

Kaushika,

Knitting and Sewing in my life.

I was born and brought up in Nairobi, Kenya. My mum used to do sewing. In our culture we wear sarees – so sarees need a tape put on them and our Mum used to show us how to sew these tapes on. She used to do a lot of sewing by hand and we learnt from her. If something needed mending she would hand stitch it. Then we had friends and neighbours who had a sewing machine and they suggested we children use one so our Dad got us a machine and they showed us how to use it.

We came to the UK in 1975. Before I came I did a dressmaking course in Nairobi and made dresses for my younger sisters - I was 15 or 16. We used dress patterns.

We had a choice of going to India or going to the UK. My father's friends said come to the UK, we are doing well here, so we came. All his friends were train drivers, many lived in Wembley, Southall, Leicester, but my father's cousin was in Bow so we got a council flat in Bromley by Bow – these flats no longer exist – we bought a house in East Ham in 1986 and we moved in June 86 . The council flats we moved from were by St Andrew's hospital in Bromley by Bow – the hospital was pulled down and around 2000 all the flats were taken down and it has become an industrial estate. My mum did a lot of knitting and taught us how to knit. She and her friends made jumpers out of their heads – I don't know how they did it. She taught us basic stitches. We then got more interested. A friend of my Mum's was a very good knitter and she showed us how to follow knitting patterns. My mum used to knit in East Africa – baby clothes, cardigans and jumpers. When we came here friends and neighbours were into knitting – one from Goa and one English – my sister crocheted as well as knitted – I never crocheted. When we started knitting we made cardigans for the younger sisters, then I gave up but when I was expecting my first child I really got into knitting and knitted a lot of stuff for the baby – and my sister too knitted loads of clothes in neutral colours, white and yellow, and when he was born, in blue. My dad bought us a sewing machine and we made simple things like curtains , my mum's saree petticoats and edging for saris. When my Mum got older she relied on us to help her sew. I did lots of knitting for my children, but I did not keep anything. When I went to India I took lots of clothes for my relations for their children. I stopped knitting when my children started school – I went back to work when my son was four months old – we needed a mortgage so I left him with my Mum while I worked. We were looking for a house for 4 or 5 years but we kept getting gazumped. Then a nice couple said they would not do this to us – the lady was a teacher and the guy worked for the Inland Revenue and they wanted to live nearer her mother. My children live with me, neither are married, my son would like to move out, but we said rather than renting stay with us and save up to buy something. We had a loft conversion done and my daughter has that and my son a room. I have not been alone during lockdown but my husband and my children all are key workers. My son and daughter have not stayed at home a single day during lockdown. My son is a delivery man with royal mail and can't take time off and my daughter is a dentist. They have been

protecting me – they have gone out and taken the risk of getting Covid and they rather I stayed indoors and stay a distance. Last year for my birthday, Christmas, my anniversary I was alone.

– for you and Sonia to keep this project going was a Godsend. I do not have words to express how good Sonia has been -she is, enthusiastic, very good organiser, dropping things off , picking things up. Because of her I have been able to continue knitting and doing my embroidery.

I had to retire in 2016. I worked for the Youth Justice Board which was created in 1998/9. This body looks after young offenders. In 2016 they decentralised everything and they took all the financial services up to Liverpool – I was head of financial planning and that role got dismantled – there was a new position for me but it was totally new work and I went to sit with the new group, but felt I did not belong there. My parents needed a lot of looking after. I thought this is an opportunity to take care of my parents but unfortunately my parents passed away, my father in June and my mother in August 2017. I was lucky to have spent quality time from October to the end, with them. I had a cup of tea with them every day, I spent a couple of hours every day with them, had a cup of tea, helped my mum start the evening meal and chatted with my Dad and my Mum. I was fortunate to have spent time with my parents before they died.

