

LYDIA SUTTON

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Interviewer: Napheas Akhter

Interviewer: I

Respondent: R

00:00 I My name is Napheas Akhter. Today in speaking with Miss Lydia Sutton. Lydia was born in 1966 in Sparkhill, Birmingham. Please can you tell me something about your background?

00:22 R Ok, erm yes I was born in Sparkhill in Durham Road and my family had lived there since 1964. My parents lived there since 1964 with an older brother and my sister and before that they'd lived in Sparkbrook around the Sampson Road area and I know Sampson Road, I don't think it exists anymore, but it's near Farm Road, or it was near Farm Road and they've knocked all those houses down and yea I lived in Durham Road from 1964 til 1990 I think it was, so yea, that's where I spent my whole childhood and my teen years in Sparkhill.

01:11 I Can you tell me something about your parents?

01:14 R Ok, my parents came from St Vincents in the Grenadines which is in the Caribbean and they're quite small islands. My dad went via America, he lived in America for five years before coming to the UK and worked over there with other people from the same island and he did the typical thing that lots of males in families did in those days which was he went and left the island first to earn some money so that he could bring my mum out to live with him and at first they were thinking about going to America, but then after he'd lived there for a while, he didn't enjoy it quite as much as he thought he would, and then they got on a boat and decided to come to the UK, because again some of the friends from the same island had come to the UK, so they came to the UK, lived here for a few years and then had enough money to bring my mum over at first and then they sent for my older sister who had stayed in St Vincent while my mum settled here. So then they lived in Sampson Road for I think about four years, three years, and then during all that time saved the money they were earning until they could put a deposit on a house of their own, and they've got some very interesting stories of how the landlords used to behave and how they used to behave which is quite funny to listen to, cause my mum's now eighty five and she still tells me the stories if I ask her about how they used to be in their rented accommodation which is quite amusing.

02:55 R They could only rent from Asian landlords, nobody else would rent to them,

there used to be signs up saying refusing black people, so the house that they lived in was owned by a man called Ali and they used to have this, they weren't allowed to do certain things. They weren't allowed to cook bacon, we know now why, I don't think they did at the time, they were just told that they couldn't. They weren't allowed to use too many electrical appliances. Now I suspect that that's because he charged them one amount of money and didn't charge them for the bills, but they used to do things like sneak in the iron and plug the iron in and she was telling me a story last week of how if they heard him coming up the stairs coughing or anything, they'd sneak things out the way and hide things away and if they were cooking bacon at the time, they'd take the frying pan off and cover it and put it in a cupboard. I'm sure he kind of maybe had a suspicion, but it's quite amusing cause my mum was probably in her late teens, no she would have been in her very early twenties when she came over, so it's funny listening to those stories, because now at eighty five, it's hard to imagine my mum being sneaky, but it's very good and some of those people that she shared, because when they first moved into their first place, they had one room, so that was one room for three people and then her friend lived in a room next door with her husband and their children. When they moved to Sampson Road they had two rooms, so my mum and dad stayed in one room and my brother and sister were in the other room. So when they moved into Durham Road in Sparkhill and they had a three bedroom house with two rooms downstairs, a kitchen and a bathroom, it would have been quite a difference, so they moved into Durham Road in 64, I was born in 66 and my younger brother was born in 67.

05:05 R So they filled the house up pretty quickly and yea we lived there and it was a really nice place, we had a nice back garden, we had nice neighbours and there was a row of one, two, three, four, five houses with all of the families there with children around the same age, so I had a, there was a girl next door to me called Sonia who was the same age as me and then she had four other sisters, I can't remember all of their names, I remember Lisa was the next youngest one and then there was Michelle and then there was another one, another two and then next door on the other side there was Andrew and Angela, and Andrew was my brother's age and Angela was born when I was kind of about seven or eight. I watched her grow up, and they had an older brother, I always forget the older ones because they weren't ones that played out with us called Errol, and then in the house next to that there was John and Mary who were an Irish family and their two children John and Mary we used to play with and then the family next door to that, were the sister of the people, so it was quite a lot of family connections and then their son was called Darren and they had a another younger son, I can't remember his name, and we all played out together, so at the time it was one of those areas where people talk about a good sense of community, there was, I feel now looking back and at the time, a sense of if you wanna go and play out, there are kids to play with and you don't have to go very far and we used to play on the streets and you know kids from houses down the road

because they'd be out as well and you'd be playing on your bike, on the pavement and all of that kind of thing, so it was a really good childhood really.

07:04 R You had lots of people to play with, we didn't go very far, I mean I know at the moment parents get really worried about their children going off and doing the various things, but actually the furthest we probably went was to Sparkhill Park, and we could go there if we told our mum that we're going and then you'd have to be back by a certain time, and that's pretty much what we did and we went as a gang, so if one of us turned back up at home, the parents would be going "*oh where are all the others?*" So it wasn't that you went off on your own and you did your own thing, and you wandered back whenever you wanted to, so that was always good and there is one story where at school because I went to Greet Primary School, which we used to walk to. No driving to school in those days, we walked to Greet Primary School, and I met this girl called Tracy, she started when we were near the end of the school, so when we were in the final year, and she was very different to what I'd known before, because I used to play with mostly boys cause that was mostly what was on my street., but she lived further up near the library and one day after school she invited me to her house and my mum said yes you can go and afterwards the two of you need to walk back home and then we'll make sure Tracy gets home, and because I suppose I'd never really played out with girls and I suppose I was easily led and I went to her house and then at teatime when it was time for me to go home it was kind of like six, she went no, no stay longer, it doesn't matter, it's alright and I always remember it because it was the first time that my dad had to come looking for me and I stayed at her house until probably only half an hour later than I should have and then we set out. And I remember walking up Stratford Road and then seeing my dad walking down towards where he knew she lived and feeling, that sense of absolute horror and fear actually cause you know in those days, I don't know if kids feel the same now, I was quite scared of my dad, he never hit us or anything but I used to be quite scared of him, didn't wanna upset him and I just remember thinking what am I gonna say, what's my excuse going to be? And I think I blustered something like "*it wasn't my fault it wasn't my fault, she made me stay.*" But after that my parents were quite strict and didn't let us stay out, go out with friends, well they certainly didn't let us stay out over night or anything like that. But I remember that as being my one moment where I just thought I've let my parents down, they let me out and I've let them down. So Tracy was to blame for my straying from the pack there, but that was quite a different way of growing up to how my see my nieces and nephews growing up, because they did have sleepovers and go out to people's houses and the parents would bring them back late at night and we weren't allowed to do any of that, but I don't think I missed out by it, but anyway I'm jumping around a bit.

