

OUR
Sea of Stories

Grey Court School
eBulletin

26 May 2023

OUR
Sea of Stories

1543 students (in total)

254 EAL students

164 staff

42 countries

59+ languages *and*

27 stories





What does it feel like to leave
your home and travel to another
country where you don't even
speak the language?

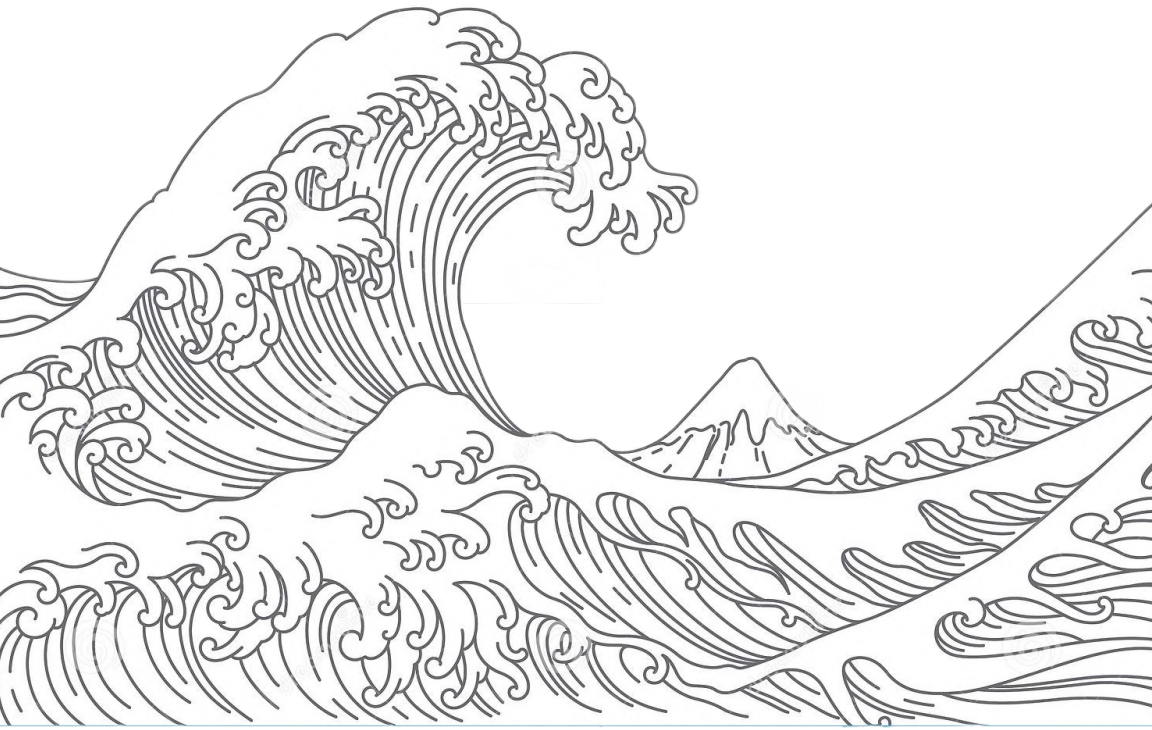
What if you are a child and
have no choice?

What can your new school do
to help you feel safe and
comfortable?



The Background

The Grey Court School community speaks over 45 languages and represents many countries, states and regions of the world. We are an amazing community who all arrive in this place, at this time from a surprisingly wide range of stories, journeys and experiences. For the School's Diversity and Multicultural evening 2023 I came up with a new idea. To tell our stories. Our multicultural evening is usually a bi-annual event involving the whole school, but we hadn't had one since the first year I took up my post in 2018 due to Covid. I really wanted to do something which would bring our community together. As I got to know them, I realised that many of my students had inspiring migration stories. Having been a documentary film-maker for many years, I understood that sharing their stories would be the most powerful way to convey their experience of migration, and really reflect the conversations we had been having in the diversity committee around inclusivity. We have been meeting for two years and implementing many positive changes within the school.



I extended my research to include teachers too, and when I discovered that the grandmother of our operations manager, Meachelle Johnson, in Newman House, now 98 years old, had come over on Windrush to be a nurse, a Maths teacher's grandmother had escaped Nazi Germany, a student's great grandfather had walked from a POW camp in France all the way back home to Italy at the age of 20, an RS teacher's earliest memory was of her hedge being set on fire during the troubles in Northern Ireland, and an English teacher's dad was the first Asian person in Hitchin having chosen the town deliberately for that reason, I realised that I'd found treasure, right here on my doorstep in this beautiful school where I spend every day, as well as an opportunity to share the incredible richness of our Grey Court community.

