Date: **24/05/2021**
Interviewer: **Sue**
Interviewee: **Pearl**

Pearl is an active Park Champion who volunteered for the London Borough of Newham leading up to London 2012. During the Games, she was a Games Maker volunteering for the triathlon event in Hyde Park and met many of the participating athletes across the disciplines.

Interviewer
It's Monday the 24th of May 2021. And this is Sue who's here today to interview Pearl about her memories of the Olympic Park and its life before, during and after the Games. How long have you lived in Newham and what are your memories of the Park area before the Games?

Interviewee
I've lived here since the early 1980s. My memories of what is now the Park is very small. I remember going into the city on the train and seeing the piles of coal, which is where the London Aquatics Centre is now, but anything other than that I don't really know much about. Newham did start to have sort of an idea of walking the Olympic route, and they took us around the Bow Back rivers and just around the outside of the site. And it was it was very, very different. It was jetties with mad barking dogs and things that look like unloading areas for boats and barges. There's no sign of boats or barges or anything like that now. So it was pretty derelict and strange, really.

Interviewer
Once we won the bid and we started the Park development, did you follow its development before the Games?

Interviewee
Newham started a volunteer group that fed off the Commonwealth Games in Manchester. They started this group in 2004 which coincided with my early retirement. We would be out on the pavement early morning, handing out stickers and trying to encourage people to back the bid. We went to lots of Olympic themed events in the city. I remember going to one on the Cavendish Estate, I think it is near Oxford Circus, where it was about the disability side of things. Danny Crates, who was a Paralympian, was there as a keynote speaker. There were other events, one at the Royal Festival Hall, which was hosted by Cherie Blair, because Tony Blair was Prime Minister at the time. That was getting women involved including high profile women like Angela Ripon. So lots of things like that we did prior to the bid. Then we had the event for the winner of the bid. We couldn't make up our minds whether to go to Trafalgar Square or to Stratford, because they had a big screen there. We decided to go to Stratford. We were supposed to be doing something in a volunteer role but that didn't happen. So we just stayed around the square, waiting for the announcement. When it came and the Olympic Games went to London, it was a fantastic moment. At that point, I think we were invincible. We'd been invited to a meeting at Stratford station, where Emily Maitlis and media people were. We decided to go in here, so we went up the stairs. We said to each other, just keep walking, keep walking. We went right past the reception into the event, had glasses of bubbly and had a great time. We had too many glasses of bubbly I think and we got asked if we would be interviewed by BBC Radio or something. It must have

been hilarious. Some of my friends phoned me up or sent me text messages saying, "We heard you on the radio" and stuff like that. So that was great. Then we worked on things to promote the Games coming to Newham and so on. I actually worked on the Park as it was being built. I went on a tour guiding course. There were about 30 of us. I think twelve of us got selected. We would meet the visitors by the back of Stratford theatre to get on a coach and take them on to the Olympic site. We have to learn all the scripts and so on, but it was such good fun. You never knew from one day to the next which route you were going to be using. To start with, the most exciting thing was the big green machines that were washing all the contaminated soil. Then we slowly saw the buildings coming up out of the ground and being there for everybody to enjoy. It was a really exciting thing to do. As the buildings got finished or part finished, we went on building tours. I can remember going into the Velodrome when they were just putting the roof on. That was a real 'hard hat' thing! Then going to some of the opening events when they were handing the venues over to LOCOG, the Organising Committee of the Games. The highlight was when the Queen came to visit the Park to plant the first tree down by the stadium on the river. We were invited to a little get together in one of the building huts in Pudding Mill Lane. We all got to meet the Queen and shake her hand.

Interviewer
That sounds fantastic. When you were meeting the public, what was the public response towards the Games? Was it very positive or very mixed?

