



‘Just Like  
Migr  
is Cen  
the Very  
Who We Ar

Suyin Haynes visits a  
tracing the lives of those  
to build the health service  
message is as relevant

Photos courtesy of

“NO ONE PREPARED YOU FOR HOW THE patients were going to treat you,” remembers Allyson Williams, who came to London from Trinidad to train as a nurse in May 1969 at the Whittington Hospital in Highgate. “They’d slap your hand away and say ‘don’t touch me, your black is going to rub off on me’.”

Though there were many challenges on the job, Williams found her community in London. In her words, she and her colleagues “would party all night and return to the nurses’ home about 6am, shower and then go on duty for 7am”.

In 1974, she met and married her husband, Vernon, one of the founders of the Notting Hill Carnival, which she continues to be heavily involved with.

In 2002, Williams was awarded an MBE for her services to the midwifery profession.

Williams’ story is one of many featured in the Migration Museum’s new touring exhibition, ‘Heart of the Nation: Migration and the Making of the NHS’, which celebrates the contributions of migrant workers to the NHS on its 75th anniversary.

Currently open at Leicester Museum and Art Gallery,

before going on to Leeds in October and then London in 2024, the exhibition showcases the experiences of people who moved from Caribbean countries as part of the Windrush Generation – as Williams did – alongside those of people from all over the world.

Tracing their journeys from leaving their home countries, to working on the job, and building a life in the UK, the exhibition explores the key challenges that migrant health-care workers have faced and, crucially, the rich contributions they have made and legacies they have created.

At a time when about one in six people working in the NHS has a non-British nationality – and as the NHS is facing unprecedented pressures – the museum’s artistic

**“They’d slap your hand away and say “don’t touch me, your black is going to rub off on me””**

Allyson Williams

director, Aditi Anand, hopes that visitors can take away an appreciation of the struggles and resilience of migrant healthcare workers. “They often faced systematic discrimination and prejudice, but built careers and lives in Britain in spite of the challenges they faced,” she says.

The exhibition features dozens of personal stories, unique artefacts and ephemera, such as the nursing badges and passport of Margaret Elizabeth Jaikissoon, who moved from Trinidad to the UK and completed her nursing training in 1976.

“She had to work twice as hard,” recalls Margaret’s daughter Nicole. “She found herself repeating the same menial jobs, whilst her white counterparts were able to prosper with more advanced jobs. Unfortunately on many occasions, Mum would encounter ignorant patients who rejected the care of a black nurse and refused to be touched by her black hands.”

One section of the exhibition features a series of recent portraits by artist Ewewright of Caribbean elders who worked in the NHS. As visitors walk past this part of the exhibition, the images transition from the subjects’ own personal images showing their lives within the NHS over the



# the NHS, ation tral to Fabric of e in Britain'

A new touring exhibition  
se who came to Britain  
ce and explores why its  
as ever in its 75th year

Migration Museum



decades to the recent portraits, creating an effect of journeying through time.

Another section features portraits commissioned by the Migration Museum by the photographer Christian Sinibaldi, with each person representing a different decade of the NHS' history. Allyson Williams is the representative for the 1960s, and is pictured at her home among her colourful carnival headdresses – symbolising her role as an integral part of the Trinidadian community in London.

Alongside the personal stories exploring migrant contributions to care in Britain, the exhibition explores bigger themes that take on renewed relevance today. Through photographs from colonial-era medical colleges and testimonies of recruitment drives abroad for nurses, the exhibition teases out the links between Britain and its former Empire, and how this legacy led to people migrating to work in the NHS. It also presents narratives that may be surprising.

"The story of the NHS is about emigration from Britain as well as immigration," says Anand, pointing to the fact that, after the Second World War, thousands of British doctors and nurses left to work abroad, often to

Commonwealth countries, where British qualifications were easily transferable.

"This, in effect, created an even bigger gap that immigrant healthcare workers filled, particularly in deprived regions or areas of practice that were considered unattractive to British-trained doctors and nurses."

Speaking to this theme in the context of 2023, Heart of the Nation features a placard from the recent junior doctor strikes which reads 'Next Stop Australia', hinting at how emigration is a continuing trend for doctors who are considering leaving the NHS.

The staffing crisis is just one of the questions raised in the exhibition that persists today, and arguably has more urgency than ever before on the service's 75th anniversary.

Disputes over pay and burnout have seen the biggest doctors and nurses' walk-outs in decades, and a record number of people are waiting for care – exacerbated by the pandemic.

A 2022 BMA report on race equality in medicine showed that 76% of respondents experienced racism in their workplace on at least one occasion in the last two years. Another report this year found that one in three black and ethnic minority

NHS staff members have faced bullying or discrimination.

And though refugees have contributed significantly to the NHS, as stories within the exhibition show, the political environment for those coming from similar situations is becoming increasingly hostile. Even after a recent court ruling deemed the Government's plan to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda unlawful, Rishi Sunak and Suella Braverman doubled-down on anti-migrant rhetoric and announced their intentions to appeal the decision.

"At a time when there is so much negativity around migration in the media and public discourse," says Anand, "Heart of the Nation is a timely reminder of the vital role that migrants have always played in the NHS and the extent to which, just like the NHS, migration is central to the very fabric of who we are in Britain – as individuals, as communities and as a nation."

The Migration Museum's new exhibition, 'Heart of the Nation: Migration and the Making of the NHS', is open at Leicester Art Museum and Gallery until 29 October. It will then move to Leeds, and London in 2024