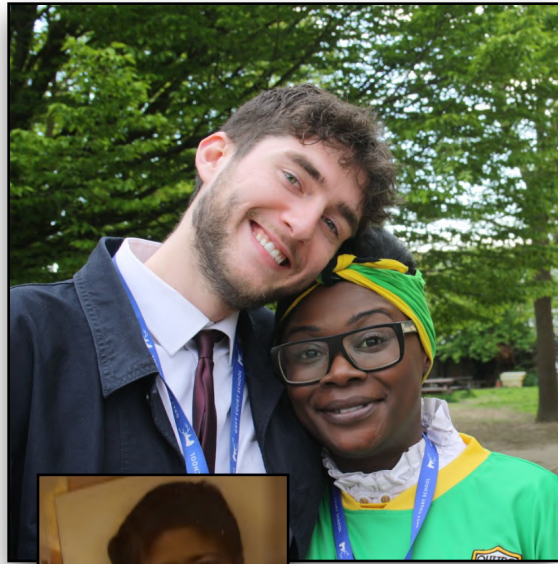
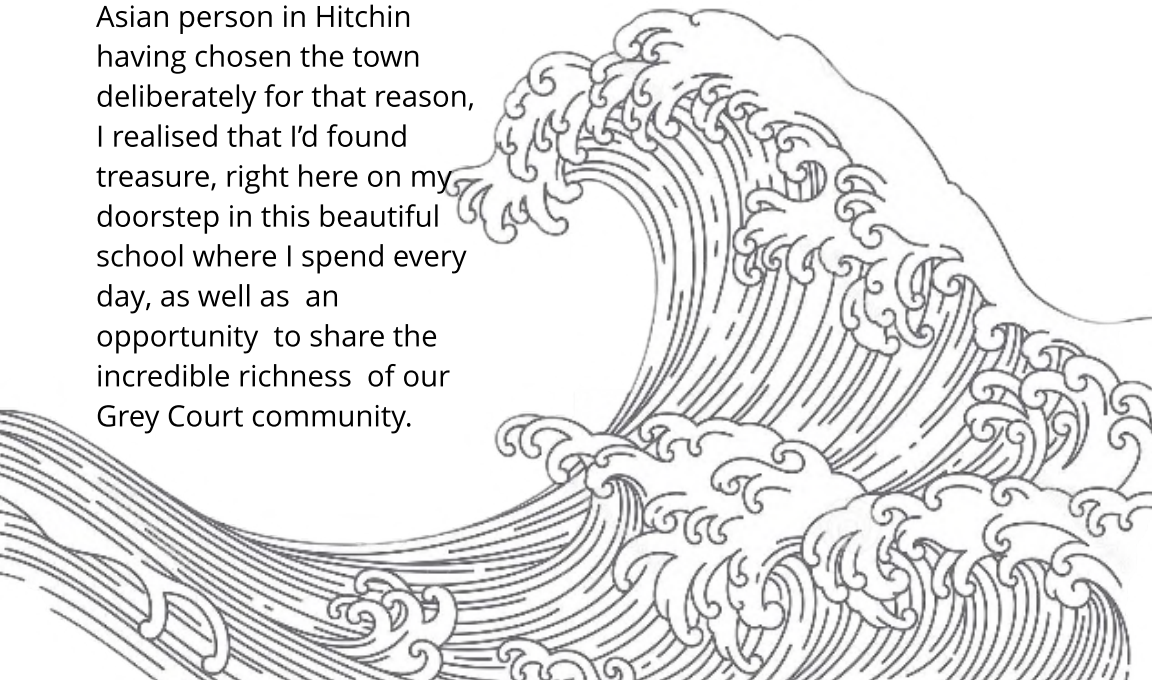


Photo (above):
Meachelle Johnson
with Ralph Ridyard.



Photo (left)
Meachelle's
grandmother,
Thelma White





The Windrush Story

*A story about leaving Jamaica
to settle in England*



Photo: Thelma and Emmanuel White



Our Event

On Thursday 4 May we held our first immersive promenade performance celebration when our students performed in a multimedia performance of migration stories which had been written by staff and students, and our families. It was attended by over 300 members of our community.





Escape to Ireland

*A story about leaving South
Africa to settle in Ireland*





Moving from Pakistan

PAKISTAN



*A story about
leaving Pakistan
to settle in
England*

Multicultural Evening
Our Stories
Moving from
Pakistan

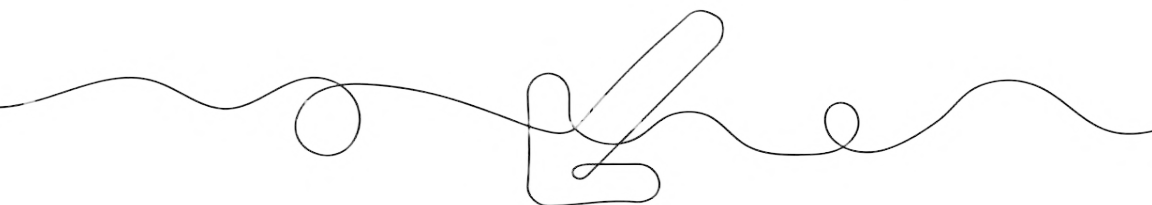


"I really liked that nothing
changed in the story I wrote"