Interviewee
It was very mixed. I think my own reaction when I heard that Stratford was bidding for the Games was, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, of course we are". I never thought it was for real. I think a lot of other people thought the same. It wasn't as if it was an inconvenience to a great deal of people. It wasn't a housing estate or anything like that. There were a few small patches of housing which was mainly based on student accommodation. There were 250 businesses on the Park. But most of those were given the option to go somewhere else. So it wasn't a major disruption in that respect. There were some people who were very anti. To us, it was almost like a game. We just gave out as many stickers as we could. The number of stickers you gave out was the number of people who supported it. As the tours came to the end and the Park was being built, people were seeing what it was like and how it was a transformation. It went through so many stages of demolition, building, handover, and then transforming it to what it is now after the Games. So I think people saw that there were going to be benefits from it and got on board.

Interviewer
So what did you actually do during the Games?

Interviewee
That was a bit of a disappointment. I wanted to be on the Park. Because I had done a lot of triathlon volunteering, so I volunteered for the triathlon in Hyde Park. It was a great atmosphere. Then we also did the cycling events. I had to go over to Putney for one, to Richmond for another, and to Hampton Court for another. We were out on the road doing crossing patrols and things like that. It wasn't really exciting, but Newham did something at the same time during the Games. We had our own Ambassador Scheme, hanging around Stratford station and around Westfield talking to people. It was so exciting as

we really felt part of it. It was really an exciting thing for Stratford. People seemed different somehow, everybody was happy. There didn't seem to be any problems on buses and trains and things like that. They all ran smoothly. We thought it was going to be a disaster in some ways. How would TFL cope with it? But they really did. Before the Games, we had a bit of a hassle with road works and roads being changed and different combinations of access and so on to Stratford. But that melted into the pot at the end, and it was really good fun. So, yeah, it was good. I didn't get selected for the Games until really, really late, but I got an award from my local council, which was sort of like a Civic Award for volunteers who had been involved from the start. We went to an event where we all got an envelope then matched it against a board. Newham had got tickets for all the high-profile events like what turned out to be Super Saturday. I actually got tickets for the Opening Ceremony - absolutely fantastic! It's a once in a lifetime thing. You could go to a Super Saturday in another athletics event, although it wouldn't be the Olympics, but it would be something that you could see somewhere else but an Opening Ceremony is an one-off. It was fantastic. The only thing was it finished at about one o'clock in the morning and I had to be up at four to get over to Hyde Park for six o'clock or something for my Games Maker role! So, it was an absolute nightmare. I left my friend sleeping at my house. I just said to her, "Post the keys through door, help yourself to what you want, I'm off!" We didn't get any tickets for the Games itself apart from the very first day of the athletics. I met somebody when I was doing my tour guiding and they had some spare tickets. They just gave them to us and that was the first day of the athletics. So, I saw Jessica Ennis in the heptathlon. That was really good for the very first event. You could wander around the Park as well. So we got a good feel of the Park. Then we got six tickets for the Paralympics. We went up the ArcelorMittal Orbit, we had booked to go up there. We had one of those tickets where you can wander around and go into anywhere you wanted. I think the Paras were much more friendly than the Games themselves. You really got into the feel of it just wandering around the Park or sitting in their wheelchairs or whatever, chatting to people. I had a picture taken with the guy who is our top wheelchair tennis player and who has won medals since. I don't think he actually won gold in the Paralympics. We were up at the ArcelorMittal Orbit and he was there. We had photos taken with him. I'm not a big selfie person. I don't go out looking for them or whatever. But, you know, even in the run up to the Games, I met so many people. I met Kelly Holmes at a local event and had a picture taken with her. Steve Backley, too. I met David Henry in the queue for one of the events. The biggest one which I should have got a photograph of... I went to the day that they handed over the London Aquatics Centre to the Olympic Organising Committee. I was standing outside and they had this race in the pool - some were swimmers and some were other athletes. So you had a badminton player, Tessa Sanderson, Mark Foster and Damian Bowles, who was one of my favourite athletes. They had finished the race and we came outside. They were all standing there and I was just chatting to them. It didn't even dawn on me to ask to have a picture taken with like, I think there were eight athletes there of different disciplines. It was fantastic to get those events and I think that's why my own Games experience was a bit like after the Lord Mayor's show. So much enjoyment, fun and involvement during the build up with my tour guiding, and that sort of thing. It wasn't a disappointment. I loved it, walking through Hyde Park. This family came up to me saying, "Can I have my picture taken with a purple person?" I was dressed like a drowned rat because it had been raining that day. But it was really good fun.

