



Joyce's charity continues the work of her late husband, Flip

Black history has been suppressed, changed and distorted

Joyce Fraser OBE tells Joanne Smith how her celebration of black icons through plays, school talks and charity work led to an appointment with the King

KARWAI TANG / COURTESY JOYCE FRASER

Few people will have heard of John Archer, who fought for equal rights for Africans and became London's first black mayor in Battersea in 1913. Or Claudia Jones, who challenged the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act because she had the foresight to know it would lead to identity problems decades later for the Windrush generation.

Now, u3a member Joyce Fraser has been awarded an OBE for bringing their stories – and many more – into the public eye through her charity, the Black Heroes Foundation (BHF), which she set up in 2016 in honour of her late husband, Peter Randolph 'Flip' Fraser, founding editor of the UK's first African-Caribbean newspaper *The Voice*.

Other notable individuals highlighted by BHF include Jamaican farmer's son Sam King MBE, a former mayor of Southwark, and the cousin of Joyce's father, who came to the UK on the ship HMT Empire Windrush in 1948 after volunteering to serve Britain in the RAF during World War II. Known as the 'father of Windrush', he co-founded the Windrush Foundation in 1995 and financed the *West Indian Gazette* – which was created and edited by Claudia Jones.

Nurse Mary Seacole was born in Jamaica in 1805. Her Scottish father, James Grant, was a soldier in the British Army. When Mary's offer to join the official Crimea War nursing contingent, led by Florence Nightingale, was turned down, she borrowed money to fund her own trip to eastern Europe, where she rode on horseback into the battlefields to aid wounded soldiers.

Sir William H Russell, war reporter for *The Times*, wrote of Mary in 1857: "I trust that England will not forget one who nursed her sick, who sought out her wounded to aid and succour them, and who performed the last offices for some of her illustrious dead."

Amid controversy, a statue honouring Mary was erected outside St Thomas' Hospital in London in 2016.

There are modern-day heroes, too, such

as children's author Malorie Blackman, England footballer Marcus Rashford and Professor Dame Elizabeth Anionwu, who was instrumental in campaigning for the Mary Seacole statue and became the UK's first sickle cell and thalassemia nurse specialist, as well as helping to establish the Sickle Cell Society.

Joyce's work promoting black history at arts festivals, in schools and online events earned her an OBE in the Queen's Jubilee Birthday Honours last year as well as a Points of Light award, which recognises 'outstanding volunteers', from former Prime Minister Theresa May.

She has also written and co-written three plays which have been performed at arts centres and festivals – quite something for someone who was a science teacher before working in IT and didn't consider herself at all creative.

"It's amazing what has happened," she says. "I knew nothing about charities or theatres or media when I started in 2016."

The Black Heroes Foundation continues the work of journalist and creative Flip, creator of the critically acclaimed musical *Black Heroes in the Hall of Fame*. Born in Jamaica, he gained a

scholarship to the prestigious Jamaica College before coming to the UK when he was 15 with his parents, who worked for the Jamaican High Commission.

The *Black Heroes in the Hall of Fame* production was Flip's life's work, telling '5,000 years of history in one night'. It ran from 1987 to 2012, touring all over the UK and in America.

Joyce says: "He knew that the way to educate people isn't in the classroom but through media and theatre, and he was just so clever.

"People would go and see it and come out saying they felt 10 feet tall. It made them feel proud of their background. The problem is black history has been suppressed, changed and distorted and we actually don't know our own history, so the play was telling the black audience about their past.

"My parents always said 'Get a good education and you will be able to get on', but Flip thought it was more than that – it was education about ourselves. We all need to know black history."

With little money, the charity needed a bit of luck, which came in the form of a generous restaurateur. "Mihad of the >



Flip Fraser created the critically acclaimed stage musical *Black Heroes in the Hall of Fame*, which toured across the UK and US for 25 years from 1987



From left: Joyce with a picture of Claudia Jones; 'Father of Windrush' Sam King MBE; Mary Seacole's statue at St Thomas' Hospital; Joyce chats with King Charles III after receiving her OBE at Windsor Castle in January



Leilani Restaurant & Ashanti Bar on Lavender Hill in London gave us our first break by offering use of his premises for one night a month," recalls Joyce. And so with a £5,000 grant from Wandsworth Council, the Black Heroes Soul Food Café™ was launched, where people came together to tell their own stories or to research tales of local black heroes. "There was poetry and singing – it was a magical evening once a month," says Joyce.