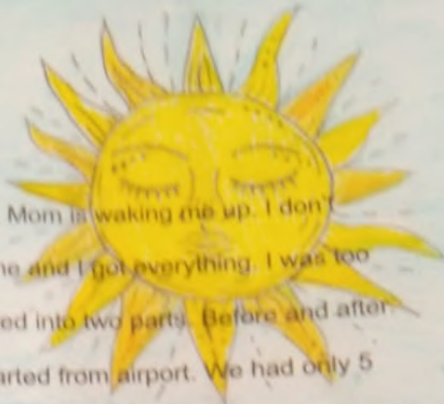
*It felt important to preserve the authenticity of what my students
had shared with me and I tried as much as possible to keep the
stories intact.*

Here is her lovely story



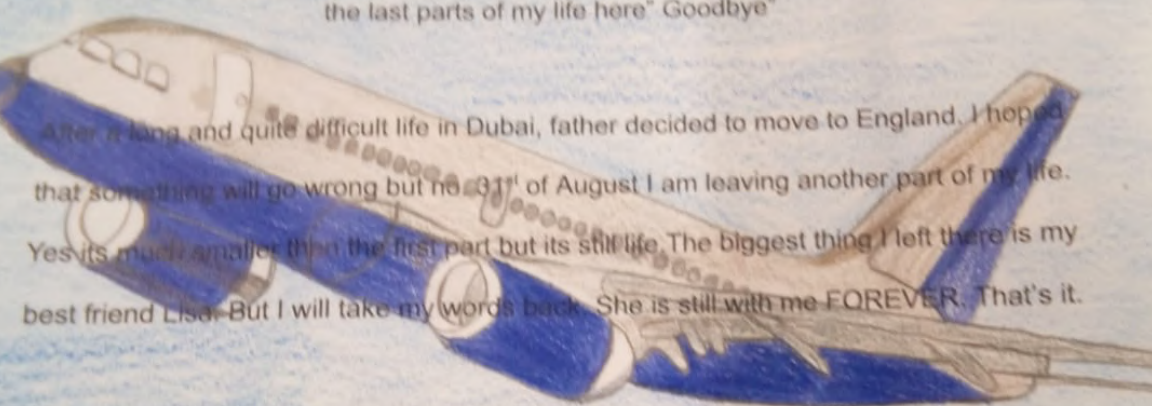


England



It's 5am. Light is going through my sleepy eyes. Mom is waking me up. I don't understand what happened there. She looked at me and I got everything. I was too scared and sad to talk, feel, cry. My life was separated into two parts. Before and after.

It's stereotype that 'after' is better. Our journey started from airport. We had only 5 minutes to get to the plane. Through all of the check points. Plane is in the air. I can see the last parts of my life here" Goodbye"



After a long and quite difficult life in Dubai, father decided to move to England. I hoped that something will go wrong but no. 31st of August I am leaving another part of my life. Yes its much smaller than the first part but its still life. The biggest thing I left there is my best friend Lisa. But I will take my words back. She is still with me FOREVER. That's it.

Soft voice of airhostess coming to me. It's time to eat. Omelette, sausage, bread, orange juice, croissant, jam, soup. so tasty, crunchy sweet. My life not as sweet as a jam.

