

UBUNTU!



By Olivier Tsemo

It's important to demonstrate and champion human qualities, for example kindness, warmth and honesty, in what we do, we've concluded in our Putting Relationships First cell. Olivier Tsemo writes here about what this has meant in his work in Sheffield.

'Ubuntu' is a Bantu term that translates as 'humanity'. It could also mean 'I am because we/you are' or 'humanity towards others'. It is this philosophy that drives everything I do.

When I was asked if I would write a short essay for this collection, uncertainty flooded through me. Firstly, I didn't think anyone would be interested in reading about my philosophy in life and also my work in the community. Secondly, I have never felt comfortable writing about myself, I am an active and evaluative kind of person. I am still uneasy about writing this article, but I do feel that I would like to embrace this opportunity to share with you my collective work with the community.

In 2015, after many years of working as an executive mathematics consultant, I volunteered to become the CEO of SADACCA, the Sheffield African and Caribbean Community Association, a registered charity that has been in operation since 1955, and which now provides a wide range

of activities and services. This includes an education programme – which has been of particular benefit to women – and a variety of measures designed to tackle deficiencies in mainstream services in response to the cultural and social needs of the community, including day care facilities with a domiciliary care and lunch club for the elderly, a Saturday school and an advice service designed to cater for the needs of the African and Caribbean community. SADACCA Studios has professional recording studio facilities, production and rehearsal rooms and instruments, and music producers and recording engineers. All of this involves a great deal of effort with a very minimal and inadequate financial resource base.

It was a period of financial instability and inadequate funding leading to minimum service delivery to the community. Relations between the charity, its leadership, the local council and mainly the African and Caribbean community were at their lowest and reflected discontent, brought about by a

culmination of years of distrust and the loss of confidence between the local council and the African diaspora community.

A new direction of travel was urgently required.

SADACCA had its own relationship problems with the community. As Chief Executive, I received complaints, mainly from community members, about the quality of care they had received from staff at the organisation. For example, there was an increasing number of elderly people of African origin not receiving satisfactory care at the day care centre due to funding cuts from the local council.

I decided to approach leaders at the council to engage in meaningful conversation with the aim of creating a safe space where open and transparent discussion could happen. To my surprise, I realised that I was knocking on an open door. They were welcoming and very accommodating. I was also reassured at my first meeting that they, too, wanted to build an organisation which reflected diversity in the community. My engagement with city council leaders reduced the trust gap with the community hence creating opportunity for more engagement with the young and the elderly people from the African diaspora.

The objectives of our meeting had two aspects, firstly to establish a working group which comprised of the Council Community Team and wider community representatives. Together, we organised and delivered a series of events and other activities which are still ongoing. These initiatives were extremely successful. Not only did the number of participants from this community

increase significantly within a short period, which continued during subsequent years, but also the level of support from the council increased as well.

It is fair to say that up until this time the council staff knew very little about the different issues facing the African Diaspora community, or of the racial discrimination they were experiencing on a daily basis. Equally the African diaspora community knew very little about the council and their operations.

I was confident that I could facilitate the communication amongst diverse audiences. I was already committed to promoting justice and equality within the community and to ensuring that the most vulnerable had access to good quality care. One of my primary roles as community leader is the promotion of racial equality. It is also one of my professional duties not only to challenge injustice, promote fairness and equality, but also to ensure that we can all be instrumental in striving for the changes that we wish to see.

We put relationships and people first in everything we do and now have a real opportunity, in line with Sheffield City Council and the NHS five-year plan, to develop solutions that engage by providing innovative, appropriate services in the community for the community with a goal of creating happier, healthier and more engaged communities. As we have renovated and diversified our provision, we have further increased the number of people we are able to assist. We help roughly 300 people a week, responding to a variety of needs, and this number is set to grow further with the rise in living costs

and the ongoing impact of Covid-19. We also provide personal care to older people living in their own home in the community. Our SADACCA Daycare service is a social and healthcare provider for the African-Caribbean citizens of Sheffield and has won twice the Prestige Award for Community Care Centre of the Year in 2020 and 2021. Our services are focused on the wellbeing of this group, and the prevention of their social isolation. The service delivers, assists with and monitors their health needs through craft activities, day trips, health and nutrition workshops and signposting to other services.

When asked what piece of wisdom I would give, I always speak about the need for

people to think more collectively. We need to constantly ask the question, 'What is it we can do together?' I grew up in the Kingdom of Bayangam in the Grassfields region of Cameroon where the words Muntu/Bantu/Ubuntu are commonly used.

It is the idea that I am only human if I recognise the humanity in others. It is this collective notion of life which I think we have lost.

Olivier Tsemo is the CEO of SADACCA which provides community and health services for the African and Caribbean community in Sheffield.

