



## WOMEN UNITE AGAINST RACISM & GIRLZ UNITED IN TOWER HAMLETS

In response to the election of a BNP councillor in Tower Hamlets in 1993, Julie Begum and others set up Women Unite Against Racism (WUAR). In part, they were inspired by the US civil rights movement Voter Registration campaign. “They avoided the cult of leadership they’d seen in other movements, there was childcare provision, and they made sure women who weren’t normally involved in activism had their voices heard. They came together in each other’s houses and made banners and posters. They wanted to make sure the women were visible, but still safe, as the protests could get violent.” WUAR encouraged people to register to vote, escorted women to polling stations, and empowered them to be part of the anti-racist struggle in Tower Hamlets. Working alongside others, they helped defeat the British National Party candidate. 23 years later, Julie reflects:

“I think it changed us all and it left a really important legacy to show that it is possible to do things differently.” “To remain silent and stand by, it’s just not a part of my nature I think.” (Quotes from an interview with Share UK, *Women Activists of the East End*, 31 March 2016).



Journey to Justice partner Girlz United has been working with a diverse group of teenage girls from London and Essex for several years, hosting social events, interfaith conversations and residential weekends. The group was keen to learn about the local East End history of struggles against racism, and to understand more about each other’s cultures and personal experiences of discrimination. Julie Begum, Chairperson of the Swadhinata Trust, talked to the girls about her role in Women Unite Against Racism in the 1990s and about the racist murder of Altab Ali in 1978. In July 2016, a group from Girlz United in Shadwell went away with members of Hawkwell Girls Brigade, Essex and Brandon Baptist Church, Camberwell for a residential weekend in Danbury, Essex. Led by youth workers and facilitators, Liz Anderson, Sally Claydon, Parul Motin and Leanne Sedin, they learnt more about this local history, discussed questions of identity and social justice, did team building activities, and produced searing poetry. Now they are sharing their learning all over the UK.

In their own words, after the residential:

*“Without programmes like this you can’t understand why people are racist. It is fear of the unknown.”*

*“We learnt that we all have a voice. It’s just what we do with it that can make a difference.”*

*“What we’ve done together this weekend is important not only through the practical activities, I also gained knowledge and it’s inspired me to become more of an active person and to start taking more interest in my own community and value every piece of it.”*

*“We have similarities and differences, you’ve got to see that and understand it. We’re unique, but we have so many things in common, so we can be really good friends.”*

*“I’m proud that I can open my eyes to different cultures, religions, backgrounds. I want to know as much as I can.”*

With thanks to: Girlz United; Hawkwell Girls Brigade; Brandon Baptist Church, Camberwell and their families; Liz Anderson; Julie Begum; Sally Claydon; Parul Motin; Leanne Sedin; Kate Traynor; Essex Outdoors – Danbury

With thanks to our funders and supporters

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