

THIS IS CROYDON OUR STORIES



Photo: Chris O'Donovan for Croydon Council.

SHANIQUA BENJAMIN

CROYDON'S CARIBBEAN INFLUENCERS

During *This is Croydon*, London Borough of Culture, the Museum of Croydon partnered with the National Portrait Gallery's Citizen UK project. Croydon Poet Laureate Shaniqua Benjamin, artist Kyam, and designer Abi Wright captured stories to celebrate the impact of the Caribbean community in **Croydon's Caribbean Influencers**. The project was challenging to deliver but had a big impact, transferring to the National Portrait Gallery in October 2023.

IN NUMBERS

Croydon's Caribbean Influencers

Museum of Croydon
Apr - Jul 2023

National Portrait Gallery
Oct 2023 - Feb 2024

10 volunteers

326 participants

17,296 visitors

Shaniqua reflects on her involvement, and on the importance of projects like this to highlight Croydon's rich heritage and bring about long-term change.

What was Caribbean Influencers about?

Citizen UK was a bigger project, with the National Portrait Gallery looking at waves of migration in different areas of the UK. In Croydon, it looked at migration from the Caribbean - how this impacted the UK, Croydon and the world. It was about telling stories of different Caribbean people - not famous people in the typical sense, but everyday people whose influence is still felt in Croydon today.

What did the project consist of?

We had a group of citizen researchers - local people

who looked at the museum archives and interviewed people. We collected beautiful, rich oral histories. Kyam created portraits, and I wrote poetry in response to them. Then the designer Abi came in and helped us to consider how we could bring everything together.

How did the project evolve?

My journey was interesting. I came in as a poet and ended up being very present till the end – even when it moved to the National Portrait Gallery. Things kept evolving, which was a challenge. It meant going above and beyond but I cared about the project so much.

So, saying “I’m going to write a poem” - then realising it’s about writing lots of little pieces and it becoming a big task because there were so many people. Becoming a citizen researcher, which I loved because it was so enriching to interview family and friends. Then also taking on the interpretive text, which I hadn’t done before.

It sounds like you were juggling a lot.

It became a lot to churn out all the poems. There wasn’t a lot of time. I’m from Croydon and I’m a Caribbean person, so it was important to me that care was given where it often isn’t. It was great to challenge me, and to have my community highlighted, but it was fatiguing. I’m amazed that we got it done to the calibre we did.

How was the project received in Croydon?

I don’t think some people comprehended the effort that went into it from such a small team! For a small community museum, there was an amazing array of stories collected and presented so beautifully by Abi with the design.

But people also said “This is amazing. Thank you for telling me about these people, for telling me about my history”. It was lovely when the contributors came to the launch. It meant a lot to them to be recognised. Especially when we were marking 75 years of the Windrush Generation. When I first interviewed our contributor, Renee, she didn’t quite comprehend the project. But when she saw the exhibition at the Museum of Croydon and I explained about the National Portrait Gallery, her mum was so emotional – she cried twice seeing her daughter there.



How was bringing it to the National Portrait Gallery?

It was great for it to have a second life. It was a smaller display but beautifully presented. I curated a soundscape – there was poetry, music, and oral history clips. The impact in Croydon was limited by museum opening times but with the National Portrait Gallery being open seven days a week, more people could see it.

Were there any challenges?

Timing and resource were big ones. There isn’t enough understanding about the time things take to create. Especially for a project like this, where you need to ensure everyone is getting the care they deserve. The team was small and we were scrambling at the end - it was all hands on deck.

Why was it important to do this work in Croydon?

Even in a place like Croydon, which is so amazingly diverse, there are many gaps in archives and collections. With this exhibition, I hoped to fill lots of those gaps. So that, in the future when people look through things online, they will know about our history.

What would you like to see going forward in Croydon?

I hope work to diversify the archive continues. Community engagement is such a key way to collect local stories and give recognition to different kinds of people.

Following London Borough of Culture, the Museum of Croydon secured £30,000 from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to partner with local communities and bring their stories to life. A National Lottery Heritage Fund grant is also supporting a radical Young Archivists programme for Global Majority communities to help diversify Croydon Archives.

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