was ‘no animosity but just a calmness’. He was totally disarmed.

‘It is more about empathy’

For Pat, it was the experience of being listened to that was life-changing. ‘To listen is to recognise the imbalance and to talk away part of your power,’ he comments. As a former IRA member, he carries the burden for the loss of innocent lives in the armed meeting would be a one-off. ‘If there was anger I doubt there would have been a follow-up. We came mutually to know that the conversation had to go on. More needed to be said. We just couldn’t leave it there.’

‘To listen is to recognise the imbalance and to talk away part of your power’
struggle of ‘political obligation’. The judge at his trial branded him ‘a man of exceptional cruelty and inhumanity’ and gave him eight life sentences. He was freed in 1999 under the Good Friday Agreement. In prison, Pat wrote about ‘the Troubles’ and completed two university degrees. He states his actions were ‘symptomatic’ of the time: ‘I had to do what people around me were doing otherwise I couldn’t live with myself. I would not wish that for anybody. But that’s what happened and I have to deal with it. I wish I hadn’t been that person. I wish I hadn’t lived that night.’

‘I wish I hadn’t been that person. I wish I hadn’t lived that night’

From a single encounter their relationship has developed into an extraordinary friendship based on honesty. ‘Jo can read me very well and never takes advantage. That redefines friendship. But it goes way beyond that, because it involves total honesty.’

‘Someday I may be able to forgive myself’

And what about forgiveness? Pat sees a distinction between ‘seeking forgiveness and seeking understanding’. It is not an issue that has ‘plagued’ him. ‘Someday I may be able to forgive myself. I wouldn’t ask for it and I don’t believe I deserve it. All I’m trying to achieve is some level of understanding. It may be that forgiveness can follow but it is not essential to what we do.’ Pat and Jo have now met over 100 times. Together they speak at conferences, universities and outreach programmes all over the world and have collaborated on documentaries. They work together through the charity Jo set up in 2009, Building Bridges for Peace, which seeks to help divided communities ‘to explore and better understand the roots of war, terrorism and violence’.

‘Jo admits the journey has been long and often difficult. But today the narrative has changed: ‘Pat is not just the person who killed my father; he has become somebody I care for, who travels and works with me and is my friend.’

British society has become increasingly and richly diverse in recent decades. Mostly, people live in harmony, co-existing free of overt tension. Yet, as an active politician for the last 25 years, I have always been conscious that a minority was not reconciled to Britain’s multi-culturalism. For right movements never disappeared and found political expression in the British National Party and the UK Independence Party, amongst others.

In comparison, until recently, Britain’s immigrants were rarely, if ever, sources of extremism. Tensions tended to be within and between immigrant populations. But with the rise of globalised violent extremism, especially from several Muslim countries, tiny numbers within Britain’s immigrant populations have become radicalised, with larger numbers becoming disaffected.

This radicalization has been catalysed further by various foreign policy decisions, above all Iraq, and by the internet and social media. A vicious circle of mistrust has developed, only partly fuelled by irresponsible and reckless Islamophobia in the mainstream media. As a result we see less dialogue rather than more.

A local MP, I get to know people from many backgrounds and faiths. As I help individuals in my advice surgeries or visit our local mosque, it’s been deeply distressing to see this increased alienation and distrust. As a Christian, called to ‘love thy neighbour as thyself’, this is one of the most backward steps I’ve seen in my lifetime.

The most striking example from my local work involved Guantanamo Bay. Bisher Al-Rawi, a Muslim man from New Malden on business in Africa, was illegally rendered by the CIA to Guantanamo, via a period being tortured in prison at Bagram Airport, Kabul. It took more than four years of hard work to get him released – including two trips to Washington. He was never charged with any offence.

Engage not prevent

Sir Edward Davey MP is the Liberal Democrat Home Affairs Spokesman.

Ed Davey MP reflects on how to break the vicious circle of mistrust.
Aboard the miracle train

The award-winning nurse who took healthcare to rural South Africa tells Mary Lean about her journey.

When Lillian Cingo retired from managing the neurosurgical unit at London’s Royal Free Hospital, she had every reason to put her feet up. Her back was wrecked from over three decades of nursing, during which she had reached the top of her profession, winning awards in both her native South Africa and in Britain. Instead, she chose to spend 13 years living on a train, sleeping in a bed so narrow that she had to wake up every time she turned over. Millions of South Africans have reason to be grateful for that decision.

The train was South Africa’s Phelophepa (good clean health) train, which set out in 1994, with Lillian as its manager, to bring health services to remote rural communities. Since then Phelophepa (which now runs two trains) has reached over 5.5 million people with medical, dental and eye care and counselling. It has given 20,000 student doctors an insight into rural needs, and every year trains nearly 600 volunteer health workers, chosen by their communities.

