

Kensington Narrators Arts & Heritage Archive

#ArchiveYourself #SendAMessageToTheFuture

KensingtonNarrators.org is home to a community-led, multimedia archival platform, where creative works of historical value are collected, digitised, displayed, and preserved.

When we create (whether a painting, a podcast, an essay, or a photograph), we understand the context of our work; why *that* imagery, why *that* turn of phrase, why *this* moment needed to be captured. The KN archiving process helps creatives to share both work and context, sending a message into the future. Each contributor retains all rights to the products of their creativity.

We are committed to documenting the history being lived in the RBKC. Every contributor to our Archive is a Kensington Narrator.

Are you a Kensington Narrator? [#ArchiveYourself](#).



Kensington Narrators: Spotlighting a local community organiser

#TalentRich #CivicFuturesLondon

Kensington Narrator Christina Sealy has had a busy year!

In May, she launched [Talent Rich CIC](#) (a Community Interest Company) to manage community projects and programmes. With extensive support from Kensington & Chelsea Social Council, she is building the company to ensure that grassroots teams have the right infrastructure and project support to succeed.



In a nutshell, what is Talent Rich all about?

CS: Taking community-generated content and talent to the next level and to new audiences – by bringing professional resources, support, and platforms to community groups, we can create world-class, community-led, and community-owned projects.

Wow. So how did that happen?



CS: Well, from 2009-2012, Talent Rich was just a group of people working together. We ran the Portobello Young Artist of the Year programme with the help of 30 local volunteers. And it was really successful – well attended and engaging for the community – we even made the front page of the local paper! It also took hundreds of hours of work and special resources to make everything happen.

And seriously – not every community organiser has access to resources that formal organisations have – and while not every project needs things like funding and vendors and insurance, many do. And it's also about making all that work more visible and valued.

So the goal for Talent Rich is to bridge that infrastructure gap, and be an umbrella organization that can administer grants, manage data privacy, write cheques, or sign contracts to support programmes and projects that the community owns.

You know, what I also realized from the Young Artists experience is that our community *is* talent rich. While money and resources are vital, identifying the right people and putting the right teams together can have more impact than money. Talent Rich will work strategically with community leaders to create public programmes.

So what is Talent Rich going to do next?

CS: We're engaged in creating a programme of training to help individuals who want to learn how to run community projects. We've had a lot of feedback from local people – especially stay-at-home mums – who say that they want to build a track record of delivering a project, so that in the future they can apply for funding.

We are also designing a public programme of workshops and events, spanning arts, culture, and technology. We're working with the Chelsea Theatre and other local arts venues to develop specially targeted programming to engage local youth and seniors in storytelling projects – and the end results will be included in the Kensington Narrators Arts & Heritage Archive.

Sounds promising. Anything else on the horizon?

CS: Through the Civic Futures project, we're working with the GLA – Greater London Authority – to reimagine the way that grassroots groups organize themselves and obtain funding. I think that right now, we need to be realistic – the social sector is in a period of great instability and rapid change. The old ways don't work anymore, and I want Talent Rich to be part of the conversation so that we can help clarify how projects happen on the ground, in our own neighborhoods. When there's less money to go around, the last thing we or the funders want is waste.

Yes – you’ve also recently been named a 2019-2020 Civic Futures leader for your work in Kensington & Chelsea!

CS: Yes, that was a huge honor to be nominated by so many community members, and then to be named was amazing. I love thinking about how our community projects can evolve and be part of the Greater London grassroots network. The current Greater London Civil Society Strategy focuses on integration and equality, and it’s a great opportunity to find ways to adapt community projects to meet those priorities.

I’ve been learning so much. I didn’t even know that what we have been doing organically for over 20 years is called “building civil society infrastructure” - but I can clearly see that our projects and our vision fit here. I also had no idea that putting together a lot of community groups under one name is called “enabling collaborative commissioning.” It seems we’ve been aligned with government priorities for some time!

One of the biggest outcomes thus far is that we’ve been able to help the GLA understand more about the distinctions between grassroots functions – “community leaders” have been lumped together, when really they’re performing different jobs and have very different skill sets – they are outreach workers, project managers, activists, and advocates. As community leaders, we need to understand which of these roles we inhabit – and what value we bring to community projects – so that projects can be designed and funded more realistically.

What else have you been doing with Civic Futures?

CS: Since September, I’ve been to a half-dozen events, and spent time with 24 incredibly talented grassroots leaders with diverse roles and perspectives from community work across London. I’m particularly inspired by Leroy Simpson from Harlesden, who chairs the Harlesden Ward Safer Neighbourhood Panel.

