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A Black History Month Q&A with Michelle Gordon, member of N1 WI, Middlesex Federation and a co-founder of the WI Wanderers Facebook group, where WI members can visit each other's virtual events and connect with other members during lockdown. We caught up with her for her thoughts on Black History Month.



Photo by Anne-Marie Bickerton

Q: Tell us a bit about yourself.

I am very proud to call myself a Londoner – I was born in Islington and I am the youngest of four children. I started my career off in education and then switched to financial services and went to work in the city. The demographic in the city was the same in most organisations: in board meetings, I was regularly the only Black person as well as being the only woman.

I learnt from the best, working with some of the most exceptional people who mentored me throughout my career. There were low points: being overlooked for roles because I didn't know the "right" people; working hard at a project only to hear that someone else was trying to take credit for it; prejudged because of my sex or colour. I persevered and let my work speak for itself.

Q: Who are some black women who inspire you?

There are numerous Black women that inspire me – none more than my mum, Evette, and her sister Elaine. They came to Islington, London in the 1960s from Jamaica. My grandfather was already here as were quite a few members of our family. It was not an easy time to be in London, but they quickly established themselves in the community. After having a family, my aunt pursued a career in the government and my mum went to work in the banking sector.

Whilst working in a predominantly white male environment, both women came up against lots of issues. They had a way of turning every roadblock or unsavoury incident into something positive. As children and then young adults, we watched and admired these two women in what seemed to be a big scary world. My mum had a highly successful career in banking and my aunt went on to receive an MBE for her amazing work.

Whilst in my twenties, I discovered the writer and activist Maya Angelou. I saw this quote on a poster and it has become my life mantra:

"My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive; and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humour & some style."

Here she is in all her glory reciting her brilliant poem, "And Still I Rise".



Q: For Black History Month in 2020, what's an area of history you'd like to see highlighted?

I would like more focus on British-Jamaican nurse, healer and businesswoman [Mary Seacole](#) and other forgotten heroes. I recently heard someone say, "Black people are trying to rewrite history." My reply was, "We are currently living within the rewrite." It is important to recognise that our ancestors may have made some mistakes and the current history books may not be a true reflection of what actually happened. This does not mean blaming each other and fighting about decisions that were made way before any of us was around. It should mean working together to ensure that details are corrected and that it never happens again.

Q: What change would you most like to see in UK society in the future?

I would love to see UK society more unified. I believe that people need to be more accepting of change. The questions we're asking ourselves should be: how can we make things better? How can we knowledge-share to a point that Black History Month becomes obsolete because it has been accurately integrated in this country's history books? Maybe this will happen in 2021 – I remain hopeful.

WI members can request to join the WI Wanderers Facebook group at <http://www.facebook.com/groups/wiwanderers>.

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