10:16 R So we grew up in Durham Road, I went to Greet Primary School and I didn't

go to nursery sadly, my brother did, he went to a nursery that used to be in a Methodist Church on Warwick Road and then he went to reception class at Greet, but I just was in, I think he went to reception cause I was in the lower, the first year, so my mum could take us both to school at the same time, so it made it nice and easy for her but I say it was easy but my mum always worked, so it was always trying to fit that in and do all the rest of it, like you know. In the olden days you didn't have the choices and they didn't have the choices in particular of finding childminders, it wasn't that easy for them to find childminders, so I know my older brother stayed with a childminder when he was in his pram and my mum has this story that my brother, this is awful, but I'm gonna say it as my mum tells it. My mum said that my brother was really like skint when he was born and that she used to take him to this childminder in Sparkbrook somewhere, I can't remember where it was and in those days people used to put children in prams and leave them outside, so my mum left him off in the morning before she went to work, my mum was always a nurse and she used to work in the maternity hospital in Moseley, Sorrento it used to be called. So she'd left him there in the morning and this was before I was born, and she went back in the evening to pick him up and he was in the same position in the same nappy and he's been out in the blazing sun all day and he'd gone completely dark, *(laughing)* he'd gone so much darker and she said that he was screaming, as you would if you were a baby left out in the sun for most of the day, but she had very few choices about where else to take him and you know, I suppose in a way she was quite grateful that she'd found someone who would look after him, but people weren't really that careful I suppose with other people's children in those days, and I think there was probably an attitude because it was a white childminder who thought well it's a black baby, if it's out in the sun all day it will be fine. So I don't know if my mum ever felt guilty, she never said she felt guilty about it but she tells the story with a little bit of humour as you have to because she was probably terrified when she got back and found that her baby hadn't been looked after all day and hadn't been given anything to drink, he'd been left out, it was the UK so blazing hot sun, you know with a pinch of salt, but either way, I wouldn't want to leave a baby out in the sun all day.

13:10 I What work did you father do and a bit more about your mother's job please.

13:15 R Ok my mum worked as a, at first she was a don't know kind of just helping out in so whatever the word is for a support to the nurses, so she would clean up after things had happened and stuff like that. Then she did her training while she was there and she qualified as a nurse, so she used to support in theatre, these are the bits of stories that I've always known. So she used to work at Sorrento which was a maternity hospital. She helped out in the theatre there and then she left there and went to the Children's Hospital and worked at the Children's Hospital when it was at Five Ways for years and years and years till it closed down actually, and as she got more into the system, she changed, so she was working fixed shifts because she's

was raising all of us at the same time. So she used to work weekends and do shift work, night time weekends sorry.

14:14 R Then my dad worked for Bakelite in Tyseley and he worked there for I think it was thirteen years or so and he worked there until they closed it down. He got his watch and everything. No, yes he did work there until they closed it down because they made people redundant, and that was the first time he was unemployed from the time he started working. So that was in the factory years when the Bakelite factory closed down and that was, that was really, I remember that time really really well cause it was so shocking for my dad not to be at work and he used to work three set shifts so mornings, afternoons or nights and there'd be the odd time when my dad's nights and my mum's nights crossed over and then we'd have to be looked after by my older brother. My older brother's nine years older than me, so it was legal. But I remember my older brother when he was looking after us, he used to do that typical I'm in charge thing, "*you're not watching that on telly*" and he'd turn the telly over and he'd make us watch what he wanted to watch and then he'd tell us to go to bed at a certain time and make sure that, oh he was really bossy and horrible. But yea so my parents worked for many many years and my mum when she left the Children's Hospital retired actually, so she was there for, she worked as a nurse for all of her life.

15:53 R When my dad was made redundant from Bakelite when they shut down, he was unemployed for a while and they used to have all these work schemes cause the unemployment was so high and what would have it been, early eighties, they had all these work schemes so it was one of the strangest times cause I'd be walking home from school and I'd see my dad watering plants on lampposts because those were the types of jobs that they had cause the council was kind of employing people to put up hanging baskets and things all round. So I'd see my dad for the first time when he was working, walking along the street and I remember it now thinking should I say hello or is this because he's working, should I just walk past and leave him alone and it was very odd and he did that for a little while and then he got a job in Coventry and different jobs, but he never settled in a job again, but I guess dad must have been in his fifties by then, so it would have been quite hard at that point to find another job that you were gonna do till retirement age but my mum's work kept us going and my brother was working as well.

17:05 I Can you give us some ideas of your first school?

17:15 R Strangely I don't remember Greet School all that much. I remember starting it I remember it because I had an older sister who I mentioned earlier and she died when I was at primary school and I remember the day my mum, the day she died and the day my mum came into get me and my brother from school. We were sitting in a, this head teacher used to read us stories every Friday, so I remember it was a Friday, although I've just remembered that. Every Friday we used to have to sit on the floor in the hall in front of Mr Carol who

was the head teacher and he used to love the story of Ivanhoe, oh gosh the story of Ivanhoe and Jane Eyre and Rebecca, those kinds of stories. So he'd sit us down and this was quite a mixed school, it was a time when there were quite a few African Caribbean children who had been born here, quite a few Indian and Pakistani children who had been born here and we were hearing these stories, I suppose traditional British and English stories read by an Irishman for an hour and I used to remember, I remember how tired I used to be, it used to make me sleepy, but he'd read to us every Friday and I remember sitting there and thinking, hearing someone crying and thinking oh no that's my mum and then a teacher came in and got me and my brother out and took us out and my mum told us what had happened and whatever and we were taken out, but that's just something that I remember really clearly and it's quite interesting that as I'm talking about it I remember it was a Friday because that's when we used to have a story. I'd never thought of that before.

