



Interviewee: Rafina Bardell

Interviewer: Liz Bloom

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### **Family life**

I'm the eldest of a large family of seven children. My family life in Mauritius was very warm and supportive especially my dad, who was constantly encouraging his children to strive for better things in life. He was always in the background; he would coach us with our homework, especially after he came home from work. Being the eldest, I was happy to do little tasks for him in return. For example, I used to polish his working boots. He was a Prison Officer for his Majesty Service.

### **School life**

I enjoyed school life where I made many friends. Now, at the ripe age of sixty plus, whenever I go to Mauritius, I still visit a number of them which I have maintained their friendship. I was at school in the early 1950s; it was housed in a very Victorian building and I remember at the age of 5, sitting on a bench in a large room using slates and chalk to write on. The older pupils had chairs and desks. As Mauritius is bilingual, English and French, we had many illustrations on the wall; for example, 'apple' and 'pomme'; that's how we started learning both languages at the same time. I went to a Catholic School, The Sacred Heart of Jesus Primary School until the age of eleven. Then I progressed to Trinity College, it was a fee paying school. In those days all families with children at college had to pay fees until they left. After gaining a Senior School Certificate - if you were bright enough - you would go on to do your HSC or Advanced Level. I completed only the Senior School Certificate because there were seven children to educate. Life was not easy for my parents. We did not have holidays, except the school outings or days at the sea-side. We did not have all those luxuries that people take for granted nowadays. My parents were very ambitious and strongly believe in education.

After leaving school at the age of 17, jobs were scarce in the 60s with the high percentage of unemployment in Mauritius, so my father encouraged me to go abroad for a better life. At that time the hospitals were looking for nurses in England so I applied and I was successful in my application.

### **Working life**

I left my homeland on 26 January 1968 for destination at Heathrow, somehow became stranded at Bruxelles (Brussels) with another five students who were also coming to do nursing. However, we travelled together by rail from Lille to Calais and by sea to Dover and finally to Victoria and by car to St Albans. It was a frightening experience for me as I have never travelled alone. I arrived at my uncle's place late at night after travelling for nearly 2 days since leaving my homeland. I stayed overnight. The following morning he took me to a bus stop on the London Road so I could go to the hospital to start work. It was winter and it was bitterly cold and I was frozen because I only had a summer dress on. Departing in tropical heat, it was one of the many culture shocks I would encounter during my life in England. For three hours I waited; I had no idea which bus to take. I was too shy to ask the other people at the bus stop. However, when a bus stopped, somebody on a bus saw the address of Harperbury Hospital on my suitcase. Dismounting from the bus, she asked me if I was going to the hospital. She had a hospital uniform on and she realised that I was a newcomer. After travelling with her to the hospital, she took me to Matron's office. Matron was so pleased to see me because she had been expecting me two days ago! I had that day off day to rest as I badly needed proper sleep.

I started work the next day doing an early shift starting at seven o'clock in a children's ward under the supervision of senior staff, of course. There were quite a few Mauritian girls there who were already qualified, so they looked after us.

Life in the Nurses' home was safe and secure. We each had a comfortable room which was very nice and warm, with a fitted wardrobe, a bedside cabinet and a little sink. We had to share a bathroom and a kitchen. That was the first time that I had a room to myself because in Mauritius, I was sharing with my sisters. I was very happy at Harperbury. I loved my job even though it was very stressful and difficult. We had 42 hour shift per week. Caring for Mentally Handicapped was tough. Despite the hardships endured in terms of climate, food and language I succeeded in establishing a career and a home.

Sadly, eighteen months after my arrival in St Albans, my dear father died as a result of a traffic accident. Unfortunately, I was unable to attend his funeral. I remember him with great affection; he is always with me.

### **At Present**

After imbibing the Western way of life, and being from the East, I started to feel closer to God. So last year, I am proud to say that I performed pilgrimage to Mecca (*Hajj*). Over the years, I have been involved in voluntary work. I did Home Start for mothers who have children under five who find it difficult to cope. I have worked 'front of house' at the Trestle Theatre and at the Oxfam Charity shop amongst others. I also belong to the U3A, the Priory Club, Active Lifestyles and the British Franco Society (the city of St.Albans has an exchange partnership with Nevers).

I would like to carry on working and to help others, especially young people; a lot of them have difficulties at school. I feel safe and secure here in St Albans where we have all the facilities that one needs. I also like being near the capital; whenever I feel like going to London, within twenty minutes, I am there! I have been in England for 44 years now and I have enjoyed being here; it has been a long time since I left my home land. I have visited many places but I always look forward to returning to St Albans because, for me, this is home. Sometimes I feel that I have abandoned something that was dear to me, forever lost in the past.