



# STARLIGHT

**Starlight Black Child Mixed Heritage Group**  
September 2008

A newsletter for families, friends and professionals with a keen interest in issues related to black young people of mixed heritage.

## Editorial

### Welcome to the September issue of our newsletter.

What a summer! It has been such a shame that the weather has been so cold and wet again this year but we have managed to enjoy some good times despite the weather.

We were very lucky with our outing to Aston Rowant, Nature Reserve as it was one of the few days of sunshine in July this year. We have also run the Going for Gold course during July and August and will be hosting an award ceremony, celebrating the students achievements, in October.

Other points of interest in this issue include Professor Gus John's response to the launch of the REACH project on page two. 2008 marks the 80th birthday of Maya Angelou, an inspirational woman who has achieved so much.

It is also the 25th anniversary of Letterbox Library - the book club that provided most of the books we purchased for our book and toy library - we wish them a very happy birthday and look forward to increasing our library with more of their wonderful books.

### Apologies!

We experienced problems with our computers back in June and some people may not have received this issue of the newsletter. It will shortly be available on the website but if anyone would like us to e-mail a copy in the meantime please do get in touch and we will forward it to you.

The June issue welcomed our new placement Tracey Ruskin. She is studying for her Youth & Community degree at Ruskin College and has proved to be an invaluable help, particularly now that our book and toy library is getting busier. She has also helped run the Going for Gold course during this summer and we hope she will continue her placement with us for some time to come.

### Get in touch

Remember, we are always pleased to hear from our readers. If anyone would like to write an article, particularly for the Personally Speaking item that we like to include in each issue, that would be

fantastic. Any comments or feedback is also welcome so we hope to hear from you soon.

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### Do you know who this is?



He was born in 1762 in Jamaica, the son of a Jamaican slave, Rosanna and a wealthy Scottish man who made a fortune from the slave trade.

He was never acknowledged by his father and is rarely mentioned by the famous Scottish family directly related to him.

To find out more about his life, please turn to page 4.

### Inside this issue:

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### Special points of interest:

- Professor Gus John's reaction to the REACH Role Models Campaign Launch
- Going for Gold Showcase Evening planned for Oxford
- Parent Engagement Programme - NEW COURSE!
- **FREE SUBSCRIPTION**

## HAPPY BIRTHDAY MAYA ANGELOU



4 April 2008 saw the celebration of Maya Angelou's 80th birthday. She is hailed as one of the great voices of contemporary literature. She is a poet, educator, historian, best-selling author, actress, playwright, civil-rights activist,

close relationship with her brother, who gave her the nickname Maya when they were very young.

At age seven, while visiting her mother in Chicago, she was sexually molested by her mother's boyfriend. Too ashamed to tell any of the adults in her life, she confided in her brother. When she later heard the news that an uncle had killed her attacker, she felt that her words had killed the man. She fell silent and did not speak for five years.

Maya began to speak again at 13, when she and her brother rejoined their mother in San Francisco. Maya attended Mission High School and won a scholarship to study dance and drama at San Francisco's Labor School, where she was exposed to the progressive ideals that animated her later political activism. She dropped out of school in her teens to become San Francisco's first African American female cable car conductor. She later returned to high school, but became pregnant in her senior year and graduated a few weeks before giving birth to her son, Guy. She left home at 16 and took on the difficult life of a single mother, supporting herself and her son by working as a waitress and cook, but she had not given up on her talents for music, dance, performance and poetry. **Continued on page 4**

producer and director,

Maya Angelou was born Marguerite Annie Johnson in St. Louis, Missouri. Her parents divorced when she was only three and she was sent with her brother Bailey to live with their grandmother in the small town of Stamps, Arkansas. In Stamps, the young girl experienced the racial discrimination that was the legally enforced way of life in the American South, but she also absorbed the deep religious faith and old-fashioned courtesy of traditional African American life. She credits her grandmother and her extended family with instilling in her the values that informed her later life and career. She enjoyed a

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**Next issue: December 2008**

