

# OPEN Summary of oral history interview with Karin Greene

## Date of interview: 30<sup>th</sup> September 2021

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**[01:23:08-01:23:36] closed access**

**[01:25:27-01:25:56] closed access**

**[These sections of the audio have also been removed/ muted from the Listening/ Public Access copy of the recording and details have been removed from the OPEN Public Access Summary. The Master/ Closed audio recording is unedited.]**

**INTERVIEW WITH: Karin Greene**

**INTERVIEWER: Sarah Gudgin**

**LOCATION: South London Gallery, Peckham**

**File number: KARIN\_GREENE\_WAV\_FILE**

**DURATION: [01:31:54]**

[00:00:00] Karin Loretta Green was born in Barbados on 18<sup>th</sup> August 1948. The family lived in the parish of St Michaels near Bridgetown. They lived in a 'chateau house' which she describes, but it was destroyed by hurricane in 1955. She lived with extended family, mother, two brother and grandmother, two cousins who were brought up by her grandmother. It was a positive environment to grow up in.

Describes her grandmother cooking in a large pot and feeding the community, who were like family, everyone looked after each other. However, if anyone got up to mischief, their parents and grandparents know of it before they got home!

They went to church three times on a Sunday. She thinks it was a strict but fair upbringing. She lived in Barbados until she was 21. She gave birth to a son, who was born in 1967 and she wanted to bring him to the UK with her, but her mother decided she was going to keep him. She was angry and upset, but this was the custom.

She talks about her reasons for coming to the UK she was 21, describes having to return home by 9.00pm and she decided it was time for some adventure and escape. She was well educated. She was daddy's girl, but her mum was strict with her, dad was strict with the boys. She disagreed with her mum, but not in a rude way, but this created tension between them. Her grandmother taught her to cook and prepare food.

Mum was very strict. After school it was homework, chores and playtime. Mum stayed at home, dad worked at a distillery, then worked as a delivery driver and then a taxi driver. Discusses the other members of the household and that everyone worked and contributed to the household.

[00:08:40] There were high expectations around education and there was a family moto, which Karin remembers, 'You go to school out the front door and you come back through the front door.'

She was a prolific reader and her mum obtained books for her, but she became frustrated at the amount of reading Karin did and she eventually got her a book by Thomas Hardy to read. Karen used

a dictionary to look up words which she didn't know and her mother got a shock when Karin was able to finish the book.

[00:11:42] Karin learnt a lot about England at school and says Barbados was known as little England. She learnt English history, but all she learnt about her own history was the year that slavery was abolished, which she scrubbed from memory. She didn't learn anything about black Barbadian history until she became an adult. Slavery was a painful history and it wasn't ever talked about. As she got older she realised the West Indies was regarded as British territory and they couldn't acknowledge British rule there.

[00:15:27] Religion played a big role in their lives. She was told that if she didn't go to church, then she would go to hell. She accepted that this is what she had to do, but she did enjoy it. They were Anglican Church of England. Wasn't allowed to step foot in a Catholic Church.

She talks about having her first son out of marriage. The news wasn't received well by the family, her Father was livid and mother said that they had 'sent her to secondary school and all she got was a son,' which Karin thought was brutal. Her father did come around and her mother took over raising him.

At the age of 21, she was still expected to be home by 9.00pm or the door would be locked. However, if she wanted to go out, her brothers or cousin would help her get out the window.

[00:19:07] Karin discusses her feelings about leaving Barbados, her family and her son. She was fed up of the restrictions at home, she wanted adventure. At the Labour Exchange she recalls a large poster of Lord Kitchener which said 'England needs you', although she didn't know who he was. For her at 20 years old, the expectation was that she would stay at home until she got married and have her own family. Grandmother used to work in the Estate house, but mum looked after the children and didn't have a job.

When Karin enquired about going to England, she was told she would have to have her mother's permission as she was not 21 yet, so she decided to tell her dad instead. She recalls telling him and getting his permission. She had to have vaccinations to come to England, TB and a couple of others. Also a stool test, which was all fine. Dad agreed to sign on the condition that she paid back the cost of travel. When she told her mum, she said, 'You're not having your son.' Karin acknowledges that it was painful, but it was the sign of the times in those days.

Karin talks about how this arrangement changed her relationship with her son, because he thought she had abandoned him. His dad went to Canada and that's how they separated. They didn't mend their relationship until her son was an adult and he has sadly passed away since.

[00:25:27] Karin talks about coming to the UK and how this was freedom. She came by plane and flew into Heathrow. At that time, the Barbados High Commission had accommodation for new arrivals. Her first impression was that it was freezing and no one had said to bring a coat. In addition to accommodation, the Barbados High Commission had organised a job at Lyon's Corner House. Luckily her land lady's daughter had some lovely warm coats which she borrowed.