The train, which is run by South Africa’s freight transport company, Transnet, spends a week in each community, at their invitation. ‘Making people feel tall and loved’ says Lillian. ‘We would say, “It’s your train, its success depends on you.” It would never have worked if we had just arrived.’

She talks too about the lessons she learnt. In one community, local teachers arrived late for a meeting. ‘I was getting so agitated. I told them I was disappointed. Then they told me that two of their children had just lost their parents to HIV/AIDS and they had had to arrange where they would go after school, and collect money for the coffins. That humbled me. We just don’t know how people’s lives are.’

Lillian’s journey to Phelophepa began in Flagstaff, a village in the Eastern Cape. Her great grandfather, King Faku of the Pondo people, invited Methodist missionaries to his kingdom; her grandfather wrote two hymns in the Xhosa Methodist Hymnbook. Her parents were both teachers. So she grew up in a family with a strong Christian faith and tradition of service. As a child she would take off her shoes before she walked to school. ‘No one else had shoes: I wasn’t going to be the only one.’

She trained as a nurse at Baragwanath Hospital, Johannesburg, and was chosen by Robert Lipschitz, a pioneering neurosurgeon, to work on his ward. By the end of the first day she knew she had found her niche. Lipschitz urged her to go to the National Hospital for Nervous Diseases in London to train as a neurological nurse specialist, a career unavailable to her in apartheid South Africa.

It took her two years of struggling with obstructive officials to get her passport. ‘One chap said, “Why does a kaffir want to go overseas?”’

In London she met her future husband, Reg Hlongwane, a fellow South African who had campaigned against racism in sport and finally had to leave the country. They went together to a play at the Westminster Theatre, the London centre of Initiatives of Change (then Moral Re-Armament). The experience was a turning point. ‘My life had been so full of anger and being let down, and Reg’s had been so full of being tortured and beaten, so talking to people who were different from us colour-wise, but treated us with decency and respect, was so important.’ She was particularly impacted by the practice of taking time in quiet, to listen to God’s voice in her heart.

‘I wasn’t going to be the only one with shoes’

Lillian says she didn’t encounter racism in the UK, maybe because she worked in a profession which had no time for that. She revelled in being trusted to put money in an honesty box when she bought a paper and was surprised to find that the police were friendly. ‘All those small but big things.’
In search of a God who speaks

‘This book is a rattling good read,’ was the verdict of former Bishop of London Richard Chartres. ‘I read it at one sitting.’ He was launching That Other Voice by Graham Turner at the London Centre for Spiritual Direction in September.

The book tells of Turner’s quest to discover whether God, or a higher power of some kind, can communicate with us directly. He tells of discussions with Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and Jews in several countries. And he describes his own experience. ‘I want the evidence to speak for itself,’ he writes, ‘to leave readers to make up their own minds.’

Graham has been a senior journalist for several British newspapers and the BBC. In a foreword to the book, former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams writes, ‘This vivid and sensitive book introduces us to a wide variety of people who have learned about change by learning to listen…. This is the very opposite of a naïve belief that there is an inner light that will give us infallible guidance in our problems. On the contrary it is about developing habits of silence and attention, scrutinising without self-indulgence the byways of our “inner life”, and nurturing a basic trust that truth exists and will change us and our world if only we allow it space enough.’

John Bond

That Other Voice by Graham Turner, £12.00 from shop.iocf.org/that-other-voice

Not that life was easy at home. Reg could be violent, and finally, in 1977 when their son Jameson was about eight, she left him. By then she was working at the Royal Free, where she had set up the neurosurgical unit. ‘When I was at work I could block it all out and focus,’ she says. On the day that she left home, she stayed late at work looking after a child who had had surgery. It was only as she left the hospital, that she remembered that she and Jameson had nowhere to sleep.

They went to a launderette to use the phone. Nobody would take her in, once she said she had a child. Finally she thought of the Samaritans. By now she was so emotional that she could not speak, so an English woman who was waiting for her washing made the call for her. They spent that night in a home for battered women.

The divorce took five years to come through, because Reg was so personable that the court would not believe that he was abusive. ‘We went to the High Court of Justice 12 times,’ she says. Now, nearly 40 years later, Reg has dementia. She visits him regularly in his nursing home when she is in the UK.

Lillian retired from the Royal Free in 1989. While working, she had prepared herself to return home, when the time came, by taking a Masters in counselling psychology and a diploma in HIV/AIDS counselling. In 1994, in Nelson Mandela’s free South Africa, her chance finally came. When she left Phelophepa in 2008, she was a South African icon, with five honorary doctorates to her name.

She now divides her time between Britain and South Africa, but plans to move permanently to South Africa in 2018. She speaks of her concern for HIV/AIDS education, and for children from violent homes in Soweto’s most deprived communities. So she still won’t be putting her feet up. ‘When you have received a lot in life, you’ve got to give,’ she explains. ‘I’ve got so much to do because I have been blessed in so many ways.’
‘If you change yourself you will change your world’

Mahatma Gandhi