

ROOT

News, Information and Views

From time to time we publish articles that are relevant to current affairs/ events. Len Kwesi Garrison obituary may be of some interest to you

March 2003

Issue 2

Obituary

LEN KWESI GARRISON, M.A.

Len Garrison died on Tuesday 18 February 2003 during a meeting of the Black Cultural Archives, of which Len was a founder member, he leaves behind his wife Maria and son Tunde.

Though photography was Len Kwesi Garrison's first love and profession, his vision in conceptualising and realising the setting up of the pioneering Afro-Caribbean Education Resource Centre (ACER) in 1977 and the Black Cultural Archives (BCA) in Brixton in the early 1980s will be the achievements by which he will be most remembered. Born in Jamaica, Len Kwesi Garrison followed in the footsteps of many Jamaican children when he sailed to England to join his parents who had already migrated in the early 1950s.

By the age of twelve he was passionately interested in photography, including developing his photographs at home. After he left

secondary school, he worked as a Medical Photographic Assistant at the Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine from 1962-66. Thereafter he moved to work at the Maudsley Hospital, Institute of Psychiatry from 1966 -71, being appointed head of the Media and Photographic Unit. Here he was involved in audio visual aids support, as well as medical and scientific photography for teaching, research publications and exhibitions.

During this period he studied Photography at Regent Street Polytechnic and London College of Printing as well as Media studies at Goldsmiths College. He also worked as a freelance photographer, accompanying Claudia Jones on assignments to take pictures for the West Indian Gazette in the early 1960s. In addition many West Indians during this period in London, wanted photographs taken of themselves and their families to send home.

Having worked for several years at

his profession and achieved a City and Guilds Certificate in Final Scientific and Technical Photography, Len Garrison decided to go back to university to further his education. He did a Diploma in Development Studies at Ruskin College, Oxford and a B.A. at the University of Sussex in African and Caribbean History, as well as studies in Urban Education at Kings College London. Subsequently, on a part time basis he worked on an M.A. from the University of Leicester in English Local History. Here he focused his work on the post-war settlement of West Indians in the East Midland city of Nottingham.

Following the completion of his Degree at Sussex, Len was invited to represent Britain at the FESTAC - Festival of Arts and Culture held in Nigeria in 1977. The paper, which he presented, was later expanded by him and published in Britain as "Black Youth, Rastafarian and the Identity Crisis in Britain." In writing this book, Len formulated his ideas on the need for a truly multi-cultural education system, so that Black children could grow up and receive an education which gave them a sense of their identity as proud people of African descent but who were also Black British citizens. He had come to believe that the British public education system was, by denying the reality and existence of the Black child's history and culture, causing them to fail and under achieve in that

system. Len's contribution to the debate of the early 1970's, was prompted by the publication of the book by Bernard Coard titled, "How the Black Child is made Educationally Sub-Normal by the British Education System." This timely intervention was to be of historic significance.

What was needed, he felt was an Afro-Caribbean Education Resource (ACER) base as well as an Archive of Black History from which educational materials suitable for different age groups of school children could be developed. From 1975, for two years, Len and others negotiated with the Education Authority for Inner London (ILEA) for appropriate funding and resources, to establish the independent community based project working in partnership with the Authority. In 1977, the ACER Project was launched with Len as Director.

He retained the post for eleven years, during which time the Centre took the lead in developing the Education Authority's anti-racist policy, practice and strategy through its research and comprehensive range of African-Caribbean and Black British resources. During this period the Project developed a range of resources and learning packs which enabled Black, white and other ethnic groups to learn about and from each other. They also developed anti racist strategy for use by teachers and

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parents, which was promoted through seminars and conferences for teachers and parents.

One of ACER's innovations was the introduction of the "Black Youth Annual Penmanship Awards". Hundreds of Black youngsters entered this competition each year, and the winners were those who had written most movingly about their reality and experience as Black young people in Britain. By the early 1980s the project had grown to include a self-publishing unit, a large resource library and a team comprising of eleven staff members devising anti-racist classroom learning resources programmes.

Unfortunately, when the Thatcher Government dismantled the Inner London Education Authority, ACER had to close through lack of funding. However, in spite of the Centre's closure, the learning materials and techniques had become a permanent part of the modern day London and schools across the country curriculum. Further, the system had so impressed the Dutch authorities that they developed a similar range of multi-cultural learning materials for use in Dutch schools. Hopefully, ACER had achieved enough in terms of laying the foundations, by developing learning packs for different age groups, and giving training to teachers about the techniques most likely to succeed to make education a fair learning process for children of all groups.

This legacy will be a testament to the vision and hard work of Len in ensuring that the ACER Project got off the ground.

In 1988, Len Garrison was appointed Director of the Association of Caribbean Family and Friend (ACFF) Centre in Nottingham. His task was to set up and run a new community Education Centre for both the City and the County by providing services and support for the African-Caribbean children in schools and colleges as well as in the wider community. He was also instrumental in setting up a Black Mentor Programme for teenagers, which later became the Build Mentor Project. In addition to these initiatives, Len was involved on a voluntary basis in the setting up of the East Midland African Caribbean Arts (EMACA), and the Time Out Respite Care Project for Black elderly in Nottingham.

For Len, the need to collect evidence of the cultural and social history to reflect the Black presence in Britain and ensure the history of African-Caribbean people is securely housed in an archive -museum was paramount. Since 1981 he has been involved in the setting up and chairing the Black Cultural Archives. He is a trustee (since 1999) of the Archives and Museum Of Black Heritage which is a partnership project between the BCA and the Middlesex University. This is a short-term project funded by the Heritage

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Lottery Fund, to develop aspects of BCA's work. He holds two other trusteeships, one being a member of the Board of Trustees of the Yaa Asantewaa Arts Centre and the other being a trustee of the Caribbean Teacher in Education Project (CETTIE).

Over a period of thirty-five years, Len has worked in various ways, and often times on a voluntary basis to redress the inequalities and gaps in

our public education system. Vis a Vis children of African and African-Caribbean descent. As well as this contribution to the Black community's social development and his work as a photographer, he has also found time to publish a volume of poetry titled "Beyond Babylon," which has also been well received.

Len Kwesi Garrison
13 June 1943 – 18 February 2003

FUNERAL

Service

BRIXTON SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH
4 Stanley Road, London SW4
Tel: 020 7274 8283
Thursday 13 March 2003 at 11.00am

Burial

WANDSWORTH CEMETERY
Magdalen Road, off Trinity Road, London SW18

Afterwards

BRIXTON TOWN HALL
5.00 PM

The family request that those who wish to mark the occasion or make a contribution, instead of a floral tribute, could give a monetary donation towards Tunde's education.

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