18:55 R But at Greet School was really, I suppose it was really lovely, it was a lovely school, there were lots of teachers who genuinely seemed interested in you, and we used to still get school milk. I used to hate drinking school milk and we'd, I don't remember much else about it really, we'd have, we used to do things like, I remember doing, I was at Greet when the Queen's Silver Jubilee happened and I remember that because I was determined, they gave all of the children either a mug with the thing saying the Queens Jubilee 1977, or a silver spoon with it engraved and I so wanted the silver spoon. I did not want the mug and I got the mug. I was so disappointed, I remember that so well and we did lots of things at that time because we did raffles and things to raise money and there were lots of streets. There was a recent jubilee, the Golden Jubilee and they were trying to encourage people to do street festivals and things like that, street parties and I was really hoping that someone would do a street party in our street, but nobody did. But we did kind of have a day off school, I remember that. So although we didn't have a party we got some sandwiches and things.

20:25 R We had a chance to play out on the street and enjoy the day off and I remember making, we had this erm, at school we used to do sewing and we had a hand cranked sewing machine, we didn't have a foot operated electric one, we had two hand cranked singer sewing machines that we used and we made these ragdolls cause it was to raffle so we could raise money to do something or other in the school in celebration of the jubilee and we all made this ragdoll, so we all had to do little bits, like sewing the eyes and things like that, and then we named her and then we put all the names into a big hat and everybody had to pull one out and if you got the right one, and I remember I chose the name that we named her because I don't know where I got the name Zoe from, but I remember it now and I think it was just because it stated with Z, I was a bit like that, always looking, I loved words when I was at school and I prided myself on, we used to have annual reading

assessments and they'd take you into a room and then they'd get you to read out all of these words on a list and it'd get increasingly hard.

21:38 R Because I grew up in church that was one of the things my parents, especially my dad was really keen, well he was a born again Christian so we went to church regularly and when we were young enough not to object, he took us every week, so I was used to reading texts that were probably far above the reading age of eight or nine or ten, cause you know if you read the bible or any other religious text, there's always words in there that you don't necessarily come across in secular literature, so my reading was quite good and I used to love finding new words and I think Zoe was one of those names that I thought oh it begins with Z. But I remember having jumped to my reading assessments, I remember doing reading assessments and then going through all the words and one of the women saying "*oh your reading's quite advanced*" and getting the word evangelist wrong because I couldn't pronounce it. I knew what it was, but I couldn't pronounce it at first go and she went "*ok we'll stop there*" I thought "*nooo I could have been so much better*", but the way of assessing you at primary school, I suppose it was as random as it is now where they give them actual proper tests and exams, but you kind of always think oh, I think even at that age I could have done better, I could have done better. But thank goodness we didn't have to do exams, it was just, it was a nice environment to be in and it didn't feel, now looking back on it, and I don't think at the time either it felt pressured, I had to do something particularly well, but of course you try for your parent's sake because you want to prove to them that you can do really well, so that was Greet and I liked Greet School, even though my brother was behind me all the way through my primary and secondary school, so I always felt a little bit that I had to behave otherwise he'd go home and tell mum and dad what I'd been doing. But yea.

23:39 I What happened after Greet School?

23:42 R After Greet I went to Golden Hillock School which was a bit strange because my oldest brother had gone to, and I keep forgetting that I have two older brothers, had gone to a school near Swanshurst School over that side of the city, so near Kings Heath and my other brother, Mark, had gone to Moseley School and I don't know why they went to those two schools and why me and my younger brother went to Golden Hillock. But probably for the reasons that I just said, you don't necessarily want someone looking over your shoulder so it was quite good not to have my older brothers there. I went to Golden Hillock which I loved, I remember going to Golden Hillock on the first day and walking with my mum, not having to hold her hand or anything, because she was just walking with her on the first day and thinking gosh it's gonna be really scary because we'd been there for a visit the year before, before the summer holidays and I remember thinking it's such a big school, how am I gonna find my way around, but we met the head teacher and I still remember her name because she was quite a character.

25:00 R Well actually I say I remember her name but I might be getting it wrong because I said it to my brother and my brother said I don't think that is it. Mrs Sterling Stewart I think her name was and she was really, I remember her now and I think she looked severe, but I think you think that about all head teachers and I remember her talking to us and telling us how we have to behave in school and now that you're in a school with hundreds of pupils, you have to be responsible and you know the usual things about walking on the left up and down the stairs and no running in the hallways and obviously for a little person going into a big school, those hallways were like lovely cause they were massive and you'd be in the upper school and the lower school and there was this thing I remember vaguely, that if you were in the lower school, you weren't really allowed into upper school and you certainly weren't allowed into the sixth form common room, but of course that just became like a magnet to everyone, you wanted to sneak into the sixth form common room to see what they were doing cause they weren't always in lessons, they used to be lounging around.

26:11 R I don't know what they did but they used to be sitting around in there and chatting and things, so it was always like what are they doing and I loved secondary school and it was the time when Rastafarianism was getting really big, so they'd be, you know there's always little things that happen in secondary schools, I'm sure it happens now, so you use to wear, it was quite a strict uniform and you used to have to wear white socks up to your knees and all these girls that started getting into Rastafarianism started going "*I'm not wearing white socks, I'm wearing black socks*" so what you had to try and do was to wear black socks with these rubber soled moccasins to show that you were in with the in crowd and my mum refused flat absolutely outright to buy me the shoes. She said that if I wanted to, I could save my money and buy them myself which I did. And the same with the socks, she said if you want to buy black socks, you can buy them yourself, so I used to have to save my money to buy the fashionable items because my mum wouldn't do it and then you'd have all these little things that, I know this one happens now, the ties got bigger and then they got smaller, but I used to love my uniform, so even when I , because I stayed at Golden Hillock for one year into the sixth form, so even when I got into the sixth form you didn't have to wear your uniform and lots of people were wearing, it's interesting how my young years are marked by things from the Royal Family, and so by the time you got to sixth form, Dianna was around and all those frilly shirts with the collars and I couldn't stand that, so used to wear proper collared shirts with my dad's ties from the sixties, *(laughing)* cause mods were back in fashion then and that kind of thing, so I was really into that and I liked that kind of nice sleek look, so yea it was a good time.