But I still needed things to do so in November 2016 I registered with Newham Volunteers and got a volunteering role in East Ham Library and in a Children's Centre and did a couple of half days in the children's centre and two or three days in the library. I did the children's After School Club on Fridays 3.30 pm - 5 pm and then I really got into it and they said why do you do not do more sessions with us and while i was there on Mondays Sonia had the embroidery class and Friday mornings there was the knit and natter group. I said this looks interesting, and so Steve, the head of the library activities, said do join any groups so that is how I got back to knitting and sewing. Sonia was brilliant, I had never done embroidery – she had really good projects. I did not come to her church group much as I was at the school on Wednesdays. I took a lot of embroidery home – I found it very interesting to do while everyone was at work (I only saw my parents in the evening). In 2017 after we came back from going home to take my parents ashes to the Ganges, I became depressed and very lonely. I had no-one here and nowhere to go and so I came back to the classes and did more sewing and knitting. Steve said why not do some training and get a job here. I did 8 weeks training and learnt how the library worked – very interesting, but all the jobs were full time but I only wanted to work 4 or 5 hours a day – I did not want long hours. While I was in the children's centre a lot of ladies there said why not try and do a day in the school so I started one day a week in a school, and then Barbara a tutor was teaching and said why do you not do a teaching course so in 2018 I started doing a Teaching Assistant course level 2. And then I did not feel lonely as I was busy and occupied. I finished the qualification and the lockdown came, so nothing further. But it was good and I learnt a lot. I carried on embroidery all the time. Embroidery keeps you occupied and you concentrate, you think about what stitches to use and what colours and I got engrossed and did not think about my parents. I enjoy embroidery. I started looking up stitches on

YouTube. My kantha embroidery of the four elephants is on the ELTA website. I now have it in my home temple area. When Sonia said lets do some kantha i took her design home and checking it with my daughter, who comes up with some brilliant ideas, suggested i do one much larger and get Sonia to draw out a design and that is what I did.

I loved doing it and then my daughter then said she would like one with peacocks and she drew four peacocks on the material and that is for her. She will have it framed one day and i finished it in the lockdown. My daughter has a photo of it somewhere. I really enjoyed doing that too and all the turtle shells. Sonia has kept me sane and busy. I keep putting on whatsapp what would i have done without Sonia. The foodbank project was really good. It was a good idea to knit for the foodbank. I enjoyed knitting for that project. I think they made a hundred plus things for them. I just finished something for a newborn baby and now i am doing a baby blanket. It keeps me going i do a couple of hours a day of knitting or embroidery. I do the knitting while watching TV – it is not too complicated in the evening. In the day i do my embroidery it is therapueitc – it stops your mind from wandering. My daughter could see the change after my parents died and i was quiet – she said it is giving you something to do and think about and she wanted a jumper for Christmas – i did not quite finish it in time – she bought the wool and the pattern. Now she feels so proud of it and says she will treasure it.

My first job was with a small company with a workforce of about 200 people, mostly ethnic minorities in the factory and the office mostly white. I was one of the first ethnic minority people in the office and two or three followed. They treated me well; they did not make me feel like an outsider, they were good company. In 1983 I got married had my son in 85 and in 89 had my daughter. I was quite high up then- in 88 I was in charge of all the finance. It was done manually then. It was really fun. In 89 I told them I did not want to work with them anymore as my daughter had some health issues. My boss came to visit me two or three times pleading with me to go back. I left, but returned to help from time to time - with annual accounts and when people went on leave. I prepared audits and set up new files at the beginning of the Financial Year. They kept me on the pay roll for years. I carried on doing a few weeks here and there. They were very nice people to work for. I started working part time for Iceland. When at Iceland, I went in on Saturdays to work for them – they had the trust in me, which you need for finance. The company is still running. Computers came in and I had no IT skills so left Iceland's in 99 and did courses to get the IT skills and my old company let me do a few days with them as they were changing from manual records to computerised. I did a lot of data entry and helped them set up their computer systems. I carried on till 2001 and finally left as I couldn't do this with a full time job.

In 2000 i started as a junior in the Youth Justice Board, which had just formed. It was set up by the Home Office and Lord Chancellor's office. I started in the policy department and then as the department grew and the HR knew my background they moved me to finance, which saved them bringing in an outsider. It was nice of them to promote me. I stayed

with them till 2016. I did management accounts, planning and worked along with financial accountant and reported to the chief accountant. In 2016 when they moved to Liverpool they offered me a job in the Ministry of justice but it did not feel it was right and my bosses were really nice and they offered me a redundancy package. Wherever I worked it has been brilliant – I was well looked after with no issues. From my experience it has been really positive here in the UK.

