

Mile in My Shoes: Angela's story

Estimated reading time: 5.5 minutes

The best way I can describe it would be when you go to a petrol station and you fill up your car with petrol, there's a certain – odour. Well imagine that being multiplied many times - within your own home and surrounding environment.

Behind that particular block lies the industrial estate. And behind the industrial estate - which is parallel - is the gasworks site, now known as the Green Quarter. I felt as though this must have been what the industrial revolution was like. When I'd learnt at school about factories pumping out black smoke in places like Manchester and other places in Lancashire.

So, we are very, very close to it. And – we really experience terrible air pollution.

I remember back in 2017; I held a party actually in the Close for my daughter. I had a table set up and we had samosas, crisps, drinks, cake. And it was so lovely to see the children playing outside. I remember creating a piñata. But in the backdrop of this was the air pollution – because of the remediation of the soil and the excavation of contaminated soil at the former gasworks. And I was aware of it and I'm sure the children and their parents would have been aware of the stench outside. I felt embarrassed. And – you know – I thought to myself, I wish I'd booked a hall instead. We wouldn't have been exposed to this.

And the impact on our health was very noticeable. And it affected my chest. I used to wheeze a lot.

I had to put up with this along with other members of the community - 24 hours, 7 days a week. It was absolutely a living hell. And my oldest daughter said that it used to make her feel breathless. And - she was actually prescribed an asthma inhaler. It's been hard to feel that nobody was interested in protecting us.

Background: Hi! How are you?

My name is Angela Fonso. I am the coordinator for Clean Air for Southall and Hayes or CASH for short. And it's just lovely that there's a mix of people here. Some South Asian, some of African background like myself and another neighbour. There's another neighbour who's white. But we all get along. We all rub along.

CASH was formed in 2018 as a result of having a conversation with my neighbour. We were outside at the time. And he said to me, 'What we are inhaling is possibly carcinogenic.' And that shocked me. That was a real eyeopener. And what we decided to do was hold a public meeting initially. At one of the local restaurants. So, we just leafletted the local area. And I must admit I was pessimistic, I thought, 'Oh, not that many people will turn up'. But I was surprised to see at least 50 residents all seated, all waiting for this meeting. And they all had very similar stories to tell. And I will never forget there was an elderly resident. And he said,

'My grandchildren don't want to visit any more, the stink keeps them away.' And he was quite tearful. I remember feeling quite emotional myself. And that drove me forward actually. I thought, this is just so unjust what was going on.

So, we carried on campaigning and lobbying Ealing Council. Ealing Council decided to hold a public meeting, and I would estimate there was probably around 200 people there. And there was only standing room at the back. And there were a lot of angry residents. I remember one resident calling out, 'You killed my father.' I'll never forget that.

We had been suffering for at least a year if not longer, so we had no choice but to be activists, to stand up for our rights. And we found out where the pre-AGM meeting was being held. And I was with my neighbour and another member of CASH and I had both my kids with me. And the Chair said, 'I think you'll find you're in the wrong room.' And my neighbour said, 'No, weren't not.' And he then proceeded to sit in the back of the room. And tell the board exactly how we were being affected, how our lives were really being damaged and destroyed. And one of my daughters was actually in the room at the time. And I said to her, 'One day you might be on a board of a large organisation,' I said, 'Do not lose sight of humanity.'

So even though we are facing challenges I hope that I'm educating my children to stand up for their rights and not to be trampled over because they come from a disadvantaged community.

I am the daughter of two immigrants. My father came from Jamaica – he's passed away. My mother came from Trinidad – she's still alive. And it does kind of bring it back in a way when I think about what's happening here and now with the riots and what happened back in the 70s in Southall. And the truth of the matter is racism has always been present. And it's certainly for me a constant when I look at what's happening in Southall and the failure of the authorities to prevent the injustices that are happening. As far as I'm concerned that needs to be given equal priority not just the far right attacking people – you know, that's the visible side. I'm talking about really what sort of bubbles under the surface and – is – racism but it's in a different guise.

The developer has about 30 gasworks across the country. This actually led to CASH being a founder member of Gasworks Communities United. And – to put it simply – I felt that if other communities came together with CASH and these communities were more affluent, more White areas, that we might start to get recognition. It would be more difficult to dismiss us.

And to move forward we need to have continued investigation into what we are experiencing. And we welcome that Imperial College has started the ball rolling with their Bioremediation Project. But this is just the start. And what frustrates me is the authorities can have all the statistics in the world on deprivation in Southall. That knowledge does not stop them from overdeveloping Southall. It's also known that we face considerable burdens on our health due to health inequities – yet Southall is earmarked for over 20 development

sites in the local plan. It's just ludicrous. Nobody seems to care about the cost to the NHS. And the overcrowding isn't going to be addressed. You just have to look around and see the lack of green space, the failure to provide the employment opportunities. We were told there were going to be new jobs, you know – where are these new jobs in Southall? Apparently 30% of these developments should have affordable homes. Affordable to who? The average salary in Southall is round about £19,000.

It's gone under the radar because we aren't White, we aren't affluent, we don't control the levers to power. But it's not going to stop us campaigning and standing up for our rights.

The government needs to ensure that the remediation of brownfield sites does not affect communities. And I'll be blatant and say, if one person's going to be affected – don't do it. That life has a value. And there needs to be independence on deciding what are safe levels for us to be exposed to. That needs to be removed from the influence of the environmental consultants and the property developers because really this conflict of interest only serves the government and the property developers not the communities who are being exposed to unacceptable air pollution caused by the remediation of contaminated sites such as former gasworks.