## Focus on Them that Focus on Black Boys, summary of paper by Professor Gus John, - 11 July 2008

On 15 July 2008, the REACH Role Models campaign was launched in London. It aims to recruit Black male role models from organisations across a variety of sectors, to inspire and motivate Black boys and young Black men. Professor Gus John comments that this initiative comes at a time when the country is witnessing an unprecedented number of murders of young black men by other young black men. However, no comment is made on the attainment of white working class boys despite them having been disadvantaged in the schooling system for far longer than black boys. As he points out, some white working class areas, especially places such as Glasgow East, violence and knife crime in particular has been endemic to their communities for generations. However no mention is made that their poor schooling outcomes are the result of absentee fathers and a lack of positive role models.

The REACH project group was established in February 2006 and their report addresses issues which have long exercised the black communities of Britain. However, Professor Gus John feels it is disappointing that the project group were not informed by young people's voices. For example, they failed to refer to two recent publications that gave black young men the opportunity to speak for themselves. The first is *School Exclusion and Transition into Adulthood in African Caribbean Communities*, published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York, in September 2005. The second is *Born To Be Great – A Charter on Promoting the Achievement of Black Caribbean Boys*, published by the National Union of Teachers.

### Excluded Voices

Professor Gus John feels that the approach of the REACH group is not the only ones guilty of such condescending attitudes to black young people. In the five years that Diane Abbott MP and the former Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone held their annual London Schools and the Black Child conference, not one of those conferences was organized with and for black school students themselves. And although over 2000 black teachers, parents and community workers attended each year, no more than 20 young people were to be seen amongst them in any one year.

Black communities and successive governments have focused on black male underachievement ever since the 1960s. Yet despite a long history of concern and community agitation about black boys' underachievement, no government has ever facilitated those students to come together and collectively determine how they might respond to their situation.

Over the years, many black parents have tried to rescue their children from what they see as the decadence of the state schooling system. Some have struggled to send their children to fee paying schools, others have packed them off to relatives or boarding schools in the Caribbean or West Africa and away from the indis-

cipline, low expectations and increasing levels of violence in Britain's inner city schools. But, inevitably, these private solutions to persistent public ills remain just that.

### Promoting the Cult of the Individual

Professor Gus John feels that by far the most pernicious aspect of the REACH Role Models campaign is that they saw fit to place the problem squarely upon young black males themselves despite the four decades of black struggle for quality education for black children. In the meantime, there is a growing band of successful black men who have made it, despite all the discussions about racism, concrete ceilings and the rest of it. They may well be from underprivileged backgrounds but they enjoy all the benefits, not from a life in the alternative economy of drugs and robberies, etc., but by legitimate means. He is fearful however that all sorts of assumptions are being made about the qualities that would-be role models have, without making explicit the values they should espouse, the principles they hold or about their private and public conduct. Those unquestioned assumptions lead to the belief that one could give black young people 'a taste of success' simply by allowing them 'to mix with some of the most successful adults within the Black community' and that such 'successful role models' could 'instill greater hope' in those young people.

The REACH model makes other assumptions too, according to Professor Gus John. It rather

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assumes that there are not role models and peer mentors to be found amongst young black males themselves yet there are a large number of successful young black males with high aspirations, without role model intervention. But rather than being seen as appropriate role models by their underachieving peers, they are invariably bullied and harassed for having high aspirations, working hard, staying focused and applying themselves to the level of their capabilities. Some become victims of knife attacks for being 'nerds', 'geeks' 'flatheads' and "teachers' pansies". The REACH model, at least by default, further encourages each group to see and treat the other as a race apart.

Black boys and black young men have legitimate things to say about the school curriculum which typically excludes, among much else, the courageous struggles of their parents' and grandparents' generation and the myriad ways in which they have contributed to the shaping of modern Britain. Black struggle in Post War

Britain has produced a vast army of positive black role models, male and female. Schooling fails to provide black boys and black young men with a knowledge and understanding of who they are, their contribution to British social history, the values and principles that underpinned their activism and their creative and cultural expression. They are also largely written out of cultural studies programmes in colleges and universities. There is no evidence of the REACH model focusing on any of that.