But what I look.. my life is opening I Another life. Good luck I

Dubai

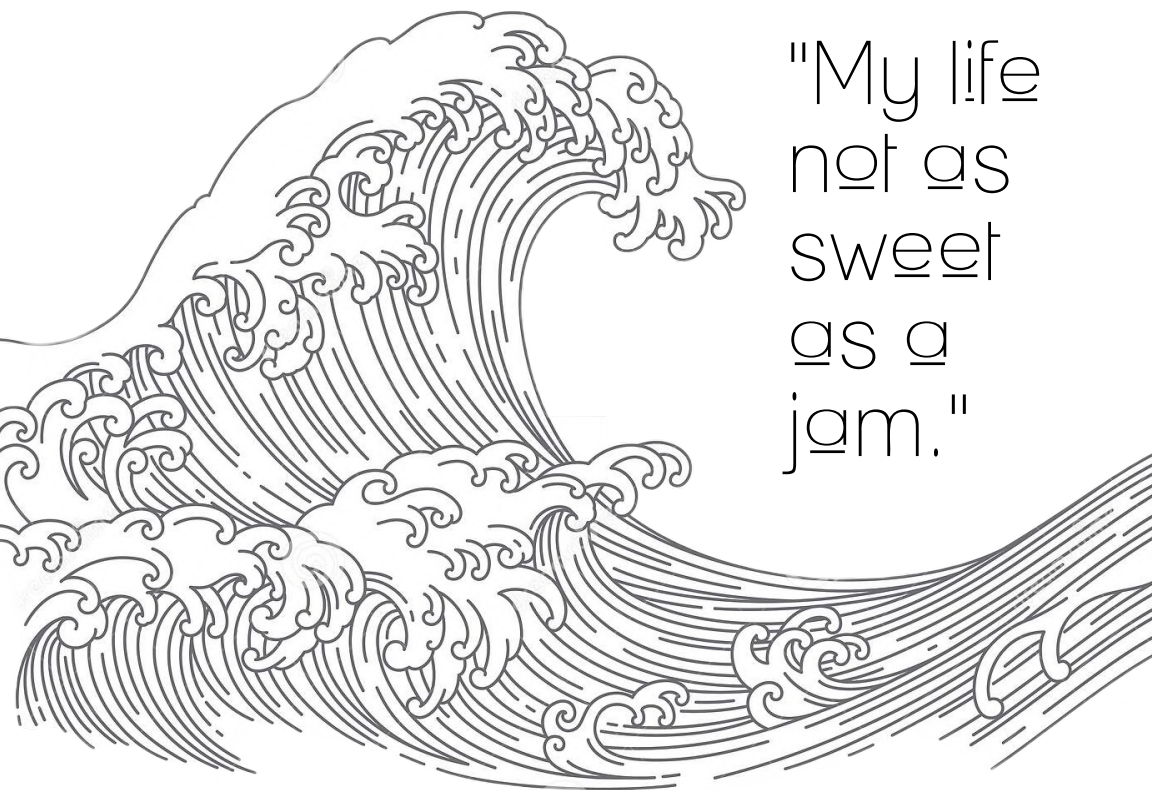


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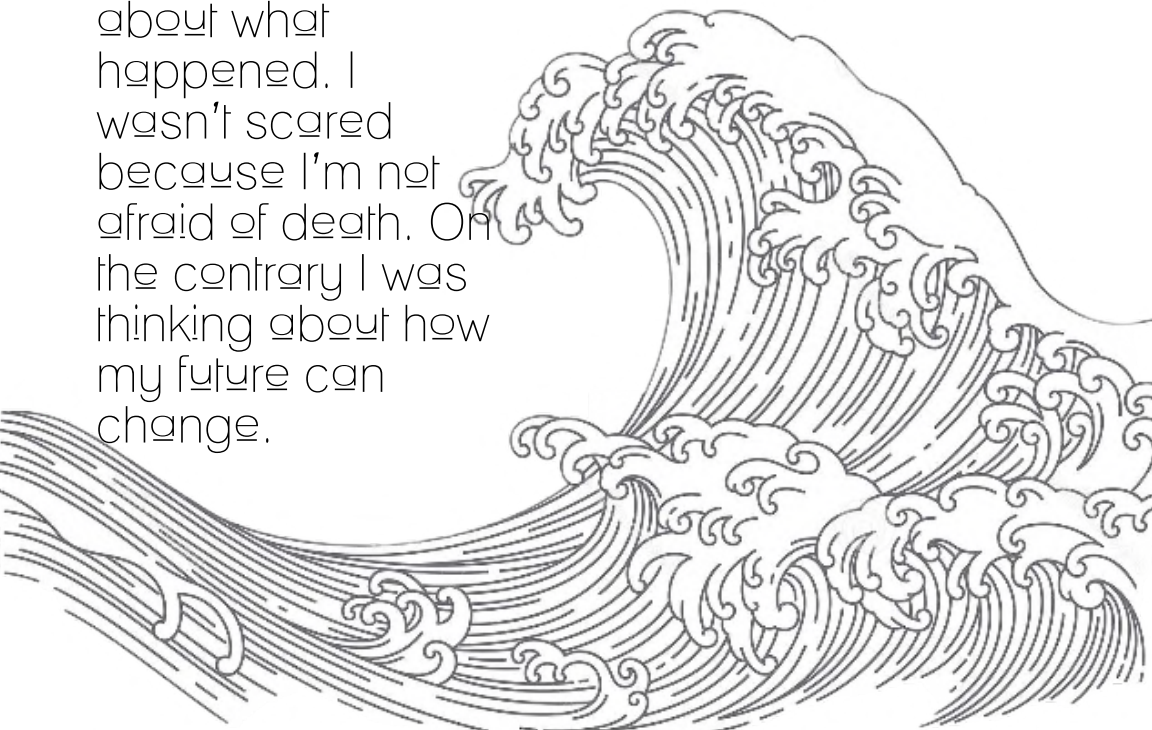


"I studied for my technical exam on 24 Feb. Physics and Maths on the same day. I woke up at 4 am to do homework. My train was at 7. I woke up because of sound. My mum turned on TV. It was the war.

In school we were joking and teachers said "Putin will die in autumn, but he didn't" Our school moved online. I was curious about what happened. I wasn't scared because I'm not afraid of death. On the contrary I was thinking about how my future can change.