28:11 R I really enjoyed my secondary school and of course boys, I started getting interested in boys and I had you know it wasn't anything serious, not like I see some of these ones these days you'd just walk round the hallways

holding hands with whichever boy fancied you at the time and things like that. And there was a boy that I went out with, I say went out with, more during school time whose parents owned the fish and chip shop on Baker Street, there used to be a fish and chip shop, I don't think it is anymore. And just thinking oh this is great, I can get cheap fish and chips. *(laughing)* I don't think I ever did, I think that his brothers used to give us free chips if we went there at lunchtime, but just because we all went to the same school and we were in the same class, but I had some brilliant friends when I went to Golden Hillock and I know that Christine, one of my really good friends, there was a little gang of us, there was Christine, myself and Lorna.

29:10 R I'd met Lorna on my first day at Greet. So we went through primary school and secondary school and my mum and her mum knew each other and I knew her older sister Jackie, and Lorna lived, as soon as Lorna finished Greet School, she went to London to work and I don't know why or how, it was really odd how when you finish school, people just kind of like, it's like letting go of someone's hand and going bye and you never see them again and you go on about your life and Christine stayed in Birmingham because she had a baby the year after we left school. er boyfriend was one of the Blake family which was a massive family, Caribbean family that has lived in the area for a long time, so I don't know where she is now, I haven't seen her for a good number of years, but she stayed in the area for a very long time and I know my mum has seen her oldest daughter recently who now has a child of her own, so you know, now I know I'm getting old when people of my age have got grandchildren and things like that, so it's kind of, yea it's really nice to be able to think back on it because I didn't realise how little you talk about some of the things that you did when you were growing up because no one wants to hear really.

30:33 I Looking back, can you talk a bit about other things that you did during the school holidays?

30:41 R Yes I mean we never, I would say we were a poor family, even though both my parents worked. We didn't have lots of luxuries, so we didn't go on holidays, but one of the things my parents liked to do was to catch up with people from the Caribbean that they'd grown up with and that had come over at a similar time, so what we used to do is on weekends and during the holidays, we'd go for drives because dad was a big car person, he loved his cars, he loved motorbikes before we came along, because he used to ride motorbikes and then when he had children and he had to cart them around as well, he started getting into cars, so I remember the first car he had was a Vauxhall Viva and he was one of the first people on the street to have a car, I think he was very very proud of that and we'd go for drives out to places like Coventry cause there were quite a few Vincentians in Coventry, we'd go and visit them and spend a day and then come back and then our bigger drives he used to take us to Oxford where there was some people that went to school with my parents living in Oxford, and then the furthest we went, no actually

there was a big community plus one of my dad's half-brothers lived in High Wycombe, and the same in Luton and then our biggest drive was to Southampton.

32:15 R But if we weren't going to visit family, my dad would always take us to Weston-super-Mare. So I've got lots of pictures of us holding like little plastic windmills and things at Weston-super-Mare and on the beach, all fully dressed (**laughing**) on the beach fully dressed, sitting on the beach, eating my mum's picnic sandwiches that she brought and Weston-super-Mare was just the best and I don't remember going on any fair rides or doing anything really kind of like that you would do now. I just remember us kind of getting there and walking down to the beach and then my mum and dad sitting in a deck chair and us sitting on the beach and maybe building a few sand castles and that was it. So that was what filled our holidays really, it was, they were family outings. It wasn't that we went, I mean I think my brother, Mark one of my older brothers went to Cheddar Gorge one time with the school and it was like "*how come you're getting to go there? How have you managed to get there?*" and I don't know what convinced my mum to let him go and I still don't know until now, I've never asked her, but she would never let any of the others of us go on anything that was over night.

33:36 R I finally got to go on an overnight trip organised by school when they went to Boulogne and they had a trip when it was in the sixth form on a coach. So for twenty four hours, I don't know how many hours we drove down to Dover for, but then you got to Dover, got on the boat, the ferry and you got off the coach and then went over to France, went there, went into those warehouse places. I mean actually I must have been old enough to buy alcohol because I remember buying some wine, (**laughing**) but I didn't have much money. I remember buying a white blouse, a pretty white blouse and a bottle of wine, not knowing anything about wine, and bringing it back and I remember that was the first journey where I was out overnight. The first time I left, was away from home overnight and yea there was some funny things that happened, the boys bought flick knives and tried to, well did sneak them back through customs and it was kind of like shoving them down the back of the coach seat going "*if anybody finds them, just say they were there before, we don't know anything about it.*" But that was really, that was probably the reason why my parents never wanted us to go anywhere overnight, it was you do naughty things and get involved in things you shouldn't, but yea, we had some wonderful holidays.

35:04 R I don't feel like I missed out and one time cause most of my mum's family did settle in America, so her brothers and sisters lived in America and then one, how old was I then? 1976, how can I forget, the brilliant summer of 1976. In May, me and my younger brother and my mum went to America for six weeks and that was the first time I'd travelled abroad and we just lived there for six weeks and then came back and then got the summer holiday as well, so that was the first time and then two years later my mum went back with

just me and her, and I think my dad felt really sad that we'd gone, because I remember when we came back after the second time, I'd never seen him buy my mum flowers, but there was the biggest bunch of flowers when we got back and he'd obviously tidied up the house, he'd done everything perfect, the kitchen, I just remember it so well because it was so unusual for him. It's not that he didn't help out in the house, but it was you could see that he'd missed her so much so that was really lovely to be able to remember that as well. So yea that was a bit of what we did outside of school. I don't want to say because we were raised in church, it makes it sound like we were, we weren't kind of beaten with a rod every week to keep us in line or anything like that, but because we went to church regularly, my parents weren't great fans of things like letting us go to the cinema and things like that, so I didn't go to the cinema because the church we went to thought the cinema was evil.