But, Professor Gus John feels there is a much more serious assumption the REACH group makes about the incapacity of black women as parents. Many black males who would be considered eligible role models in the REACH context are the product of sound parenting and inspirational leadership provided by their single mothers. For example, Tim Campbell (first Black winner of *The Apprentice*) invariably cites his mother as the greatest inspiration and motivator he could have had, with a class teacher who believed in him and cajoled him to believe in his abilities and take himself seriously coming a close second.

There is a danger in taking at face value commonsensical assumptions about a causal relationship between absentee fathers and the lack of self discipline, high aspirations and self management skills among black boys and young men. Far from being submissive or causing mayhem in their communities, the majority of young black males have a highly developed sense of social injustice, an abhorrence of oppression and a determination to affirm and safeguard their own rights and entitlements while having due regard for those of others. Too often, however, they become victims of bullying if not of murderous attacks from the nihilists who see them as having 'white middle class values' and who see a career of violence and crime as the only thing that would or could earn them 'Respec'.

Schooling and education is about academic achievement and equipping people with skills for the labour market, no less than it is about giving them the confidence and capacity to organize themselves and affirm and safeguard their rights and entitlements as well as exercising their responsibilities. The black community has a long history of struggle for racial equality and social justice and methods of organization to go with it.

Professor Gus John believes we have a historical duty to help young people gain the belief that acting collectively with a shared sense of purpose they could bring about change not only in schooling but particularly in their communities, many of which are facing levels of self inflicted violence never seen before.

**Gus John is Chair of Parents and Students Empowerment and Associate Professor at the Institute of Education, University of London. He is a member of the Street Weapons Commission and writes on gangs, guns and knives.**

## Going for Gold Showcase Evening in Oxford

Celebrating local students completing the 'Going for Gold' accredited course here in Oxford.

Whilst we are still waiting to hear from any schools in Oxfordshire, we have been able to run the Going for Gold course in our community. We hope to have fifteen students completing the course by the end of September and felt it would be fantastic to celebrate their achievement during Black History Month.

All of the students have to prepare a presentation on a significant black person from history or contemporary Britain who has inspired them and helped them to realise they can achieve their goals and aspirations. We therefore felt it would be a good idea to incorporate these presentations in an award ceremony where we hope the Mayor of Oxford may be available to present the students with their certificates. At the time of going to press, details are not confirmed but we hope to include a dance troupe and singers as part of this showcase evening. The date planned for this event is Friday, 17 October 6 - 9pm.

We intend to invite parents, community leaders, teachers, youth workers and, in particular, Richard Higgins and Marie Jones from Oxford Brookes University, who have supported us in being able to run this course in the local community. We also hope that we will receive media attention to further highlight the benefits of the course to young people. Professor Gus John's paper points out the importance for black young people to know the significant contribution black people have made to British society and the Going for Gold course offers this opportunity. As one of our students has stated: *It's good to have a role model of your own ethnicity - now I know I can still make a success of myself.* (Young person, aged 16)

Once details are finalised we will send out the invitations, hopefully in early September and we will report back how things went in our December issue of this newsletter.

## HAPPY 25TH BIRTHDAY LETTERBOX LIBRARY!

Letterbox Library is a non-profit driven workers co-operative. It was started twenty five years ago by two single mothers operating from home, who wished to provide multicultural and non-sexist books to children - offering essential topics and titles which were sadly neglected by mainstream booksellers.

Over the years they have expanded but still hold firm to their co-operative values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. Their books can be found within educational institutions, libraries and homes throughout the UK and abroad. Customers go to them primarily for their unique book selection service.

Sue has been a member of Letterbox Library since the 1980s and the books they provided were a lifeline for her and her son Rory. At the time she was a single mother living in a council

estate in rural Surrey, with no access to any multicultural toys or books in the local area. Sue recalls: *'We always enjoyed choosing and receiving books from Letterbox that truly reflected a celebration and acceptance of peoples locally and globally. The books directly reinforced my message to my son - that he should be proud of who he is - his identity and his heritage.'*

We continue to support Letterbox Library and, as our book and toy library expands they will again be the chosen supplier to increase our stock of books.