From 10 years old, my own plan was to go to university abroad. I had many steps to achieve this. I was looking for a program which would allow me to move to a different country. I'm a child with a disability. I'm in remission. In our group for children with disabilities there is a program. On 1 March we moved. My mother went to Poland. 1 week in Poland and then we moved to Switzerland. My visa came on 15 of April. On 28 May I started school at Grey Court. I was overjoyed because I wanted to come here to study at the university. My mother said "You don't have a chance to, it's too expensive". This war gave me the opportunity. I had 50 steps before. Now I have 25."

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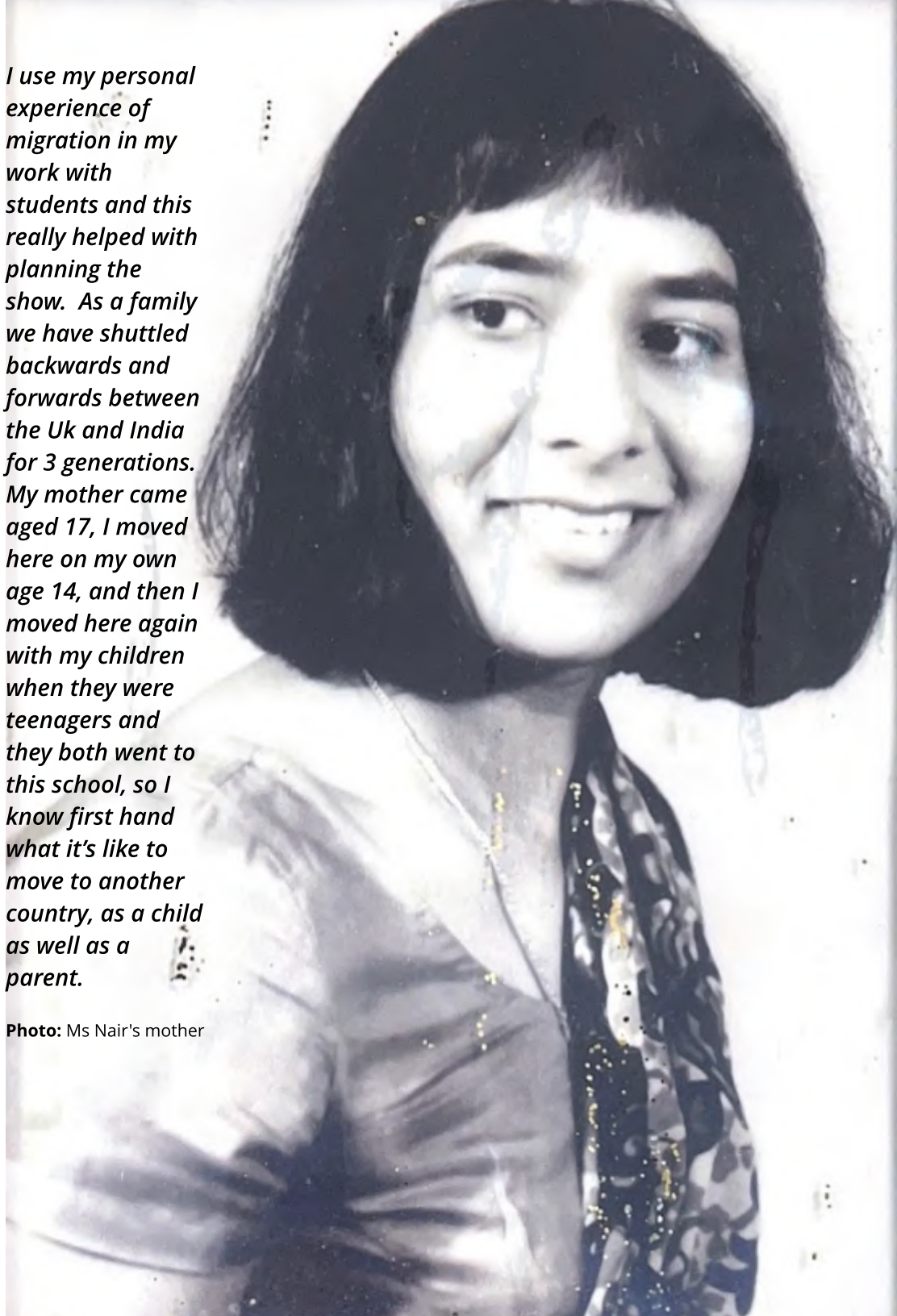


I moved from Korea. I felt confused because it had different culture. I was worried about friends and about English too. I was surprised that it was so quiet and had a lot of tree. I like how they live with nature. At the first day of school I don't know what was going on and worried. I never been to school that was so big so I was lost many times. But after the school I felt proud.



I use my personal experience of migration in my work with students and this really helped with planning the show. As a family we have shuttled backwards and forwards between the Uk and India for 3 generations. My mother came aged 17, I moved here on my own age 14, and then I moved here again with my children when they were teenagers and they both went to this school, so I know first hand what it's like to move to another country, as a child as well as a parent.

