

# Aspire to be more

**Raihan Alfaradhi**, the LSE Students' Union anti-racism officer for 2005-06, offers a personal insight into growing up in London.

I can still recall the feeling when I saw it close up. Born and brought up in Stepney, I had always been able to see the Canary Wharf tower in the distance. A magnificent structure, it dwarfed other buildings and marked how far London's Docklands had come in recent years. But as I stood at its base, aged about eight, and looked up, an awareness dawned which has never left me since – an awareness of what people can achieve.

I did not remember, moments before birth, choosing who my parents would be, or where I would be born. I did not choose what I would look like, or the colour of my skin. All the circumstances of my birth were completely out of my hands. And yet those very things were a cause of contention for others. Life would turn out, for myself and many, to be unfairly peppered with obstacles arising from background or appearance.

I grew up in the East End. It has always been one of the poorest areas of London, in part due to the undesirability of living in the direction of the prevailing wind from the city centre in the days of open fires; later because of mass low-paid employment in the docks and related industries. Throughout history, the area has absorbed many immigrants who have each added a new dimension to the area's culture. A testament to this is the Brick Lane mosque. The building was formerly a synagogue, and before that a Catholic church, having started its life as a Protestant church for Huguenots.

However, the East End has also been a focus for racism in Britain. As far back as the anti-Catholic Gordon riots in 1780, racist events have marred life here, with each new group of immigrants seemingly inducing a new threat. Famous examples include the anti-Semitic British Union of Facists' march in 1936 and anti-Asian violence in 1993. I was fortunate enough not to experience most of these problems, though I grew up hearing stories of the gang fights that occurred on the very streets where I played football.

This violent history became the stuff of anecdotes and troubled me greatly. I also looked at the community around me. Social problems were hitting hard. Drugs were one of the biggest, and this led to a gamut of further problems, each compounded by another. These were left to the communities themselves to solve, stigmatised as the problems of the 'ethnic minorities', of their

own making. That there could be wider social problems which needed wider attention, and which had hit the communities because they were poor rather than because they were 'ethnic minorities', did not seem to be recognised.

It was perhaps because of all these experiences that I decided that I could not be a spectator. I went to school in the City, and had a somewhat privileged education. I decided to help tutor others, and set up a mentoring service with friends. I got involved with a community organisation which ran youth centres and crime/drug prevention programmes. I was determined to make a change and lend a helping hand as best I could.

This is perhaps also why I stood for the LSESU anti-racism officer position. Having been involved with a range of societies and activities, including football, I realised there were a lot of students, especially international ones, who did not get involved for some reason. My aim this year is to actively engage all students with the Union, regardless of their background. One of the ways I hope to do this is through continued support for the International Food Fair and the Global Show, which were huge successes last year. We also have the 'Rise against Racism' week. Through a variety of such events as these, I hope to promote both a greater sense of belonging and increased inter-society collaboration at LSE.

As I look up now at the Canary Wharf tower, the awareness that came to me returns. It is a feeling of optimism for the future, having seen what people can achieve when they put their minds to it. I have realised that, if we all do our bit, we won't only be looking up at magnificent structures to see what makes our nation great, but we will be able to see that greatness in each and everyone around us.



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