36:52 R I didn't go to the cinema until I was at university and it was like one of the most terrifying things ever, because of course everybody else was going "*oh shall we go and watch a film tonight*" and I'm thinking don't go to a film, I've never been to see a film before. What do you do if you're sitting in a cinema? How do you watch a film in the dark with other people? And the first film I went to see wasn't the easiest of films to watch. I can't remember what it was called but it was oh gosh, it was at the Odeon in town at Smallbrook Queensway I think it is, erm *Cast Away*, it was *Cast Away* and it was boring, I just remember it being so boring and the cinema being so grim and horrible, but after that I kind of thought well this isn't sort of too bad. But university was where I kind of started to do all the things that I hadn't done (*laughing*).

37:51 I Tell us more about your time at university and where you went.

37:55 R Well after I spent a year in sixth form and then they closed the sixth form at Golden Hillock School so I went and finished my A Levels at Garretts Green College which was lovely, but I went there part time and worked part time. So I worked in a shoe shop part time and did my A Levels and took a couple more O Levels, and I met a really inspirational teacher there who was the first person to suggest that I could go to university. I'd never thought I could go to university before. I remember his name, John Maynard, and he knew a lecturer which was why when I came in here today, I was disappointed to see that the contemporary studies display had gone cause I studied media and communications at the centre of contemporary studies at Birmingham University as a half degree with English and John knew Michael Green and talked to Michael Green and said "*oh well Louise has done sociology, she's done English, do you think she might be suitable for the course?*" I went to the university informally and met Michael and had a chat with him and of course I was still quite young, I was only eighteen and I remember him asking me "*do you want to go to university?*" And I was thinking well what else am I going to do? I work in a shoe shop, I don't want to work there for the rest of my life.

- 39:13 R I know my mum wanted me to be a nurse or a secretary and part of the rebellious person in me didn't want to do that because my sister who had passed away was a secretary and my mum was a nurse and I wanted to be my own person, so I didn't want to do either of those things, but I didn't know what I wanted to do and nobody else around me was, so the people I was at school with, like I said Christine had had a baby straight away so she wasn't working. Lorna had gone to London and I hadn't heard from her, so I wasn't really seeing what my friends were doing and a friend that I had at college, she'd strangely just met this man and got married, so I wasn't seeing lots of, not role models necessarily but I wasn't able to talk to lots of people and say oh I'm doing this and think that's exciting, maybe I could try that. So when the idea of university which was just another three years of get out time really, *(laughing)* I didn't have to make a decision for another three years and I liked studying so it was ok. So I applied, got the grades and went and started the course in 1986, so I was twenty when I started my degree, just turned twenty. But it was shocking. It was the first time in all my life, I'd always been in a mixed environment, white, black, Asian, whatever, it was always mixed, it was never, one group who stood out, and for the first time I went into an environment where I was one of two black people and it was scary.
- 40:54 R The scariest one was when I was in a lecture room for English, there was one other black student, sorry there was one other Caribbean student and one other Asian student, so there was three of us from a background that wasn't English. But I think all three of us were quite scared. I made friends with one of them, Mono was my best friend at university and she was, she'd gone to private school so she was quite used to that environment, but she come up from London and her parents were in Kenya working, so she was used to being independent and doing her own thing and she was really good for me because she kind of gave me an example of how you just grow up and get on with it, cause I'd always lived at home with my parents up to that point, had the comfort of my brothers and everything. I never had to put myself out on a limb, but she was a terrible influence on me. I say that with a smile on my face. She took me to the cinema. She made me watch films that started with sex. She made me drink bottles of wine in the company of other people and then go home because I lived at home when I was at university for the first year and I remember during fresher's week, we went into the students union and they bought a bottle of wine and there was a little group of us that were all doing the same courses and it included boys as well.
- 42:23 R For the first time I was kind of socialising with boys as well as girls and it was all very kind of like "oh *what type of music do you listen to?*" and I was kind of "oh I don't know, whatever comes on the radio" and you know, they were all so socially more advanced than me and drinking, I never drank really. Well I didn't, you know at Christmas my parents would buy Babycham or something like that and you'd have it and think ooh but I never sat and drank beer or

anything like that and the first time I had drunk it was after I finished Garrets Green College, two of my mates there said “*we need to celebrate*” and the only thing I'd ever tried was brandy and they said “*yea alright we'll get you some brandy then.*” And I drank brandy and they had to virtually carry me home. So I kind of thought alright drinking is not for me, but when I got to university everybody drank and that was what you did socially, and I remember one night in fresher's week, we were sat in the Union bar and they kept buying me all this wine and of course you drink it and because you're not moving you don't think about the effect it's having on you and I don't remember having eaten that day. I felt wretched, it was horrible because I used to cycle to university from home because it was only a couple of miles and I couldn't cycle that night and then they took me up to their halls of residence and called me a taxi and I had to wait for the taxi. I don't remember getting home, I don't remember how I paid for the taxi, I don't remember who paid for the taxi, I don't know if it was me and then sneaking in late at night cause I didn't do that either and my parents had already gone to bed and I remember just getting going to my bedroom and thinking I will be really really quiet, but my head was spinning and I felt awful and the bathroom was downstairs, so if I'd gone to bed upstairs and I needed to go and be sick which I did, I had to struggle downstairs. I'm sure I wasn't being quiet because the next day my mum was at my bedroom door bright and early “*Louise, Louise are you in there? What time did you get in last night?*” And I was just thinking oh no and I probably got out of bed at midday and had in those days, I probably didn't have hangovers in the way I would now but I felt awful and that was the first time I'd really had a drink and started to appreciate what students at university did, I didn't do it too many other times after that.

44:53 R But I loved university. Once I'd got used to being to an extent the odd person out, and I did feel a little bit like I was not quite the token person there, but it did feel a bit like that, we stood out (*laughing*). But it was a good three years. I've got to say it took a lot out of me because I didn't want to go back into a similar environment to study for a great number years and it's only recently I've started thinking university is a very different place now. You could go back and it wouldn't be anything like that. But doing your first degree I think is always a little bit challenging because even if and I did, you live at home, it's still challenging to everything you imagine you are and it was, you know I didn't know lots of people from Sparkhill that went to university, and the university was within easy travelling distance of where we lived, but it just wasn't something that happened, you just didn't think about it. You did CSE's at school, nobody told us you could do O Levels and that you could then do A Levels and that it was all a possibility, so it was a good thing to do and I was the first person from my family to go to university so I was always happy about that. I beat my brother on that one (*laughing*).