Photo: Ms Nair's mother



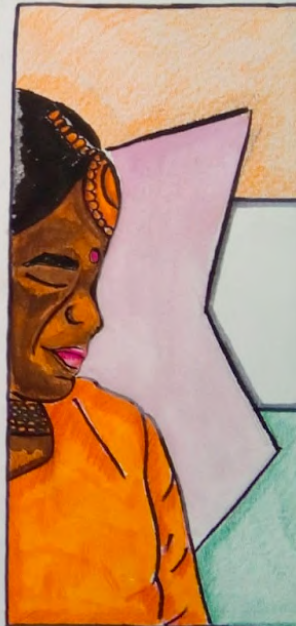
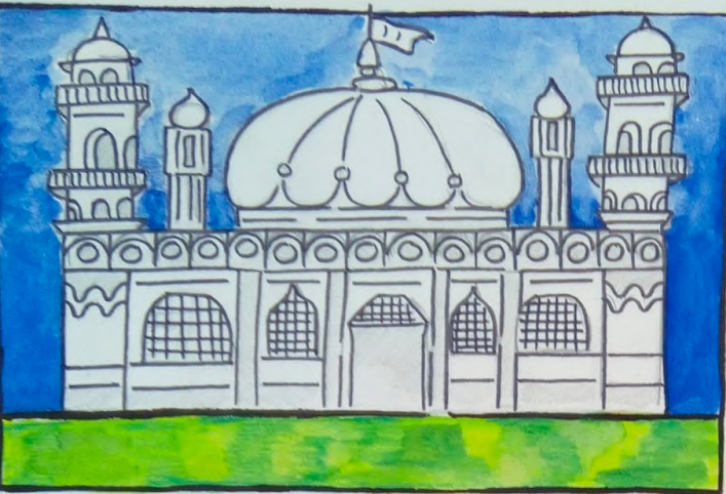


EMERGENCY
EVACUATION



HOME...?

"I've never seen home
so ripe"



"My father took the decision to leave India. He was a village headmaster and was the first person in our village to educate his daughters. My mother didn't want to leave India and threatened to jump off the roof if she had to leave her cows. We boarded the ship in Mumbai, Bombay as it was then called. We had nice cabins. It was a luxury liner, P&O company. On the first day we saw eggs being served for the first time in the restaurant. We felt very upset as we were strict vegetarians. My sister ate cornflakes with tomato sauce. Mother had packed Indian snacks so we ate those with pickles. We used to sit on the deck. There was a swimming pool but we couldn't swim. I went up on deck one day because I was feeling sea sick, and I fell asleep on a deck chair. My mother got so worried. She thought I'd fallen into the sea, and she started to cry. They searched everywhere and finally they found me, fast asleep. When we got to England we didn't know how to behave. We didn't know how to eat with our mouths closed. How not to bang doors. The carpet was worn out and I remember my mother painted it with gloss paint."

Usha Kiran Lal (Ms Nair's mother)

Leaving India

Here is my mother's story which was performed during the show



WHERE DO I BEGIN?

It's almost been six months since I moved from India to England. I'd say it was the toughest challenge I've ever faced. I remember in my cosy spacious house me and my sister were watching something on television and I said towards my Mom and Dad - They had that 'serious look' on their faces like they didn't know what to do. That same night, on the dinner table, they told me about the situation, getting a very serious role which required him to be in the UK for a long time. I was devastated. Finally when I felt that I was settled in life, I had 4 best friends who were good in school, my entire family could go along to, I really don't know what to say here. Even remembering about this is like associating pain in my nerves. And coming here meant I had to burst out of the safety net my parents made.

Before leaving, everyone came to say farewell. My best friends planned a surprise farewell party in school and took me to the mall. The best day of school that was, I was allowed to wander out with my friends. We snuck out of class, played with water in the bathroom like kids, dressed people in the tuck shop and queue.

It was a new flight and I sat there for 12 hours, still unable to believe that this was my new home. 28th of May 2022. In the taxi, on the way to our temporary house, I saw things that are quite different, flashing lights, no car horns, spiky roads. And in the taxi, I cried. My mom held my hand with my little sister sleeping in her lap.

Having collected so many stories, it was important to find a way to share them in a meaningful way that could also provide a learning experience for our school community. A promenade performance which would be really immersive seemed the most suitable form for the show, as it would mirror the journey the students had made. The only problem was that being a documentary film-maker I had never directed drama, so I was thrilled when our experienced drama teacher, Mr Page, agreed to collaborate with me and direct the performers. After an initial reading with his sixth form students, at which they insisted that all the stories must be included, we committed to tell all the 27 stories from around the globe! Over the weeks, our little group of performers expanded to include students from year 7, 8 and 9. They had to resist the initial temptation to correct the grammatical errors in the stories as these were the words of students learning English. To tell the stories, students had to put themselves in the shoes of children who had encountered war and trauma. It was an interesting experiment in building empathy and understanding. I was so surprised by their dedication, as they even came in to rehearse first thing in the morning. During rehearsals when Mr Page came in to work with students on his day off, it was so inspiring for me to watch a charismatic and gifted teacher guide them through the process, to enable them to get the balance between storytelling and acting just right, and prepare them to cope with unexpected moments during the promenade performance when they would be faced with an adult audience on their own.