Interviewer
When the games were over, what happened then?

Interviewee
Well, there was the interim. So at that stage, I then started working for the LLDC. The people who worked for the ODA, the Olympic Delivery Authority, then started working with the LLDC who now run the Park. We did some tour guiding, going around the Park, showing how it was being changed around. We saw the disappearance of the basketball arena, different things changing round and so on. Then we did some tours on the boats as well, the boats that sit in the Park now. That was for people who were going to move into East Village, perhaps local groups, disability groups or something like that. So a bit more tour guiding. When the Park opened up in 2013/2014, I joined the Park Champions. So I've been doing this ever since. I've also volunteered in Newham as well, but not so much. I think it's changed Stratford a great deal. I mean, Westfield was always going to be there. You're going to have some housing and so on, on the back of Westfield. But the Olympics brought more to it, I think, and it's evolving every day. It's a bit like when we did the tours. What are we going to see today that we didn't see last week?

Interviewer
Do you think that the Park has impacted positively on Newham?

Interviewee
On the whole, yes. It has given lots more exercise space for people. Lots of people use it, I think who are local. They may not be from Newham, they may be from the other boroughs edging on the Park. But I think that there is a bit of a gulf between old Stratford and E20. I used to be a magistrate and I do some work with youth offending. You get the feel from some of the things that come from the young people that they see the Park as being an affluent area. There isn't mega crime, but there is an element of crime there because some young people see this as a sort of a richer area. I think it's a fallacy really because a lot of the apartments are actually rented out to students and people working locally or whatever. But there are lots of initiatives to try and bring the two things together. They always said that when they built the Park they would have, like, districts on the Park, so to speak, which they would join up with existing districts. So you might have Chobham Manor that would sort of merge with some of the housing that's on the other side of the Park in that area, the area between, say, the Park and Leyton. Also down by Pudding Mill Lane, they wanted to stretch the area of the district to over the other side of the A12. So that was the plan, to try and merge the areas into a sort of joined up district. Whether that's happened, I don't really know. We've gone through the last year and a half of hell over COVID. I think a lot of people have sort of shut themselves away, so you can't really get a feel for things at the moment. It was evolving, I think quite well. I felt safe on the Park, it's just that I wouldn't go there late at night. If I was coming back from the Velodrome or somewhere over that end, I would make sure I was with somebody else, because some of those areas are quite quiet. I wouldn't want to walk there on my own. Even when it's dark, you know, not even late at night.

Interviewer
What do you think about all the new developments that's going on with the BBC and the V&A, etc?

Interviewee
I think it's great. Whether it's sort of cultural, educational or whatever, I don't know. But it is going to bring lots of things to the area: theatre, dance and the museums and so on. So you'll have stuff in the

East and stuff in the West as well. You wouldn't have to go to the other side of London to go to a museum - we'll have our own. It's a bit of a way off yet. But, yeah, I think that's a good thing for the area and I think it's very good for prospects for young people. Newham is a very young borough, lots of young people are into the arts and so on. It will give them the opportunity to work locally, which Westfield has done as well. It's just been good for young people. They've had a lot of engagement with young people, they have these committees, they have youth groups, and so on. I've seen young people start off as a being very shy. Now that they've been to University, they're really coming out on LinkedIn, with strong personalities. They probably would have done so anyway, but I think they've been given opportunities, and they've grabbed it with both hands.

Interviewer
So when you are a Park Champion, what part of your role do you enjoy the most and what gives you the most satisfaction?

Interviewee
I enjoy talking to people and helping people. I'm not precious about events and stuff. I'll do wayfinding. I know Stratford. If I'm out in the shopping centre, I'm an asset because people ask questions that have nothing to do with the event. But you're there as an Ambassador. So, I just love talking to people. One of my favourite events was the Shrouds of the Somme. That was absolutely fantastic. I'm looking forward to the [London] Blossom Garden as well because I think that will have a similar effect although it might be a bit raw at this time as it's so close to the event [COVID pandemic]. The Shrouds of the Somme was like 100 years ago, but it was such a wonderful event. People just stood in awe of it. I think I'm going to miss the south lawn because of that. You can't have an event like that again. But I enjoy working at the Info Point. I don't drive the buggy, but I enjoy going around on it and giving people information. I enjoy doing events. I don't do every event - I don't do the gardening - but I do a mixture. I'll do some marshalling, it's just really getting me out, you know.