46:17 I Can you tell me about any important people, social relationships that you may have had at this time?

- 46:28 R I think actually the biggest, because certainly when between the years of being in secondary school from like fourteen to eighteen, I did really get into the church thing, so most of my friends apart from the couple of people I had at school, most of my friends were through church so my best friend when I got to my late teens, go on holiday with which was to be approved by father and her father, was Ruth, Ruth Massey, lovely person, absolutely lovely person and we used to get on trains, we'd pack our bags, our dads would see us to New Street Station and we'd get on the train and we'd travel for hours and hours and hours and go to places like Newquay and stay in guest houses, for a few days and because we didn't drive, we'd just walk everywhere and now I look back and I just think oh it must have been horrific, but I think because we were just wanting to be away from home and feel a little bit independent, that's what kept us going and then eventually, I don't know how it happened, we started finding ourselves going to, one year she moved out because she went to university in Sheffield and she studied to be a librarian and she lived in a house with two Christians, and they all drove. So one year I travelled up to where she was and then she had a year out and was working in Hitchin, so I travelled down to Hitchin and then we drove from Hitchin to the coast and then we went up to the Isle of Man or Isle of White, one of those isles, with all of her friends to stay in this Christian guest house and I roll my eyes now because I just think I'd known I'd got to the end of that kind of thing but I still did it that year, I can't remember how old I was, I was probably twenty four, no maybe not that old because we were still at university.
- 48:30 R So maybe twenty two/twenty three and I knew I'd got to the end of it and I wasn't really into the Christian thing and I was thinking about I'd left home and I was thinking about leaving Birmingham because I wanted to get away from the confines in my family really and I thought the only way I could do it would be to move completely away, at least for a little while. So I did this trip with them, got there and found that I couldn't participate in anything, I just wasn't into it, I didn't want to go to, they used to pray and things like that in the evenings and I'd sit in the room and listen to my George Benson CD, cassette as it was on my Walkman and just think why have I done this, I didn't want to socialise with them because it all felt very po faced and proper and I just thought, that was the last time I went on holiday with her actually and I just thought, and it wasn't Ruth, it was just the things that we did together that were approved, I just didn't want to do them anymore.
- 49:31 R I'd left university, I'd had a slightly different life and I knew that I wanted to explore a little bit more and from being born where I was in Sparkhill, I'd always kind of wanted to go further and further and further away, not that I knew that at the time, but I think it was going to Garretts Green College was going to college out of the area, going to university and doing something that nobody else around there had done. Everything I think, you just wanted to, and it's interesting cause now as I've got older, I've come back to those areas

where I started and I find it really interesting to reflect and think it's changed so much but actually as an area I still love being able to talk about being able to talk about where I grew up and how it was and I'm jumping around but when I was at secondary school there was this teacher called Mr Whitehouse. He used to let us eat sweets in the classroom as long as you didn't go *(making chomping noise)* or rattle the papers too much, that was a wonderful lesson, he was a lovely teacher, one of those ones with long hair and a bald patch *(laughing)* and he had leather patches on his tweed jacket, he was an absolutely brilliant geography teacher. But in geography I remember one of the lessons where we were talking about how cities grow and we were talking and I remember him saying "*ooh and Sparkhill is one of them where most of you live.*" It's one of those areas where new communities come and then as individuals get more affluent, they move out to nicer parts and the suburbs of the city and I remember it so clearly sitting there thinking that's not true. But of course it was, it was exactly true, I suppose my perception of how long it took to move on was probably slightly different to the realities cause I saw my parents as being at the point of when I was fourteen or something, at the point where if they wanted to, they could move out, but they've chosen to live here and you know they've extended their house and they look after it, so don't tell me how this is new communities, we're established. It didn't take much longer for my parents to want to move out but at the time it was kind of, you can't see it when you're in it and now when I look at Sparkhill and I see all those new communities, I just think this is exactly what he was saying, all of you know my brother Mark didn't move as far as I did.

52:09 R He worked in Sparkhill, Sparkbrook, he worked in a car shop just off Ladypool Road, then he went to Colliers which was up in Hall Green, he's worked with cars all of this life. Then he moved from my parent's house. He bought a house on Brooklands Road in the bottom of Hall Green, I thought of this when they said people move, get more affluent and progress they move up the Stratford Road, so my brother is a typical example. He moved from where we lived together as a family to Brooklands Road, then further up to something Drive which I can't remember in Hall Green proper, then more recently he's just sold that house and moved up into Shirley, so he's the typical example of, as he's settled, as he's got older, his children have now left, well he's got two daughters, one of his daughters has now left home and I think he's following a bit of my example because she's gone to London and the other one is quite happily working and living under his roof and not having to spend a penny. So I think you know, it's really, it's the dynamic of how you decide to move and what you decide to do, I think, Mark never felt the pressure I felt to break away from my parents.

53:32 R He stopped going to church a lot earlier than I did. I remember the Sunday when he didn't get out of bed and my dad was like "*why aren't you out of bed?*" "*I'm not going to church*" and I was like horrified, how dare he, I don't want to go to church cause I have to get up but, sometimes it's those little

things that start to define you as the individual. So I was kind of really, yea I wanted to break away so after that last holiday I just thought no and then I was doing a voluntary job at the Cave which was an art centre on Moseley Road, so I could walk there and I started there the summer I finished university. Because I didn't know what I wanted to do and I had no idea what jobs I could do after the degree I'd done. I could teach, I could have taught but then I would have to do the teaching degree and at that point I was studied out, I didn't want to study anymore, so I was kind of at a loss, what do I do? And my mum said "you've got to find some voluntary work, you're not sitting down in this house all day when the rest of us are working."