My previous experience as production designer on a feature film told me that we needed a layered event where monologues would be performed in different rooms and each room needed to be interesting and unique. Mr Allchurch, our music tech teacher, was excited about the idea of his students creating soundscapes for the stories as part of his year 10 course. Students researched music from different cultures, genres and time periods, and experimented with sounds to bring the stories alive. He reflected that "it was interesting for the students to work on something real, so this is something I'd really like to revisit in future."

One very special story contributor even created the soundscape for his own story about his escape from Myanmar. **Oliver Myo's** soundscape can be found [here](#)

I decided to add video sequences to play behind the live performances in some stories so that the audience would get a visual impression of the countries students had moved from which would deepen their experience. The editing was mainly done by two of Ms Howell's media students **Sahil Walli** (Y12) and **Samuel Barry** (Y10) who was so committed that he was the only year 10 student to come in on a strike day. Ms Maybey, Head of Art, invited her students to create visual responses to the stories that were displayed in the hall. Ms Jamaal, who runs our student support centre, came on board to add another textured visual layer with props and costumes to fit the stories that had been sensitively thought through, the most beautiful of which was the flag that two Ukrainian students created and then draped around our student mannequins which began the show.

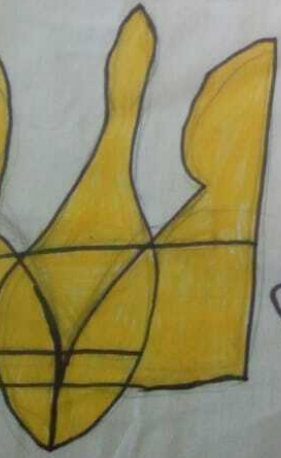
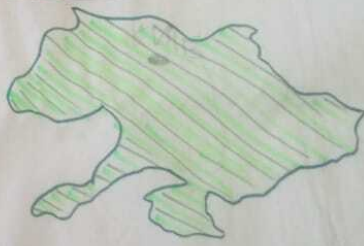
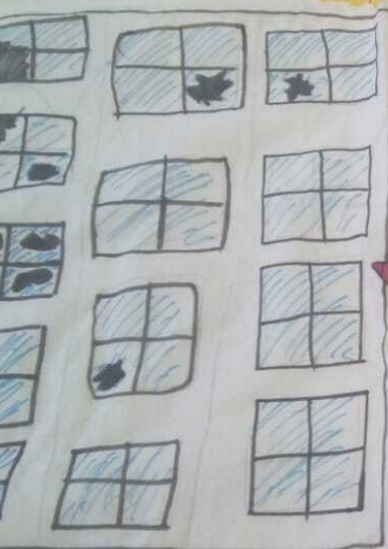


STOP WAR
SAVE
UKRAINE

Герої не вмирають

СЛАВА

УКРАЇНІ







ГЕРОЯМ
СЛАВА!



A very impressive technical crew headed by **Damian Deer**, some as young as year 7, took care of all technicalities including the lighting in every classroom. They too, are Mr Allchurch's students, and I'm sure these young people will be a real credit to him in future.



Photo (left)

Ms Nair with Jashan Ball

Putting the show together was very complex and required a lot of coordination and I could not have managed this without my assistant event manager, **Jashan Ball**, and the amazing Newman House team. Jashan did a phenomenal job of designing the poster, disseminating it in different languages in every classroom in the school, and coordinating all the admin for the show. A former student of the school, he hosted the last multicultural event with me before lockdown when he was in year 10, so it was truly special to work with him again. His family had moved to the UK from Kenya in the 70's and it was invaluable to have someone to plan with who understood the background to the show. He is currently working as a teaching assistant during his gap year, something which our former students often do as they want to give back to the school. He turned out to be a phenomenal organiser, coordinating the Newman House team to make phone calls to invite every parent on the EAL register, and as one member of the audience commented. "The logistics alone were worthy of an army !" He is going on to study economics and business management at university and I'm sure he will go on to do something quite amazing.



The biggest challenge we faced was that it was not possible to rehearse in the classrooms during the day. When we rehearsed the night before with lights, we blew a fuse in the language department and all the power went off! Luckily, the amazing Mr Griffiths, our site manager, who has been very supportive throughout, went the extra mile literally and drove off to source some more!







I have to confess, I breathed a huge sigh of relief once the event started, with a wonderfully exuberant performance of Samba drums put together by our music teacher Ms Cowper. As the choir began to sing its medley of international folk songs, followed by a violin duet performed by Mr Millar's students, I stepped into the sea of stories and joined the first group of parents as they flowed around the school. The show, an incredible collaborative effort between so many people, had begun.

