

FestivALL speech by Florence Nyasamo-Thomas, Chair of Gloucestershire African Community Foundation

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When I did my dissertation 10 years ago on Community Cohesion, the last thing I could have anticipated was that I would be speaking to you about inclusion today.

To understand my perception of inclusion, one needs to understand my journey, as most of the time I am convinced that I have lived and continue to live a double life – but I will let you decide.

Religion: was an important part of my life...

Up until I was 10 my best friend was a girl called Adija. She and her brother Mohammed went to the Mosque on Fridays and read the Koran. I went to church on Sunday and read the bible. Despite this, I never felt that we were any different.

Fast forward 15 years to me living in the UK, my younger brother was living in Northern Ireland and married into a protestant family - all over sudden religion became a contentious issue-in our family. Especially when my sister went to stay with them while she was at college and ended up with a catholic boyfriend. I then became aware of the barriers religion *can* bring to the world – I remember being very confused about the difference of being catholic & protestant, especially after attending a catholic boarding school and being brought up in a protestant household.

Sexuality:

I grew up having no notion of sexuality. The first time I comprehended the idea of a sexuality other than heterosexuality, was when I first started working in the UK. My manager who helped me build my work ethic and I respected so much was gay. At that time, I hadn't lived in this country long enough to understand the prejudice he had experienced in his life. For me we were equal. In a way, I was lucky to grow up sheltered from the notion of sexuality, because I never carried with me any negativity towards people of the LGBTQ+ communities. Looking back, I can recall when completing job application forms, which I am sure you are aware, has sections asking, are you homosexual or heterosexual or prefer not to say, I would opt for prefer not to say, because I didn't know the difference of the other two.

Disability

I grew up with an uncle who I now know was born autistic. Despite him being taken care of by everyone in our village, the same community shunned any woman who dared to bring shame to them by bearing a disabled child. Living in the UK, I was surprised to find out that disabled and people with mental health illness, historically, the tendency was to lock them away in asylums with hardly any opportunities for them on the outside world.

Now, I feel people like Stephen Hawking, and events such as the Paralympics & Invictus games have contributed a lot in changing perception on how we view disability as a society, but at the same time believe, we still have a very long way to go.

Gender:

I grew up in a country where opportunities for women education was limited, but my dad chose to take me to boarding school to have an education. In fact, I feel very honoured today to speak to you on the grounds where Miss Dorothea Beale, the first Principal of the Cheltenham Ladies College, ashes were laid to rest in 1920. She was one of the greatest pioneers for women's education in this country – if not the world. Unfortunately, after many years I still live in this world where women are not paid equally to men. Just recently the BBC publication on pay confirmed this and women are under-represented across most decision-making boards.

Age:

In today's world, young and old people have just as much to contribute. Just because you are young it should not mean you have nothing of value to voice. The Millennials continue showing us the way - in terms of how to make the most use of our social media. In my case I find that I'm learning every day from the young people around me who are mainly teens & in their twenties. The wisdom and experience of the older generations cannot be dismissed; they too have just as much to give us.

Ethnicity:

Growing up in Kenya with my dad being a missionary, I had the privilege of having guests from all over the world to stay with us. People from the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and many more. Ethnicity or colour was never an issue until I came to live in the UK.

Now I live in a country where people who are different (or come from diverse cultures or ethnicities) are regarded as 'hard to reach'. For me, if Tim Peak is in space he is "hard to reach". In effect, the fact is that one size does not fit all.

While considering questions concerning diversity, inclusivity and community cohesion, it became apparent to me that for a long time those making decisions for the business, institutions and organisations of this country were predominantly white men.

Well some may question what is wrong with that, but I ask, how has this affected our society?

These people through no fault of their own, have continually made the rules and regulations that are influenced by most of the people they deal with on a regular basis. Other groups have had limited or no representation and therefore their needs and concerns were never considered, resulting to many legislations that are not necessarily inclusive.

Today, we live in a country where diversity is a reality and there is no return to sender.

On the other hand, inclusion is a choice, because it is the choices we make as individuals, businesses and organisations that we will build resilient communities we want to live in.

We need to have representation and listened to concerns raised by a diverse group of people from our society, in making decisions that affects us all.

We need to have actual conversations with each other and get to understand one another's difficulties and at the same time celebrate all our successes.

We need to do this and more to break down barriers because we must start somewhere and

I am delighted and pleased to say... **HERE WE ARE....** So, my advice is...

If you are thinking of holding an event, I would like you to ask yourself this;

If it is fun – for whom, if it is uncomfortable – for whom, if it is just right – for whom

I want to be part of an event that fulfils all these criteria and more, to enable us to laugh with each other, learn from each other and work together, for the good of our society and future generations. This is a snippet of my perception of inclusion and the reason I'm involved in FestivALL.

Thank you!

Florence Nyasamo-Thomas