The more we can reinforce the message to our children that humans come in many shapes, sizes and shades of colour and that is why we are all special, the more we can encourage our children to grow up celebrating cultural diversity.

## Update from Starlight Black Child Mixed Heritage Group

The book and toy library will re-open on Saturday, 13 September following the summer break. We are so pleased that the membership of the library is finally on the increase and we look forward to a series of busy Saturday afternoons leading up to Christmas.

The Glad 4 Dads group is moving along in leaps and bounds and they are currently agreeing the constitution and electing officers for the Management Committee. Once this is formed they will focus on raising funds to support dads having the time and space to enjoy quality time with their children. The aim is also to offer dads the opportunity to participate in Starlight's OCN accredited course *Raising the Aspirations of Young Men and Fathers*.

The next step for the group is to fundraise and offer a timetable of activities for all the family. We hope that the benefits of having a permanent space will allow us to continue to progress and provide an enjoyable, supportive environment for families. As always, we welcome suggestions and look forward to hearing from you.

We will also be organising a Christmas party on Saturday, 20 December - more details to follow.

## 'Sounds Like Summer' event at Aston Rowant National Nature Reserve

**A successful day out at Aston Rowant National Nature Reserve on Sunday, 13 July 2008**



Families from Barton, Blackbird Leys and Rose Hill all enjoyed the gloriously sunny day for the 'Sounds Like Summer' event

Six coaches left Barton, Blackbird Leys and Rose Hill, kindly funded by Aston

Rowant National Nature Reserve and LCI.

The weather was bright and sunny and everyone soon settled into an afternoon of entertainment. A number of local artists performed and there were workshops for the children to make their own musical instruments to play along with the performers. There was plenty of space and plenty to do with a range of activities planned for the afternoon including wildflower walks, a drumming workshop, a gum boot dance workshop and tours with a 'green' man. The atmosphere was peaceful and safe with the children enjoying the opportunity to run free and explore the natural surroundings.

It was such a successful day that there are plans to organise a similar event with Aston Rowant again next year.

We will keep you posted!

## New OCN accredited course for parents: 'Inspiring Confidence'

Parents and/or carers who have little or no qualifications may find it difficult to engage with their child's school due to their own negative experience of school. The changes in the school curriculum, subject delivery and school environment in general, are all likely to further alienate parents from what their child is learning at school. Parents who lack confidence in their own ability are less likely to come forward and ask for help from the school as it may seem embarrassing and awkward to admit they don't understand.

This programme supports families by focusing initially on helping them to understand more about how we learn

and building their confidence. The sessions include tips and ideas about how they can nurture and encourage their children whilst learning more about them self and how they may have adopted traits less helpful to their own and their children's wellbeing. It is important to develop good links with their child(ren)'s school as the programme progresses in order to develop a positive relationship between home and school. It is clear that when schools, families, and community organisations work together to support learning, children are more likely to do well academically and stay at school longer.



**Continued from page one ..**

In 1952, she married a Greek sailor named Tosh Angelos. When she began her career as a nightclub singer, she took the professional name Maya Angelou, combining her childhood nickname with a form of her husband's name. Although the marriage did not last, her performing career flourished. She toured Europe with a production of the opera *Porgy and Bess* in 1954 and 1955. She studied modern dance with Martha Graham, danced with Alvin Ailey on television variety shows and recorded her first record album, *Calypto Lady* (1957).

She had composed song lyrics and poems for many years, and by the end of the 1950s was increasingly interested in developing her skills as a writer. She moved to New York, where she joined the Harlem Writers Guild and took her place among the growing number of young black writers and artists associated with the Civil Rights Movement. She acted in the historic Off-Broadway production of Jean Genet's *The Blacks* and wrote and performed a *Cabaret for Freedom* with the actor and comedian Godfrey Cambridge.

