

'Introducing our new series/articles telling the stories of our clients.'

We would like to interview more of our clients.'

Older people's stories are often overlooked/not told often enough.

If you are interested in telling your story get in contact with us.

We will need you to sign a consent form for us to share your story with pictures across our social media, website and publications.'

In celebration of Black History Month Age UK Westminster conducted an interview and this is Veronica's amazing story.

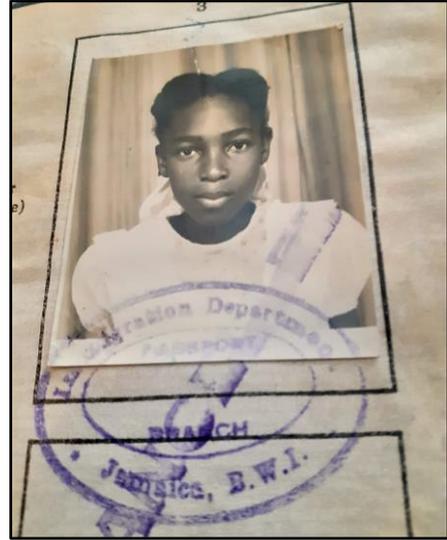
THE STORY OF VERONICA LAING WILLIAMS FROM MAIDA HILL

This Black history month holds great significance as it marks an important moment in the current political and socio economic climate that is unfolding across the world. The actions that took place in the USA and across the world over the course of the summer, coupled with the communities the pandemic has devastated the most has caused an uprising in our societies, paving way for charitable organisations to gain the necessary resources needed to support BAME communities.

I had the pleasure of interviewing Veronica Laing Williams, a 75 year old Jamaican born Westminster resident, who uses our services on a regular basis. Her and her children have lived in the borough their entire lives; "I have 4 children, 2 boys, Mark and David and 2 girls, Marcia and Joy. I also have 13 grandchildren and 7 great grandchildren, my children are my whole life." Veronica grew up in Jamaica with her sisters and brothers, up until the age of 9, and then migrated to the UK with her younger sister. Her two younger brothers Neville and Bert, who now live in the Canada, were the only siblings born and raised in the UK. Up until that moment she had not known her parents. Her dad came to the UK many years before her, and Veronica describes the ordeals he has lived through in order to be able to start a life for his family, as follows: 'He was first placed in temporary accommodation sharing a room with 12 other people, they took it in turns to share beds, half of them worked during the day and the other half during the night.' He participated in a 'pool' – or to use the African Caribbean term 'Partner' – a tradition in some countries in Africa, The Middle East and Asia. It works as a type of bank system, where every member of the group puts in an equal amount and at the end of each month the total goes to one person. This cycle continues until everyone has



had a share of the pot. This helped him save for a house, which he eventually bought in the early 50s, paving the way for Veronica's mum to travel to the UK to help settle down.



Veronica's Passport photo, taken before coming to the UK (Aged 9)

As her story unfolded I listened in astonishment at all the hurdles and hardships she had to overcome. Her resilience and strength, upheld in the face of adversity is inspiring, but also a testament to the stigma of being black in mid 20th century Britain. Veronica described her arduous school days, as the only black child in school, experiencing racism from teachers and being forced out of her classrooms as a consequence of her skin colour. Consequently, she did not learn English or Maths and found it extremely difficult to concentrate. She took a long pause after explaining this to me.

She spoke to me of her first husband, who was also her childhood sweetheart, we laughed about the different dating experiences back then and now. I told her I envied the way people dated then. She described where her and Anthony used to always meet without her dad's knowledge, 'on the Half Penny Steps' also known as the famous 'blue bridge' in Maida Hill.

As Veronica grew older, her relationship with the local Westminster community developed. If around Maida Hill, she says, 'ask anyone if they know Mama V and I promise you they will'. Undiscouraged by her education, Veronica was very successful, owning her own thriving business throughout the 60s and 70s, and working on Church Street for 11 years as a carer at the old people's home on Cirencester Street off Harrow Road. As a skilled individual Veronica has many talents and traits she pursued, for instance, she used to make Toupee and wigs for people in salons around Westminster borough.

Veronica on her graduation day, pictured with her older sister.

Veronica has been using Age UK Westminster for over 12 years, specifically using our Information & Advice service, where she describes “the service has been very good, because anything I needed, or didn't understand, Susan was there to help me. I can't do anything without the service here.” (Susan is our Information and Advice Coordinator and has been supporting Veronica for 12 years). On occasion she uses the Befriending telephone service and our pre- lockdown yoga chair exercises she describes have helped with her mobility, although she admits she misses attending classes at the Beethoven Centre as it is currently closed to the public due to the pandemic.

It was a privilege to interview Mrs. Veronica Laing Williams for Black History Month and to learn her story. As I continue to work with Veronica over the next few months, I am excited to hear and learn more about her life and the impact she's had on the different communities in Westminster. She is the pinnacle of grace and resilience, an extraordinary woman who has given her life to support others and one I can learn a great deal from.

Esra Abd Elrahman

[Community Development & Outreach Coordinator](#)