

HARAMBEE - DOWN BUT NOT OUT!

Harambee (Swahili for working together) was established in 1969 by the forceful and energetic Brother Herman. Before setting up Harambee Brother Herman spent the better part of his life in Britain fighting for improvements in the black community. North London, the venue for this operation, is one of a number of inner city areas beset by problems of deprivation and disillusionment amongst black people in general and black youth in particular.

The organisation's work involved providing support, accommodation, education and employment for vast numbers of youngsters. It is now almost three years since a quarter of a million urban aid grant which was given to Harambee was returned after a long and heated exchange between Brother Herman and The Islington Borough Council. The main point of contention was over who should hold the Deeds of Properties bought with the grant. The Islington Borough Council insisted that they should hold the Deeds, Brother Herman arguing for the long term development and stability of the black community insisted that the Deeds should be held by Harambee.

In the following interview Brother Herman explains in detail the circumstances leading up to his decision to return the grant, the reasons for this decision, the difficulties he has subsequently encountered and his hopes for the future of Harambee.

Question: It is now almost three years since you made what is now being considered an extremely important stand in relation to the long term development of the black community. Why did you take this stand?

Answer: We were functioning fairly well, we had a programme of prison visits and we had an educational programme in our hostels. I felt that we needed more development and the type of development which we decided to give priority to was the ownership of property. Jenkins was then Home Secretary. He sent a Race relations expert to see us and I made it perfectly clear that our development was at a delicate stage and I was not prepared to sit back and let anybody impose conditions that might be counter-productive. We then put in for a quarter of a million capital cost and fifty-five thousand running costs. The Home Office approved the grant but on its way to us it was strangled by the Borough Council, who sent to tell us that they would be holding the Deeds of Property bought with the grant. The capital grant was for purchasing and equipping buildings I had several meetings with them and explained that they were not in a position to hold the Deeds to the buildings. The Council's response was that that was an extremist view. I told them that I was not prepared to accept that my view was extremist and my insistence that the Deeds should be held by harambee resulted in them withholding the capital grant. I drew to their attention the possibility of the National Front gaining power and asked them what would be the plight of young black people should this occur.

Question:

Having lost out on the Capital costs you still had substantial Running costs,

were you able to make use of that?

Answer:

The Town Clerk argued that the Running costs had to follow the Capital costs, which is to say we first had to purchase the buildings after which they would release the running costs. This meant that having withheld the Capital costs they would automatically hold the Running costs. They even went beyond this. They insisted that we have Planning Permission before any monies were released. I told them that this was stupid in the sense that their powers were so total that in order to justify their first actions all they needed to do was to refuse all our applications for Planning permission. At this time they were funding us for a single hostel while in fact we were operating three hostels. We continued like this for one year. In the second year we were given a form stating certain conditions among which were that no member of my family should be on the management committee. I thought this was an extreme liberty and told the Council that they could not tell us who to have on our management committee. They also indicated that they wanted to come in at any time and inspect the accounts. I objected and told them that an annual statement of accounts were all we were prepared to provide. The Town Clerk remarked to me that everyone else had signed this form and if I didn't they would stop all monies. I subsequently read in the newspaper remarks by Councillor Anne Page which suggested that I must fall in line or have any funds withdrawn. They said that Oscar Abrahams of The Keswidee had signed. I contacted him and he said he had not. I later had the Town Clerk confirm that Oscar had not really signed but had promised to do so. The Town Clerk said that he knew that Oscar would eventually sign but felt that I would object and so insisted on my signing now. It is at this point that I decided to stand up for dignity, self-respect and integrity. I refused to sign. I then went to the bank and was successful in obtaining an overdraft for Three Thousand Pounds which was eventually paid back

Question: Given that you did not receive any funds, how were you able to pay this back?

Answer:

Contributions from some black barristers and solicitors and other private persons enabled us to repay the overdraft. What is interesting is that later I went back to the bank and asked for a further overdraft of Three Thousand Pounds only to be told by the manager that he had been instructed not to provide the credit facilities. I was absolutely certain that a system was not evil enough to deny these black children their education, prison visits and welfare privileges, but I was wrong. They were evil enough to do it. I had been with this bank for over ten years and had a good relationship with the Manager, yet that did not matter. I then decided that the only thing to do was to carry on with the little voluntary help we could get together in the community. We held a series of parties aimed at fundraising.