Driving from Heathrow, they saw smoke coming from so many buildings, that they thought these were factories, but then someone explained that they were houses. She was lucky to be able to live lodgings with a Barbadian household in Grove Park. The cold was hard, but it made her more determined.

[00:30:00] Living in a black household was a benefit to Karin. The landlady's daughter took them to the shops in Peckham and showed them around. Karin saw other black people and at this time there were stalls selling West Indian foods and Karin was making her own food in her lodging. She doesn't recall being homesick, but she missed her son and her dad, missed her mum a bit too. She wrote back fairly often. Her dad had to put up his land as collateral in order to fund her trip to the UK and she needed to pay this back quickly.

She worked at the Lyon's in London Wall. City gents came in to eat and she remembers that the men wore bowler hats, they had an umbrella on the arm and carried a brief case and they wore pin striped suits. The city gents were friendly, except one, who she put in his place. One customer, Willy always came at the same time and had the same order, two poached eggs on toast. He said to her, that she didn't have to do something because she was not a slave. She appreciated his comment.

Remembers one 'beastly' man who asked for food to be warmed up from one day to the next and sometimes the food had mould. He said that he 'Didn't want no N\*\*\*\*\* serving him'. Karin had a spatula in her hand and someone called the manager to come and she told Karin to get in her office. The manager spoke to the man and he went red in the face. Afterwards Madam the manager, made Karin a cup of tea and told her that she could have lost her job. Karin said what he had called her and Madam said she didn't agree with him and she had spoken to him about it. Any time he came back Karin would let someone else serve him.

[00:35:34] Karin faced prejudice at the time, but nothing she couldn't handle, because she grew up with men in the house and they had taught her how to respond. She learnt to walk away in these situations because someone told her she could end up in prison because of her colour. She liked to use words instead.

She left the Lyon's Corner House because she had ambitions for the Civil Service, but in the end she didn't go. She worked in Woolworths in the Strand before leaving to have her son Robert. Then she BHS in Peckham, then she worked for London Telecommunications. Although she'd had another son, she hadn't married his father. She says she'd had the love of her life and he was gone. She was a single working mother and she managed by finding a good childminder called Gloria. Her son loved it there and sometimes Gloria would suggest Karin pick him up later.

[00:40:00] Karin went on to have two daughters, but she didn't live with the fathers of her children, as she wanted to be independent. She remembers that before she had her son she used to go out at weekends and talks about her weekend chores.

She attended BOFCO a British Overseas Friends Community Organisation events regularly and at one of these, someone suggested that Karin should get some more qualifications, which she went on to do. She used to go Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights which made Monday mornings at work quite hard. BOFCO was a Barbadian social and support group for the community which would have parties and fund raisers. There was quiet a sizeable community in Camberwell and Peckham and the surrounding area, although Brixton was more Jamaican.

When studying, she worked in the day and went to night school in the evenings. When her son Robert developed terrible asthma, the doctor recommended that some sunshine would be good for his health, so she decided to send him to Barbados for a couple of years. However when she sent for him to come back, her mum told Karin that she couldn't have both of them. Talks about how her mum favoured boys. There was always a power struggle with Karin and her mum.

[00:45:52] Qualifications enabled Karin to get better jobs. Karin studied English Literature sometime after 1981, getting an A at GCSE and going on to gain more certificates. By this stage she had two boys and two girls and was living in Grove Park. She moved a number of times and mentions that she was living with the father of her daughters, but it didn't work. She settled in Denmark Hill for around 20 years. When the children left home, the place was too big and she moved to the Sceaux Gardens Estate in Peckham.

[00:49:39] Karin talks about bringing up her children differently to her own mum. She made sure her girls were respected and there was no difference between her daughters and her son. She made sure they had a good education but she 'stood no nonsense.' She had a close relationship with the girls and she told them to respect themselves and do not be disrespected by any man. She reminded them to 'Go to school through the front door and come back through the front door' and to do well at their studies. She thinks she gave them more freedom to be themselves, but there was a line they didn't cross.

The eldest girl Ann Marie was a 'tough nut' and like Karin, her younger daughter was quieter. Karin clashed with Ann Marie. If she disagreed with Karin, she would tell her 'straight and plain' but Karin didn't like it. Despite this, it was a joy to bring them up and they are so protective and she says she should pat herself on the shoulder for bringing them all up herself.

Karin kept her Bajan culture going in the food and sayings at home. She talks about the different foods that she cooked and she taught her kids about Barbados, she took them to church, until they decided that they didn't want to go and she didn't make them.