In New York, she fell in love with the South African civil rights activist Vusumzi Make and in 1960, the couple moved, with Angelou's son, to Cairo, Egypt. In Cairo, Angelou served as editor of the English language weekly *The Arab Observer*. Angelou and Guy later moved to Ghana, where she joined a thriving group of African American expatriates. She served as an instructor and assistant administrator at the University of Ghana's School of Music and Drama, worked as feature editor for *The African Review* and wrote for *The Ghanaian Times* and the Ghanaian Broadcasting Company.

During her years abroad, she read and studied voraciously, mastering French, Spanish, Italian, Arabic and the West African language Fanti. She met with the American dissident leader Malcolm X in his visits to Ghana, and corresponded with him as his thinking evolved from the racially polarized thinking of his youth to the more inclusive vision of his maturity.

Maya Angelou returned to America in 1964, with the intention of helping Malcolm X build his new Organization of African American Unity. Shortly after her arrival in the United States, Malcolm X was assassinated, and his plans for a new organization died with him. Angelou involved herself in television production and remained active in the Civil Rights Movement, working more closely with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who requested that Angelou serve as Northern Coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. His assassination, falling on her birthday in 1968, left her devastated. With the guidance of her friend, the novelist James Baldwin, she found solace in writing, and began work on the book that would become *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The book tells the story of her life from her childhood in Arkansas to the birth of her child. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was published in 1970 to widespread critical acclaim and enormous popular success.

Seemingly overnight, Angelou became a national figure. In the following years, books of her verse and the subsequent volumes of her autobiographical narrative won her a huge international audience. She was increasingly in demand as a teacher and lecturer and continued to explore dramatic forms as well. She wrote the screenplay and composed the score for the film *Georgia, Georgia* (1972). Her screenplay, the first by an African American woman ever to be filmed, was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

**Who was he?**

His name is Robert Wedderburn and he was instrumental in achieving the freedom of the press in Britain in the 19th century. He, with many other working class radicals spent time in prison for publishing opinions, on religious and other matters, which challenged the ideas of the ruling class.

When his mother was pregnant, Robert's father sold her to Lady Douglas, stipulating that the child that she bore should be free from birth. Robert was therefore brought up on the estate of Lady Douglas. He recalled that as a child he witnessed both his mother and grandmother being whipped. As soon as he was old enough, he left the plantation and became a sailor.

He arrived in England in 1778 and soon afterwards found work as a tailor. In 1812, he met Thomas Spence, the unofficial leader of those radical reformers who advocated revolution. Spence died but the government were becoming increasingly concerned about this group of 'Spenceans' who continued to promote Spence's revolutionary ideas. In December 1816, four leaders, were arrested and charged with high treason and it was claimed that Wedderburn was now the leader of the group. The Home Secretary called him a 'notorious firebrand' and he was put on the Government's secret list of 33 leading reformers.

On release from a two-year sentence in Dorchester prison, Robert published *The Horrors Of Slavery*, a vivid record of the history, ideas and rhetoric of the movement to abolish slavery.

'I thank my God, that through a long life of hardship and adversity, I have ever been free in both mind and body; and have always raised my voice on behalf of my enslaved countrymen' *The Horrors of Slavery*.

Free Course for Young People (Secondary school age)

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To register a place or for more information speak to Glen or Sue  
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**Bob Marley's response to questions about his own racial identity:**

'I don't have prejudice against himself. My father was a white and my mother was black. Them call me half-caste or whatever. Me don't dip on nobody's side. Me don't dip on the black man's side nor the white man's side. Me dip on God's side, the one who create me and cause me to come from black and white.'

**FREE SUBSCRIPTION**

Please forward this issue to anyone you feel may like to join our list of subscribers. The newsletter is produced quarterly in December, March, June and September. It is distributed via e-mail to save on printing and postage costs and help the environment too.

**Send us your views or articles**

We welcome contributions from our readers and look forward to receiving your contribution. We hope that this newsletter will provide a forum for promoting positive relations, encouraging an open debate and aiming to improve race relations in Britain today. The deadline for the next issue is November 2008.

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- 1/8 page: £25

Please contact us with details. The deadline for the December newsletter is 30 November 2008.