54:40 R So I went and knocked on a few doors and visited Mac, Mac didn't have anything that they could offer me as a volunteer and then I found The Cave and The Cave used to be funded by the Probation Service at the time, so it wasn't the best place probably to go, but what they did was they were providing participatory activities for people. So I went there, volunteered, did some front of house for a bit and then they offered me a job. So I took the job as their administrator which was the first real job I'd had apart from the shoe shop, and that made me think well actually I quite like the arts, I quite like the people in the arts, so let's do that. My parents hated it, oh my gosh, because The Cave as well was focused on BME arts. It was like, it's all black power and because I always had to remember and I still have to remember it now since I've talked to my mother is they came to the UK with a very clear idea of what it was like to live in Britain and that was about and they lived in the Caribbean with a very clear idea of what it was like to be English and British, and it wasn't about black people doing their own thing, it's about fitting in and being part of whatever's already there, so the fact that I said I wanted to work in an art centre that was focused on black arts is like you're just getting into black power, you're gonna get yourself into trouble because of course they were into, heard it all in the sixties and seventies and it was you know disruptive and all the rest of it, but that just made me want to do it all the more and it wasn't as glamorous as they thought it was, it was very much the same as any other art centre as they got funding from public sources and they had to devise a programme that was applicable and open to range of people. So I worked there for a while and then through a series of mishaps, I didn't get a job there permanently, someone else got it. I got locked into a flat that I was living in.

56:52 R I moved out of home while I was there, lived with my best friend from university and she used to go to London every weekend and she accidentally locked me into the flat when I was supposed to go for my interview. Oh that was a very good story that one, but I won't go into the details on it. So I was in this flat because we'd just moved in, didn't have a phone, my option was to shout out the window at passers-by "*ooh can you help me*", but in the end because I'd missed the interview, the people I worked with Noel and Aaron, they were worried about me not turning up because they knew I would. I'd given them my address, they came to the flat, broke the door down to let me

out, but I was too late for the interview so I missed out on a full time job, but then I got offered a job in Manchester. So my dream had come true, so I was like to my parents which was the ultimate for me, it was breaking away. I'd moved out but I was in Edgbaston, it wasn't quite as far away as I needed to be and this job offer from Manchester to work in a New Art Centre was like ok so within two weeks I'd packed up the little few things I had and I moved to Manchester and started a job there.

58:10 R It lasted six months before they made me redundant (*laughing*) but it was enough time and then when I came back because I didn't have any money, I did move back home for a short while, but then I moved out into my own flat in Handsworth and I finally felt like I was grown up then, but my parents continued to live in Durham Road until 1994 I think it was. They finally moved and I think they moved, well I know my mum moved because she literally said I can't live here anymore, it's not as nice and beautiful as it used to be. All of the neighbours have changed, you know the road have changed a lot, all the neighbours have moved out that she knew and moving to an area where new people didn't matter anymore, she didn't have to raise children, they could enjoy their lives, so they moved out to Halesowen which was a very strange choice, I didn't want them to move there, but they did and it was very odd. I still ask her now "*why did you choose to move to Halesowen? What was it?*" and she just said it looked nice so yea very different. I could have bought a house. When I eventually came back from Manchester and got a stable job and all the rest of it, I could have moved where my brother was in Sparkhill, Hall Green and I did look but, I couldn't afford to buy there and that was one of the things that really took me by surprise that in a matter of I don't know ten years or something, it had gone from my parents sold their house for I think they bought it for £2,000, £2,500 in 1964, they sold it in 1994 for £52,500, but then that's when the house prices started shooting up and then when I was looking for a house by the time I could buy somewhere in 2004 something like that, I couldn't afford to buy a house in those areas, so I had to look further afield, and I ended up in Edgbaston, but in a very similar type of house cause I think there's something about the house that you grew up in your childhood that is comfortable, so I love big terraced houses, it just makes me feel comfortable, so I can't afford the big ones, but a little terraced house is fair enough for me.

1:00:51 R Then we got married, so I never had to worry about moving where somebody else was or moving to near a school because I haven't got children, so I've always been able to choose where I wanted to live and where I live now, I've moved from Edgbaston and I've moved further out of Birmingham nearer to where my mum is, but yes still in a traditional terrace because I love those houses in Sparkhill on Durham Road. I did lots of research when I was young about how they came to be, who lived in them and all of that cause I've always been interested in social history which is why this project interests me, and it's those houses in Sparkhill that I grew up in, were sort of the first posh people's houses because they were three

bedroomed houses, although they originally had the bathroom outside which is why the bathroom is downstairs at the back, but they had big gardens, they had a front garden and they had a front room, so they were quite nice houses and yea I loved all of that.

1:02:03 I Can you tell me something about your job when you came back from Manchester?

1:02:08 R When I came back from Manchester I was unemployed for a little while because of course the choices when I came back meant I didn't necessarily have anything to step into because I'd lost the job here, but because I'd had a bit of experience by then in working with people in the arts, I found that a couple of people knew who I was from when I worked at The Cave and a couple of freelance artists asked me to do some marketing for them. So I did some marketing for a couple of dance artists, then I got into dance a little bit and started to see the dance companies and there was a company called Kokuma that used to be based in Birmingham and when I was doing this marketing I met a woman called Dee Makala who was their marketing manager at the time and she wanted an assistant. So she said *"well come and do some work with me because they're about to plan a national tour and we will pay you your expenses and things."* So I did that for maybe four months and when Dee left I got her job, so I was the marketing manager for a little while, well for quite a while I think. It wasn't my expertise, I'm not very good at design, I know what I like when I see it but I'm not brilliant at coming up with concepts which is why I'm good at working on the bureaucratic side of the arts.

1:03:37 R So I got that job, worked with Kokuma for three or four years and they were based in Lozells, that was a really good job for a while, but then it all got a bit odd and I decided to leave because all the companies I've worked with, the art companies, they are all about the ego of the artistic director. So it got a little bit kind of ooh, with the artistic director at the time was brilliant, Jackie Guy was a brilliant person, but I think the company was running out of steam and it was starting to get threatened by the Arts Council and various things, so they changed the artistic director and when they changed the artistic director, he decided to do a clean sweep, so I was made redundant. I've been made redundant quite a few times. So I was made redundant from that job. What did I do after Kokuma? After Kokuma I went to East Midlands Arts. I worked for East Midlands **Regional** Arts Board which was really weird up to that point, I hadn't started driving because I'd done everything in the city, I didn't have to, but then I got a job in Loughborough, which meant I had to commute from Birmingham, I used to get up because I was living in Edgbaston, working in Loughborough, but I had a regional job, so I'd get up at like six in the morning, bus at twenty past six, train at ten past seven, I still remember the routine now. From New Street Station to Leicester and then from Leicester to Loughborough and then a twenty minute walk from the station at Loughborough to the office.