When lockdown hit, the Soul Food Café went online, attracting people from around the globe. "We had some fantastic guests," she adds. "It was extremely popular and we had people tuning in from all over the world."

Joyce first became aware of Claudia Jones through an online fundraising event to celebrate London's women of colour. Claudia was a Trinidadian communist expelled from the US in 1955 and granted asylum in England. Three years later, she set up the *West Indian Gazette* in Brixton, South London, and fought the Commonwealth Immigrants Act.

"She knew it would be used very badly," says Joyce. "She told everyone to make sure they had their papers in order."

"My mum came to Britain with a British

"I was blown away when King Charles mentioned Flip. It was amazing"

passport. When she went back to Jamaica 20 years later, she didn't have a British passport because unless you did your papers correctly, you didn't have one. Because of that law, your British passport was not carried on unless you did all the paperwork."

Claudia contracted tuberculosis while living in squalid conditions in New York, leaving her with a weak heart. She died on Christmas Eve in 1964 at the tragically young age of 49. Joyce was so moved by Claudia's story that it became the subject of her first play. Joyce attended a creative writing workshop in Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire, and, with funding from Wandsworth Arts Fringe festival, she was able to stage the play online as a live stream. The recording has also been shown in schools.

More funding followed from the Arts

Council for Joyce to co-write *The Story of John Archer* with Jennifer Farmer, which was performed at Wandsworth in 2021. In the audience was the mayor of Liverpool, and Joyce hopes to take the production on the road to Merseyside.

The play opened Black History Month at Battersea Arts Centre in the capital in October 2021, attended by 80 Windrush elders, many of whom had not left the house since the beginning of the Covid pandemic in March 2020.

"What keeps me going is the feedback I get when I hold these events, even if it's just one person at a time," says Joyce.

Joyce joined various groups to help her learn, from the Small Charities Coalition to the Chartered Institute of Fundraising and the Musical Theatre Network. Now, she has been accepted by Stage One, a charitable body of West End veterans who help new producers, which adds further prestige to her work.

Joyce was thrilled to be awarded her OBE, having met the late Queen in 2019 at Windsor Castle to mark the centenary of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations.

"I accepted it without hesitation because I know Flip would be so proud and my parents would be so proud," she

says. "My relatives' blood and labour went into building this country, so why on earth should I not take some recognition? I was born here, I'm British, so I'm very proud to accept it."

She was presented with her OBE by King Charles in his first investiture at Windsor Castle on 31 January, accompanied by three trustees of the Foundation – the Rev Michael King, son of Sam King, his wife Marjorie and Claire Jackson.

"It was pretty amazing," says Joyce. "We were very honoured to have King

Charles. He said, 'Hello Joyce, I understand your late husband Flip was the first editor of *The Voice*. I'm very proud to say I edited it last year to mark its 40th anniversary'. He said he was so pleased that the Foundation was getting the recognition it deserved. I was blown away that he mentioned Flip."

She's now in the thick of it, writing her next play. "I would never have dreamed all of this would happen to me," she adds.

Joyce joined Bromley u3a in south-east London last year and has already given a talk as part of the national u3a online

learning events. An academic, she also lectures at the Open University in the MBA Business School.

BHF is this year preparing to celebrate the 75th anniversary of HMT Empire Windrush's arrival at Tilbury Docks in Essex, with events at Wandsworth Arts Fringe in June and screenings of a documentary about Sam King.

Black Heroes Foundation needs assistance with bid-writing, fundraising activities and donations. To find out more, please go to blackheroesfoundation.org

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Right: John Archer was the first black mayor in London when he took up the position in Battersea in November 1913. Far right: Bromley u3a member Joyce gets to work on her computer under the gaze of a poster featuring her beloved Flip