The audience moved through the school to different classrooms and experienced stories from Jamaica and India along with more recent journeys from Korea, Hong Kong and the Ukraine. Altogether stories from sixteen countries were included.





The Pickle Jar

*A story about leaving
India to settle in England*

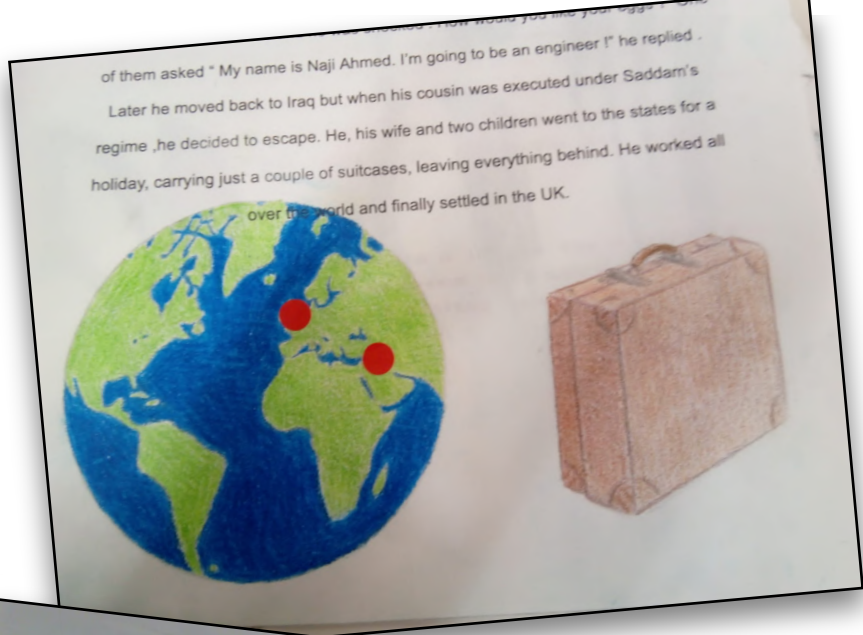


Multicultural Evening
Our Stories
The Pickle Jar









What if you are a child and have no choice ?

What if you are a child who has experienced war and conflict ?

What if you do not have the words to express how you feel ?

What can your new school do to help you feel safe and comfortable ?

These are the questions I grapple with every day as I work with children who arrive at our school from all over the world.



At the end of the show as we ate the delicious food brought by the parents, the samosas cooked by Nadira, one of our kitchen staff, after her double shift in the kitchen, and the onion bhajis cooked by our students under the Head of Cooking, Ms Clark's, supervision and watched the Indian dancing on stage, a parent responded to a Turkish story where a child described their experience at this school from arriving speaking no English to making friends. "That happened to me, that was my story". Our audience had connected in a meaningful way.



**Photo
(left)**
Nadira
and
Firdosa







I had to agree with our headmaster, Mr Rhodes, when he ended the show and thanked everyone saying "What unites us is indeed more powerful than what divides us."

Many of the stories were indeed very moving and people were sometimes in tears. I hope they came away from the show understanding that one can go through difficult experiences and survive them. In some cases it actually makes you stronger and I can definitely say that has been the case for me. I sincerely hope it will be that way for my students too.

A member of the audience commented that "These pioneer's tales were made more powerful by students performing each other's words. Somehow this gave them extra poignancy and universality."

The story contributors felt that too and one of them wrote this after hearing her story performed.

"When I heard my story, with intonation, I honestly cried because it's not just a story of someone else - this is my story I wrote myself. I hope the people who came really understood what happened."

An ex-student from Burma who happened to be visiting London, heard about the show and came to watch it, wrote to me a few days ago. This is what she had to say:

"The Multi-Cultural evening showcased a wonderful collection of stories of the students' journeys and was a great celebration of the diversity that Grey Court represents.

It was great to see so many students getting involved to help share the stories of their peers, by helping to maintain anonymity where needed. It was very inspiring to see the barriers that the students have overcome when settling in a new country. I'm very proud to see that Grey Court continues to embrace such diversity of cultures and backgrounds today."

A member of Refugee Action Kingston also wrote saying:

"Thank you so much for inviting me to the Migrations Monologues event last week. It was a wonderful evening and celebration of the vast diversity within your school community."



We plan to perform some of the monologues for our students and teachers in school, and there will be more soundscapes and a video of the performance filmed by Benjamin Barry that will come out before the summer break: do look out for them on our website.

Thank you everyone involved in the show, especially the Newman House team and VPA department who gave up their time to help me, despite their busy teaching schedules. Most of all thank you to everyone, students, teachers and families who trusted me with their stories. *We do rely a lot on sponsorship to create our events so if you'd like to support us with that, please do contact the school.*



Preeya Nair

EAL Coordinator