[00:53:39] Karin kept up her church going, but she was put off by an incident at St Giles Church, Camberwell which is a High Church. Karin sat in a pew next to a lady, who sidled up to give her more room. However the second time she sidled up, Karin realised that the woman didn't want her sitting next to her, so Karin sidled up to her, so she couldn't go any further and hemmed her in, but she didn't touch her. Karin realised that she didn't want a black person next to her in God's house and this incident put Karin off attending for a few years. She was brought up as a High Church Anglican, but this incident really upset her. She explains that in Barbados there are poor blacks and poor whites, rich blacks and rich whites, but in church they all came together as one congregation.

She now attends services at Southwark Cathedral, although this stopped in lockdown. She used to go to St Clements in Dulwich, but she stopped because she doesn't approve of women priests. Explains why she left. When she started attending Southwark Cathedral she was welcomed. Her faith is an important part of who she is and what she believes, as well as being the way she was brought up. Some of her friends don't believe, they talk about it, but they don't fall out over it.

[00:58:37] Karin talks about how she coped with help, during the Covid pandemic. This time brought out the best in humanity and people helped each other out regardless of faith or colour.

She talks about Peckham and says she doesn't have a negative reaction to Peckham. She remembers shopping in Choumert Road and a particular old fashioned shop that sold everything from hairpins to buckets. There was also the butchers there and a fish shop on Rye Lane. She didn't go to the West End till the late '80's, there was no need, because they had everything in Peckham. She talks about some of the shops, describes Jones and Higgins and the shops in the indoor market. Karin says that there was no need to fear for your life and that she felt safe in Peckham. Recalls they had three cinemas and they didn't have to go into town.

[01:04:41] Karin felt safe in Peckham and because she was black, every black person said hello. They didn't care what country you came from, you were part of the same community. In the 1970's, she remembers how if a white person came along in the street, particularly a white woman, that woman would pull up her handbag, because she thought black people were going to rob her. If Karin was feeling particularly frustrated, she would say, 'You haven't got anything I want', because she was only human and it was annoying.

There had been riots in America and this had influenced people to think that black people were a threat, this was reported in newspapers and on television which talked a lot about 'muggers'. Karin thinks the prejudice was worse in the 1980's than when she first came to the UK. People assumed black people were going to rob them. She got used to it, because if you didn't, it would annoy you and if it annoyed you, then you would react and end up in a prison cell.

[01:07:34] There was a lot of prejudice from the police who didn't know any better and they didn't like it when people spoke up because they weren't humble. They knew humility, but they also knew when to speak up against racism. Karin stayed away from the police, but saying that, if she got lost, she would approach a police man for directions. When she did have interactions with the police, it was fair.

Karin says she has put these things to the back of her mind and she is able to jettison things she wants to forget.

[01:10:41] Karin talks about *Desmonds*. She talks about how there weren't many black people on TV at the time. She found the show hilarious. Karin didn't have a television set and used to go round her neighbour's house to watch it. She didn't own a television until much later and comments on the way people spoke on American TV shows, which her grandchildren liked to watch. In Barbados she had learnt to speak and write properly.

[01:15:05] Karin says that she now avoids Peckham whenever possible, because it has changed so much over the years. There are horrible smells in Rye Lane. Although it's becoming more gentrified and some parts are nice, other areas are unpleasant especially the smells. Whereas before, they had better shops like C & A and Marks & Spencer's and other shops. The shops which smell are the West Indian shops and it doesn't make her feel like shopping there. The old Peckham has gone and they must accept progress, but the shops are all the same now. She also thinks that some of the people are not very nice. Some of the people of colour are not united and there is a division. She states that she doesn't want to record her real views.

With regards to the newcomers, Karin says that there is perpetual change in Peckham. Some of the changes she enjoys and it is not impinging on her life and some of it is enhancing her life. In the end it might be for the greater good. At first, when black people arrived, there were concerns, but over the years people have seen that black people can contribute to society, so in their own way, the newcomers are contributing to society and they all have to live together, they all learn from each other and they don't have to adopt each other's lifestyles, but they can accommodate each other, like they were accommodated when they first came to the UK. Karin talks about living together as one race, the human race, accepting each other.

[01:20:56] Karin mentions a sign that she saw in a window of a house in Bellenden Road which said, 'Neighbourhood gentrified watch area' which annoys her just to think about it. She says she didn't know how to take it, whether it was tongue in cheek, or ignorance. She decided not to take it on board, but it reminded her of the signs which said, 'No blacks, no Irish, no dogs' and it made her think of the people who first came to the UK and couldn't get accommodation and if she walks past, she doesn't look at the sign. She doesn't know what caused the person to put up the sign.

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Karin's old bungalow on the estate is being demolished and new flats are being built, but she may have the option to return.

[01:27:21] Karin's son works in a pub in Peckham, one daughter works for the NHS in a doctor's surgery and at weekends she works in a care home. The other daughter works for an organisation helping people to find jobs. Karin has 13/14 grandchildren and two great grandchildren. She explains. They come around to be fed and watered. It's busy and hilarious when they get together.

[01:31:54] End