Some weeks after the last party we received a summons from the Department of Environment for creating a public nuisance by making noise.

Harambee was taken to court and a Trustee and myself were fined a total of seven hundred pounds. We appealed and the Judge cut the fine to one hundred pounds each. According to law, he could not interfere with the costs so we had to pay that which amounted to five hundred pounds. At the appeal the Judge stated that these costs should be paid out of public funds. I went to court one day to straighten this out and the next day I was in Pentonville Prison doing sixty days. No consideration was given to the fact that there were kids at Harambee to be looked after. One day last year the bailiffs came with a warrant. They went upstairs and broke down the doors, took away school books, a typewriter and the chairs that the kids were using. This I later discovered was over a matter of rates. What I also discovered was that certain projects were given rate exemptions whilst we were not even given the 50% exemption allowed to charities. Added to this we had officers of the Islington Council meeting youths in the street and telling them that they were giving Brother Herman a lot of money. One day one of our Trustee's Rev. Mood was in court, Hot knowing who he was a Haringay Councillor came up to him and said that the Council is giving Brother Herman lots of money. This was remarkable evidence of the way the letates divide and rule machinery operates for Rev. Wood was amongst others who advised me to stand on the principle of demanding that the Deeds be held by Harambee and was therefore well aware of the council's actions in relation to withholding the grant.

Question: What do you consider to be the fundamental difference between your approach and the approach of others like Oscar Abrahams of Keswidee and Pastor Morris. Why is Harambee singled out for pressure from the council?

Answer: I think the council and other agencies were very happy with our visiting the prisons and our hostel work, our liaison with the police and the social services, but their attitudes changed when we moved into education. For example, we bought books by Martin Luther King and other black writers like George Jackson, Elridge Cleaver and Hughie Newton. Now the first reaction we had to this came from a Haringay youth officer who after visiting Harambee said that the books were revolutionary and that the display was about revolution. I explained to him that Martin Luther King was a most passive philosopher and that I hoped he understood what that meant to young black kids, and there was no way that these kids should be robbed of these experiences. I think that if you look at what is going on in this country the authorities are quite happy for an organisation to engage in a few prison visits and a few hostels to be set up, for play-groups which provide our kids with nothing more than playing dominos' and table tennis I think when it comes to what Fanon called "uplifting those black kids out of their intellectual backwardness" we will always run into trouble with the authorities.

The question of demanding that we should hold the Deeds to the property will mean that in years to come our black community won't have to start all over again, it will provide the stability that will encourage growth. It will also give us the independence and self-respect that is desperately needed in our community. For example, if the Town Clerk wants to visit us he would have to phone and make an appointment it would not be a case where they can just walk in and out as it pleases them. To really answer your

question the difference between Harambee and Keskidee and the Pastor Morris set up, is that in the case of Pastor Morris he has white people on his committee. We have been through that, discovered the difficulties involved and cut that out. Keskidee is a totally different development anyway since they cater for people who are interested in the theatre and obviously need all and any people to come and see their shows.

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Question:

It has been widely spread about that the money which was once allocated to Harambee has since been shared among other black organisations in the area, what do you think of that development?

Answer: First of all it is common knowledge that our community suffers from severe poverty, it is also common knowledge that the best method of control is to divide and rule playing one off against the other. Councillor Anne Page actually wrote in the newspaper that Brother Herman is stubborn but that there are lots of other groups that she can get to take the money. What she actually did was to talk to these groups about the quarter of a million pounds however I understand that of that vast sum of money £23,000 went to Keskidee, Pastor Morris got £1,000 and a group called Carnival Eighteen also got some money. A women's group that was offered £1,000 returned it. My argument is that now is the time for us to make fundamental sacrifices in terms of self-respect and dignity. It is quite obvious that to make these sacrifices we must be prepared to suffer. We must always remember that white society is well aware of our poverty and will seize any opportunity to divide and rule us.

Question: A while ago you mentioned suffering, how have you and Harambee been able to survive these past years without funds?

Answer:

Obviously we have no money, as I mentioned earlier we owe money for rates and electricity and gas. We have a black brother with a shop and he will allow our food bill to go to £500. We sometimes get small donations from people like you and this helps us in paying fares when travelling around.

