African migrants then and now: A story of contributions

23/09/2010

A project to record their contributions, challenges, and achievements in Birmingham since the 1950s is now underway thanks to a £50,000 grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).

The 18 month project ‘African Heritage Initiatives: Contributions of African migrants in Birmingham’ run by Cameroon Advice and Support Services UK (CAASS UK) aims to record, preserve and celebrate the variety of achievements and contributions made by Africans living in Birmingham through their working lives and professions. It will explore the reasons why they or their parents came to Britain, allowing their stories to be better understood. The project will highlight the settlement experiences, the realities of integration, achievements and subsequently their contributions to Birmingham’s society.

Working closely with Birmingham Archives and Heritage, and the University of Birmingham, a project officer and trained volunteers will research newspaper articles, journals, newsletters, documentary material and film and conduct in depth interviews to gather a full picture of an untold minority impact on Birmingham’s heritage.

The recordings will include interviews with people such as project participant Mr Francoise B. Kayembe, who migrated from Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo) in 1992 due to political unrest. He describes Birmingham as ‘a good place to raise children without so many worries compared to London’ and asked of the challenges he felt people face, identified ‘language is the main barrier'. Having graduated in Commercial Science in his native country Mr Kayembe studied Language, Business and Law at universities in the London and West Midlands when he came to England. After a time working in low paid employment he has since worked with Birmingham charity, Cite Celeste, helping minority communities with basic needs and is now the Head of Public and Cultural Affairs for The DR Congo Consulate.

Commenting on the grant award Anne Jenkins, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund for the West Midlands, said: “We are delighted to see these stories acknowledged and recorded. Many of these intriguing tales would otherwise remain unknown and inevitably be lost despite being a significant part of Birmingham’s history.”

Leading the project on behalf of the CAASS UK, Mr Ebot Ashu, Volunteer Research and Development Manager explains how the project hopes to uncover many more interesting and inspirational tales like Mr Kayembe’s: “We hope to render these stories in a narrative voice that reverberates with emotional language of universal concern. A booklet will be produced entitled ‘The Voices of NewAfricanLeaders: Their Achievements and their Contributions’ alongside a DVD, NewAfricanLeaders magazine, a digitised database and a touring exhibition. We hope that these activities will offer new facts and learning resources about an increasingly diverse heritage in the UK society drawn from many different ethnic and linguistic groups, cultures and religions for the benefit of school children, colleges, academics, policy makers and practitioners.”

The African Achievement Awards & Africa Day Celebrations will be held on the 28th of May 2011. The exhibition, book, DVD and magazine are planned for display in the Birmingham Library in May and Victoria square during refugee week in June next year.

Note to editors

Using money raised through the National Lottery, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) sustains and transforms a wide range of heritage for present and future generations to take part in, learn from and enjoy. From museums, parks and historic places to archaeology, natural environment and cultural traditions, we invest in every part of our diverse heritage. HLF has supported 33,900 projects, allocating £4.4billion across the UK.

CAASS UK is a Birmingham – children and Vulnerable Adults Charity. We are passionate about
• The Prevention/Relieve Poverty.
• The Advancement of Education and Health.
• Research and Development.
• The Advancement of the Arts, Culture, and Heritage.
• The Advancement of Equality and Diversity and Leadership Training.
• Community Development.

Mr Ebot Ashu is a Doctorate Research student of Leaders and Leadership in Education at the University of Birmingham and co-founder of CAASS UK. As a humanitarian leader, he has worked at local, national and international policy level to effect change and improvement for the lives of Africans across the world.

Further information

Robert Smith, HLF Press Office on 0207 591 6245 and roberts@hlf.org.uk

Frederick Ebot-Ashu, Cameroon Advice and Support Services UK on 07720 431 026 or info@caassuk.org