01:05:12 R So I used to get into work on time, I don't know how I did it, I couldn't do it now, but in your twenties you can do anything and I did that job for seven years. Learned to drive after the first year though, I loved it. I loved it and that was, I think that's what my degree was for, I loved that job, loved working in the arts and that was the first time really where I'd had independence in my work as well, so I could choose the things that I wanted to do and I could support people and work with people directly, I loved that job. I can say it now, even when I was there, I knew I loved it, but I left because I thought I needed to branch out a bit and I didn't want to be in the same job.

01:05:52 R I hit a seven year crisis where everybody kept saying "*ooh you've been here for ages*" and then I suddenly thought cause I hadn't had much other work experience up to that point and I thought I probably should do something else. So I left, came back to the Midlands, worked with Sandwell Council as their Critical Arts Officer, but I don't know, it was a good job but it was kind of different, it wasn't working with artists in quite the same direct way and local authorities take a bit of getting used to, so I didn't do that, well I did that for three years and I worked with some nice people, I had some real challenges there as well. I had an administrator who very rarely turned up to work without a headache tummy ache or some other ailment for which I had to send her home and I've never been very good at managing people, so you know that kind of harsh management. I'm great, when people are doing what they're supposed to be doing, brilliant, I love it, can get on with them because I know that I'm usually doing what I'm supposed to be doing as well, but as soon as it goes off the rails, maybe I should have been a parent and I would have been a better disciplinarian, but no, no children so I kind of I can't do that bit where you tell them off and you think it's for your own good, I know you're going to be upset.

01:07:15 R But I stayed at Sandwell for a bit and then just went to work with Birmingham for a bit, and I've moved around a bit, but I don't know. I think now I've got older I think I want to settle, so the job I'm in now which is back at Arts Council, I'm hoping I can stay there for a while, maybe it's just the old person in me coming out now you see cause I worked in, I should have mentioned that I recently worked in Manchester again. It was one of the things that I did when I went to Manchester the first time was I met someone and I'd made lots and lots of friends in Manchester, but I met someone and I used to travel to Manchester all the seven years I worked at East Midlands, I used to be in Manchester most weekends and then at one point I just thought this is stupid, I should just move to Manchester and then I moved to Manchester, oh what a disaster (*laughing*). I moved to Manchester, lived in his flat for a while and I thought I don't like this, bought my own house and he said "*oh we should live together.*" I think it was just an easy way out for him actually, he didn't have to pay rent anymore, so I put up with that for five years, but I

mean he had children and things and I just found I wasn't a very good step parent. I just wasn't very good at it. I just thought nah this isn't the life for me. Independence for me. And then I just thought, you know what, one day I just thought, I said *"I'm going to put the house up for sale"* and he wasn't very happy about it and I just thought well in the end it's my life, I'm not gonna just stay here because it's comfortable for you and it made it easier because he hadn't worked for, he'd stopped working because he said he'd injured his back in May of the year like two years after we'd started to live together he said he'd hurt his back at work, so he had some time off and I thought fine. But there's nothing harder than you going out to work every day to a job that's tough and coming back and finding the house in a mess, or his mate's slobbering around, everything as you left it and you've just done a day's work and now I have to cook something for us to eat.

01:09:41 R So I get in the house, he'd be there, *"oh what are you looking at that about?"* And like I said I'm not very good at telling people things or putting them in their place, I'm more of the sulking silent type. So I put up with that for a year and a half, he didn't work again until I left. When I left he wasn't working, so he'd decided in my opinion that he could live off me and I just thought I'm better than that, so I didn't even explain it to him, I just put my house, I waited til he went out one morning, tidied up the house, called the estate agents, got them in, got them to value it, signed the contract, don't put a board up outside, put the house up for sale and he did find out, it didn't go down too well, but in the end I left because I needed to and it wasn't good for me and it just so happened because life is really brilliant sometimes, that Manchester, they decided they were going to slimdown their workforce, I didn't know it at the time, so by the time the house sold in the December, Manchester Council were looking for people to take their redundancy again, so for a third or fourth time in my life, except I got a pay-out this time, I hadn't got a pay-out from the time before. Sold my house, took the redundancy from Manchester, because the relationship had ended badly, they released me a month early and I came back home, thank goodness for mothers eh, I went and lived with my mother for a month, got a new job, bought a new house, happy as Larry, so now I'm back living in Rowley Regis near my mum, in my own house, got a cat and a dog now so I can boss them about and it's all good, it's really weird and I think sometimes it would be interesting to see, because I do still think of myself as the girl from Sparkhill who went to university unexpectedly, who has managed to work for pretty much all my life and I don't know, maybe I'm being a little bit, it's not congratulating myself but it's kind of like, it could have all gone very very differently. You know I could have had lots of children and been on my own or I could have got married and not been happy, or been very happy or I could have just ended up living with my mum permanently and going from one dead end job to another because shoe shops were closing down here and there.

01:12:23 I What are your hopes and plans for the future?

01:12:27 R Uuuuurgh it's hard. I think when you're in you're coming up to fifty as I am, it's hard thinking about the future especially because I've just come out of what was a long term relationship, I've realised in the last eighteen months that it's taken quite a while to shake off a relationship that I was in, from the time I was in my mid -twenties really where I wasn't really making my own decisions, a lot of it was steered around what makes him happy or how do I get to see him or how do I support him with, I've got to say he wasn't doing the same things with me otherwise maybe I'd have a bit more idea of what I wanted to do for my future, but thinking about doing this interview, I was thinking oh well you know if somebody said to me what do you want to do in your future? Ok work has always been central to what I do so I think I'm quite happy in the job that I'm doing now, so I'm hoping that I can stay there because it's flexible, it gives me some time to be the person that I want to be outside of work as well as drawing on the skills that I enjoy sharing in work, but work aside, I don't know. I think it's really, if I was younger I'd say I want to meet someone to marry and you know someone who is gonna be just as interested in looking after me as I'm interested in looking after them, but actually I just want to have a comfortable stress free, relatively stress free life, that's what I'm looking forward to.