Question: It would seem to me that although many people agree with the stand that you took there are some who suggest that you went about it the wrong way. Do you have any regrets? Harambee has since been shared among other black organisations in the area, what do you think of that development?

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Answer: I think that the decision wasn't harsh enough, I think it wasn't quick enough, I think that there was no other way since the other possible way is one in which we would be unable to make decisions. Because of our historical position it would seem as though we are afraid to make decisions. Often when we make decisions we seem to say what would the white people think about that rather than what the black people think. I remember I once remarked to the Town Clerk "you keep telling me about the white backlash what about the black backlash". Those people who are saying that I went about it the

wrong way are not taking the black community seriously for it would seem to me that the way they want me to go about it is the way that suits the state. Again I say I have no regrets, I am proud and convinced that I made the right decision.

Question:

I understand that you have taken the Islington Council to court, while I appreciate that there is not a lot you can tell me about the details can you tell me your reasons for doing so?

Answer: First of all there are lots of legal complications. Having decided to give us the money they then suggested that we should set up a trust within a trust. We found that that was illegal but even so we prepared to go along with them. However when the time came to finalize this they started playing a lot of games and nothing happened. We didn't just take the Council to court for the Judge to say that we are right that is not our priority, our priority is that we must protect our community from the racist attitudes of white society which assumes that it should dictate to us. The reason for taking the Islington Council to court is to demonstrate to this society that we are not prepared to have them dictate to us.

If you look at the civil rights movement in America you will see that in spite of the fact that Martin Luther King understood the racism in the judiciary he still took his white oppressor's to the racist judge.

Question:What is your specific reason for taking them to court?

Answer: We argue that the money allocated to Harambee was 75% Home Office money the Islington Council then became Trustee's of that money and they must now prove why they have refused to release that money to Harambee. The reason that we are taking them on the Capital costs as against the running costs, is that the question of the Capital costs are less complicated than the running costs. We shall however be taking them up on the running costs in due course.

Question: As you know most funding bodies set down criteria for the funds that they ultimately will or will not provide, what effect do you think this has on black 'organizations'?

Answer: First of all I think that if you call it. Black selfhelp its development should not be determined by white people, the second thing is that if black organizations continue to accept money from government or funding agencies and allow them to set the criteria our development will cease.

For example if this government sent £10,000 to Jamacia they would send somebody with it.

A white person who will teil them how to spend it. As a result we have a Jamacia where life is very cheap.

Question:

How can we overcome this dilema on the one hand we know what is needed to improve the black community on the other hand the white folks have the money?

Answer: I have seen the dilemma long ago and I went to establishments like The Jamacia High Commission and asked what can you do to give our brothers somerstäbtly. I really think that to overcome this problem we are going to have to call on the black people in America, in the Caribbean and even in the Arab world for their support. I also feel that if a few more of the brothers take the stand that I have taken we would all be a lot better off. Ultimately it will force governments into understanding that they cannot do the work that we do and if they understand that then they will respect our work. I am saying that funds allocated to black groups should be put into the bank at the beginning of every financial year, I am not saying that we should not account for it, sure we must account for it.

Question:

Following on the lean years, not only in the sense of lack of funds but also in lack of support, there appears to be a new understanding of the position that you took three years ago. Do you think that we are moving into a new phase, do you think our people are becoming more aware of the importance of long term planning?

Answer:

Yes, I believe that the young people in particular are into the idea of long term planning. After we have held the strain for so long it has enabled the black community to become more aware of the importance of the stand we took.

Question: Finally what do you think of the future of the Black institution in this country?

Answer: I think there is a way forward but it must come from us everything must come from us.

ABOUT A MONTH AGO A GROUP CALLING ITSELF THE BLACK PEOPLES SUPPORT GROUP WAS FORMED TO ASSIST BROTHER HERMAN AND HARAMBEE IN THEIR IMPORTANT STRUGGLE YOUR SUPPORT CAN GIVE STRENGTH TO THE STRUGGLE. HARAMBEE NEEDS YOUR FINANCIAL SUPPORT TODAY TO ENSURE ITS SURVIVAL - HARAMBEE ALSO NEEDS 100 MORAL SUPPORT. COME TO CARIBBEAN HOUSE MARCH 18th AT 2.00pm TO A MEETING CALLED BY THE BLACK PEOPLES SUPPORT GROUP. IN THE MEANTIME SEND YOUR DONATIONS TO HARAMBEE.