My assigned mentor is the chief executive of Central YMCA and an amazing and inspiring woman. She has been helping me to understand the value of my roots and my story – as a young person growing up in Ladbroke Grove; being homeless, in poverty, and living with social injustice; and then having great privileges of education and professional training. I’ve realized how my development as a community leader through lived experience is rare, and a great strength.

The talks that I’ve been part of have also helped me see the real value of the Talent Rich team – we’ve grown organically over the last 22 years, and all the money in the world couldn’t have built the resilience, innovation, and trust we’ve developed, working together in our home borough.

I'll mention that I've also been lucky enough to have Nour-eddine Aboudihaj of the Grenfell Trust as another mentor on the Kensington Narrators project – if you don't already know his work with the Trust, he's also a university lecturer and a transformational coach. He's been instrumental in helping me to compartmentalise trauma to positive effect. With his help I've been working to turn the negatives in my environment into opportunities, and how to use adversity to build resilience.

You've been the driving force behind Kensington Narrators since it was launched in response to Grenfell. Can you talk about how that happened?

CS: I was volunteering in the emergency community response after Grenfell, organizing other volunteers and helping to signpost services to Tower survivors and affected community members. I spoke to literally hundreds of people from across the community during that year, and as a way of coping myself, I took notes on the things I spoke to people about.

I wanted to create a project that accomplished something that people really wanted and would help myself and those around me to recover from the trauma. I wanted it to be something constructive, that would leave a lasting legacy.

One of the things I found was that people were concerned about all the art and items that were being created for the Grenfell response. How would they be preserved? And then there was the media, who was writing their own story about Grenfell and the people who lived it and were impacted by it. And people wanted to tell their own stories, and to have young people benefit from those stories. They wanted to leave a legacy of hope.

So you started Kensington Narrators.

There were So Many Meetings About the Name! In the end, people wanted to 'narrate' their own stories, so that part at least was easy. We also didn't want to reinforce any North/South borough divides. People wanted to ensure we projected unity.

Plus "Kensington Narrators" was a cooler name for our youth members as it's shorter and looks nicer in social media handles!

And we decided our main project would be an archive – the community wanted an archive, and at the time, as a mum of two small children, because an archive is a longer project I felt this was something I could commit to in the long term because it wouldn't require daily meetings!

But on a practical level, we had no idea where we could start to create the archive. The Kensington & Chelsea college and library were both at risk of closing at that point. The Black Cultural Archives had lost their funding. And other archive organizations were telling us that they would take ownership of

the items archived with them – and community members had told me clearly that they wanted to keep ownership of what they created.

Obviously, it's a time of gentrification in Kensington & Chelsea. Keeping hold of existing community buildings has been hard enough, without having to find a new one. Other resident-led groups at the time were trying to get ahold of buildings for community use – including for archiving space. But they've all since folded operations. Having, running, getting a building is really expensive, and really hard, and a huge project in itself.

So when I was doing research about archives, a majority of people said that making the archive be credible meant that we should work with a University. Since I had recently graduated from Birkbeck, University of London in 2016 – as a part-time, mature student – I knew Birkbeck was inclusive with a strong history department, and many of our community members and teachers had studied there.

It's also on the Hammersmith & City line, so there's that.

So we began working with Birkbeck and Dr. Julia Laite, who in turn found us Bishopsgate Institute - a self-funded, independent organization whose focus was on community archives.

Bishopsgate is outside of Kensington & Chelsea, so I knew there would be questions about why our archive was in Liverpool Street rather than within the borough. But I had to be realistic. The fire door alone to the Bishopsgate archive room cost £5000 – we had zero pounds that point – and their space also features 24/7 climate control to preserve its contents. So I knew our work would be in good hands.

It is ALSO on the Hammersmith & City line, so there was that.

Then the Heritage Lottery Fund gave us £100,000 to build the project – to educate people about modern archiving, to run a youth training project, and buy some equipment. Since then, we've launched a youth-created website which includes a digital archive, we've introduced archiving to the local school curriculum, we've run dozens of workshops and events to introduce people to archiving and receive their contributions, and we've taken local people to tour Bishopsgate. We also have created a first-of-its-kind online archiving platform which allows people to contribute from anywhere they have access to the internet.

After one of the workshops, one of the local mums told me she "felt lighter" after letting go of a Grenfell banner she had been keeping safe. So many people have told us they have photos on their phones that should be shared for the future. We want those things to come to the Archive - even if they're only in digital form. Because it's important that the images – and what they mean to people who lived through all of this – all survive to tell their stories.

And from an artistic perspective, we live in an extremely diverse community, and a world-class arts community. And the outpouring of work is breathtaking, and unique. I want those works to be preserved, and seen. People can contribute to the Archive, and tell their stories individually, but the result is a community story, a collage, a story told in layers. I think that can only be achieved through an archive.