

Memories of Virginia 18 February 2021

I can't remember how long ago I met Virginia. Over 20 years ago. It may have been when I was in the GLC's Ethnic Minorities Unit where we had a carnival band (Elimu) or after it was disbanded in 1986 and I joined the Economic Development Unit at Ealing. Virginia was in LBE Community Services but would pop in regularly to visit her friend, Charlie Mason, who she knew from their Bristol MA, and we started doing some work in the Acton area. She had already started working on South Acton Estate (she told me several times how her council colleagues had questioned why she wanted to work in 'Siberia!'), setting up the projects which would provide so much support to our bid for SRB funding. On secondment from the council I set up the regeneration charity Action Acton with a small shop in Acton and Virginia joined me, happy to get far away from the bureaucracy of LBE. part of her role was to establish the Acton Community Forum which eventually became independent with Rachel Pepper. Looking back on it now I still believe that the most significant work that was done over the five years of the bid as well as before and after were from the community projects initiated by Virginia – and I'm not the only person to think that. I'm also aware of how she remained on the board of Berrymede, maintaining her links with the estate and it would be fantastic if a garden could be created in her memory as was suggested by the head yesterday.

Through that whole period I worked closely with Virginia and afterwards we kept in touch by email and meeting up (naturally!) for the occasional lunch. I eventually left the choice of restaurants to her, usually around the Notting Hill area although I don't remember having been to Galicia – which appears to have been a favourite haunt of hers. My birthday is on the 26th January, close to hers, and we also made a point of having an annual celebratory joint birthday lunch, sometimes joined by Cilla Phillips, who had worked in Ealing Voluntary Services and had moved out of London. She lived in various places but still tried to catch a train to meet up with us when she could.

I bought a house in the Italian countryside a couple of years before Virginia bought her flat and we would compare our experiences by email and occasionally by phone. My memories of Virginia are not much different from everyone else's, her yellow Fiat Punto that eventually moved to Italy after flashing round the streets of Acton, the colourful dress sense, the generosity and openness to everyone, her strong sense of social justice. She had forceful views about people but was never personal or petty. As well as about Tory politicians she was particularly critical of council officers and politicians who couldn't be bothered to try tackle the real problems in the area and we'd have a good regular moan together about them. On the other hand, she was very loyal to her friends. She will be incredibly missed by a lot of people which says much about her contribution during her life.