

In spring 2017, the South London Gallery (SLG) invited artist Jessie Brennan to collaborate with residents of Pelican Estate on a project titled YOUR WORDS. Jessie spent time listening to residents' experiences which, in different ways, celebrate the value of public housing and speak to the broader challenges often faced by those on council estates.

*A broader context of the project, including Jessie's introductory text and examples of further conversations between Jessie Brennan (JB) and Pelican residents, can be found on the South London Gallery website:
<https://www.southlondongallery.org/projects/jessie-brennan-words/>.*

Norman (b.1956, UK), Pelican Estate resident

JB When did you come to live on Pelican Estate?

N I think my mother came here from Jamaica in about 1955. Those were the days when they had signs up: 'no black, no Irish, no dogs'. [...] Well, we've been here 45 years. [...]

[Being expelled from school] was the best thing that ever happened to me in life, I got to admit, because then I was able to get a job. [...] I've been driving a black cab now for 30 years. [...]

JB Are you a tenant or leaseholder?

N I'm still a tenant from the council. The right to buy is a good idea but now it's not practical. [...] It's not viable to spend that sort of money because it'd be costing you thousands every time they [Southwark Council] come to do maintenance, and you've got no say in the matter. The only way it'd be viable is if everybody on this block owned the property. [...]

Years ago, being a tenant you had a place for life. [...] Now they've changed the policy. [...] I always pay my rent on time because I know if you don't pay your rent they [Southwark Council] won't maintain the property, because you have to bring your rent up to date before they bring someone in to repair it. So my rent is always paid on time. And if I ever phone them up, it's within the week and they get it [a problem] rectified. I've gotta give them credit for that. [...]

JB How do you see the future for Peckham and its existing communities?

N If I'm still alive in 20 years' time, you won't even recognise Peckham, because Peckham will be the new Chelsea. And that's what they want it to become. Anything near the centre of London is what they're going to regenerate in one way or the other. We will all be, I won't say booted out, but we will all be priced out, I should say. To the effect that we'll

have to go find somewhere cheaper to live. Because they want this area, they're just doing it slowly by borough. [...]

I think a lot of people like me are aware of what's going on but like most working class people we're more worried about how we're going to pay our bills tomorrow than what's going on around us. [...] Because they know that once you're in debt and they keep you working you ain't got time to protest, you ain't got time to worry about what's going on in your borough. All you need/want to know is that you can pay your bill tomorrow, because you're frightened of losing the home over your head or your children not being able to do things. [...] If you had a really good wage coming in and you had time to sit down and reflect on what's going on, there would be outrage! There would be more protests than ever! [...] The average working class person or poor person don't have that. They worry about how they're going to survive the next day. [...]

The media would tell you it's dangerous: 'don't come into Peckham'. But if you live in Peckham you know [differently]. For me, I think for this estate, I think I would say it's freedom for us here. [...] For a mixed community, for what we are, there ain't no clashes, there ain't no wars, and I think that's brilliant. And that's what this reflects on the estate, its freedom.