We came here In 1975 and I started A levels I was about 6 months behind and I was put in with a group of about 6 girls, who made me feel so wanted, coming in from another country. I went to Central Foundation Girls School. The teachers were brilliant. I came out with 4 A levels – maths and three sciences. I did really well.

My Dad's job got Africanised so he had the choice between India and the UK. He got a job with British rail straight away as he had worked on the railways before. He became a guard and he worked for 30 years with British Rail. My mum found it more difficult. When we were in Africa she learnt Swahili and really jelled there. She found it hard here – she never learnt English – there was no-one to teach her – she could not go shopping here alone or to her appointments. But she made friends with ladies who spoke Gujarati or Hindi.

Nairobi was a big city. When we came here we found the big stores fascinating and we went on trips to the big shops in Oxford Street and Knightsbridge, walking along going in Harrods and Selfridges. That was a big difference, the shops in Nairobi, like here in East Ham, were just small, small corner shops. In Nairobi there was shops for Asian clothes and others for African clothes, and others for school uniforms. Our uniforms were Western. We were already wearing western stuff, so there was nothing new here but my Mum wore sarees all her life in India, Nairobi and here. As children we wore western clothes, but for special occasions and for going to temples we wore traditional clothes.

To buy my mum's sarees we went with her to Wembley, Kilburn, and near here in East Ham – it was an excuse for a trip. We used to go to different parts of London and as our Dad was a British Rail guard we could go on the train to Cornwall, Devon and Dorset as we got free train journeys. My dad said said "Lets make the most of it". In the holidays we would catch an early train and go somewhere.

I have never been back to Nairobi, my husband is from India and so we go back there to see his family. He has no-one here. The children get to know our religion and culture – we try and go on a pilgrimage each time. Our only bad experience here was when we moved to East Ham after buying a house. We were only the second Asian family in the road (the other Asian family kept to themselves and did not want to talk to anyone) and the English families would complain if when my husband returned there was a car parked outside our house and he was forced to park the car somewhere else in the road, an English person would straight away come and knock on our door and say "Why was our car parked there?" When he parked the car all the curtains in the street twitched, watching if he would damage their cars. That went on for the first 6 months but then slowly they got better. They realised gradually we were not going to make any trouble, we both worked full time and we had a child. And as my son grew up and was nice to the neighbours it

changed all of a sudden and they became really nice neighbours. Why they gave us all that trouble for 6 months I will never understand. But afterwards our experience was OK as we became accepted in the community.

East Ham has changed a great deal. When we moved here you could not go past East Ham Station because there was lots of skinheads even in the daytime – we would always stay on our side of the road. As more and more Asian people moved in, it became more normal with loads of multicultural shops, restaurants, bars temples, mosques – it is not a bad place to live. Our main temple is in Stratford – we have gone there since 1976 and there is another main one on Leightonstone High Road which is for the Gujurati community – both our families are from there. My grandfather used to work in the railways in India. My father was born in Mombassa and did his O levels in East Africa and went to India for his further education but his father's friends said he should go back to East Africa.

Houses in Nairobi were big rented houses with 4 or 5 families living there, sharing main play area. In Nairobi people were very friendly. Here neighbours do not communicate or go out, or it felt like that especially for my mother. Even now very few neighbours mix. But our lifestyle did not change much between Nairobi and London – we could get most of our foods in Upton Park. The shops started after the Asians were expelled from Uganda in 1972. We knew the language. The schools were similar with the same teaching. We learnt textiles because as part of our O levels we had to take one practical class – either art or sewing. It was a class of 10 girls learning sewing. I'm not sure making clothes saved money. The clothes we made were only worn at home – my parents would not let my younger sisters go out in them. We learnt the basics of dressmaking and understanding patterns. We used to embroider my Mum's sarees– it was people's hobby to do this and my Mum and her friends would buy motifs of different flowers and borders and other things and sew on them. It was interesting.

In Bromley-by-Bow knowledge was passed on about knitting from our neighbours.

Now I want to learn to crochet – i've never done it. It's fashionable even for baby clothes.