



Recording Work Memories: the 60 Voices Project

Interviewee: Olive Walter

Olive was born in Guyana, a former British colony, and moved to the UK on 15 April 1960, at the age of 19, joining her husband who had been studying in the country for 18 months. She aspired to be a nurse. However, she faced the stark reality that a nursing career would mean time away from family, something that Olive valued. She worked at the Post Office Savings Bank in Kensington and in 1967, Olive sat and passed the Civil Service exam.

Due to her background in nursing, Olive opted for a role in the Department of Health. She commenced work within the department in January 1968 and would hold a role there until the end of her civil service career in 1993. Olive felt that working on health policy was the closest she could get to her former aspirations of being a nurse. She was also the registered First Aider at each of the buildings in which she worked - Russell Square, Eileen House, Alexander Fleming House, Blackfriars House and Richmond House.

In this time, Olive has been a part of some very important legislation during her 25 years working for the Health Department. She was involved in the Register of Persons Considered Unsuitable to Work with Children Act, established following the murder of four-year old Maria Payne, by a volunteer who had previous sex offences convictions that local authorities were unaware of. Her team was responsible for writing to individuals with convictions for sex offences, to notify them of the Secretary of State's decision to place them on the Register of persons considered unsuitable to work with children.

Olive also worked with the Post-Graduate Training Committee, responsible for the standards of education for post-graduate doctors and the approval of applications for GP Traineeships, considering overseas hospital experience as equivalent to NHS. Olive also helped with the building cost of Local Authority Community Homes for Children alongside the approval of secure units within these CHs.

Olive also worked on revising The Children Act 1989 – assisted with drafting of sections related to children in care and guardian's ad litem. This Act replaced the general duty on local authorities to promote and safeguard children in the area and providing services appropriate to those children's needs. Olive was a part of the Working Party with the Home Office to phase out the remand of 15 – 17-year-old boys to Prison Department Establishments.

Shortly before retiring, Olive participated in the *Whitehall 11 Study*, which measures how stress affects performance at work. Participants would receive a medical examination every 5 years and a questionnaire before each exam. The results were sent to GPs and subsequently led to Olive receiving an early diagnosis of a health condition. The findings have been utilised by the Department for Health and Social Care for several policies.

Olive recalls meeting Edwina Currie, at the time a Junior Minister for the Department of Health. Currie came into her office to ask one of her colleagues for advice on how to wear a traditional Sari for a function she was attending at the Indian Embassy. Once properly fitted, she walked through the office in her sari to cheers from Olive and her colleagues. She describes Currie as "lovely" and "quite a character".

Olive spoke about how, due to seizures in her knee, she had taken three periods of sick leave in seven months. One day her HEO's summoned her to his office to explain her prolonged absence. He accused her of 'swinging the lead' and claimed that he too experienced pain in his leg, but still managed to come to work. At this moment, Olive's knee seized up and started causing her immense pain. Unconvinced, her boss accused Olive of being melodramatic. A visiting doctor came to check up on her who said to the boss that the injury was completely serious, as Olive's knee had really seized up. Luckily, both parties saw the funny side, referring to the incident as "divine intervention".

During her role as a duty officer at the Department of Health, Olive would deal with several interesting calls out of hours. One caller claimed to be a member of the House of Lords and he reported one night that Westminster Council were making plans to sell their Council Houses. A few years later, the story broke, and Westminster Council was thrown into a whirlpool of scandal.

Olive retired aged 53, due to ill health. However, only a year later, she felt better and decided to fill her time with a plethora of life experiences, becoming involved in many great causes. Some of these causes include volunteering for Mind in Enfield, where she used the opportunity to build relationships, helping others fill in their welfare forms.

In 2008, Olive became a mentor and later a Director from 2012, at the London College of Law, a paralegal charity that helped people who could not afford University to gain qualifications. Sadly, the Charity closed in 2015.

At this time, Olive also volunteered for Haringey Law Centre, a registered charity providing independent legal advice and representation to socially disadvantaged people in Haringey and neighbouring boroughs. In 2011, they were under the threat of closure, so Olive and other volunteers campaigned to keep it going. Thankfully, they were able to raise the necessary funds to remain open. Olive was the treasurer from 2011 to 2019, then becoming chairperson, taking over from Baroness Osamor. She is currently the Chair.

Since retirement, Olive has had the time to relax and enjoy herself. She remarried in 1988. She and her husband bought a holiday house in Antigua and they spent holidays there until his demise.

Regarding retirement, Olive suggests planning a long holiday, taking the time to travel before it is too late and paying off any debts. Olive also suggests pursuing hobbies, spending time with family and friends, young and old, to keep perspective on life and lastly keep the brain engaged to hopefully keep dementia at bay.