Interviewer
What sort of response do visitors have towards the Park?

Interviewee
I think there's a mixture because you have people coming into the Park who were here for the Games. You have people who perhaps remember it from way back because they knew someone who lived here, or they went to school here or they even worked in one of the factories that were on the edge of the Park. A lot of people talk about the speedway track that was where Here East is now, even the sweet factory, everybody knew the sweet factory. I lived in Essex when I was I was younger. Then I moved to Newham in the 1980s, but I remember one of my neighbors worked for Trebor and they would always come in with bags of sweets and things like that! So, I think [the public's reaction] to the Park is very mixed. But on the whole, I think they are in awe of it especially when we talk about the gardens and the flowers that are there from all over [the world], the venues and how people just walk, cycle and run. Also, the wide paths and the fact that the buggy is there so that they can get to see the Park without having to worry about being tired or whatever. They can have a run around and just get a feel for the place. Most people just come here to enjoying themselves. Then you get the silly questions like, "Where's the Vaccination Centre?" or "Where is the nearest bus stop to Leyton?", that sort of thing.

But then that's part of giving information. I think if you do help them in things that are not related, they get a feel that they're important. I think that's what we try to do, to make people feel they're important. We listen to them and hear what they have to say.

Interviewer
You seem to really come over with how much the Park means to you. Can you sum up what you think the legacy of the Park is to Britain or to London and to yourself?

Interviewee
I think to London and to our area, it has bought something that we never had before. It has brought a really good choice of sporting events and sporting venues to have events in. We've had so much in the Park, even things like the Fed Cup Tennis. Who would have thought that was going to come to Stratford, an international event like that? It has brought more housing. The shops, I suppose, is a sort of bye-the-bye because they were going to be there anyway, but some of the little shops and cafes that you've got in the [East] Village area around the edge of the Park are really sort of nice social areas to go to. So there's lots of social opportunities in the Park. The Park in itself is a bit lacking in that you've only really got the Last Drop and the Timber Lodge and the kiosks which aren't really open at the moment or doing a full service. There was talk at one point about having floating restaurants on some of the rivers which hasn't materialised yet, but I guess it will come in time. It's still evolving. The plan was something like a 30 or 35 year plan when we first got the Games, so they're still working on it. Some of the green areas that we've got in the North end of the Park by Here East, there's still loads and loads of areas there. They say it's all things to all people. You can go and sit by the river and be all on your own there, it's so quiet. Last week, when we went out on the buggy, we took this lady on a ride. When we crossed the A12 over to the Lee Valley Hockey and Tennis Centre, the noise came up, and we hadn't felt any noise up until that point, it was so peaceful. During COVID I'd go over there and just sit and relax, just opposite the London Aquatics Centre by the river and chill. They said it was going to be a Park for everybody and I think that they've come up with that as well. The legacy that they promised, the venues have stayed, the venues are still being used, which is something that you can't say about other Olympic villages. It won't be suitable for another Olympic Games, but we can still have high profile events there in the stadium. There's a bit of a mishmash with the stadium over athletics, football and concerts, but it generally works. You've got to fund it anyway. The football fans don't really like it because they're too far from the action, but I'm not bothered about football! To actually swim in the Olympic pool, I've swum in the pool there many times. I've swum there where someone got gold medals! Also, just little things around the Park areas. I took my niece here who came to stay with me a couple of years ago with her children, and they were absolutely enthralled by that little park that's behind the TFL building which is not quite the Park itself. But you've got all those little gems around the Park, little things that you find that I didn't know about like signposting into the QR things that you can get on your phone. Those codes, I've never tried any of those. No matter, they might be quite enlightening, but it's brought little gems into what was a pretty nasty, dirty part of London. Not forgetting the Great British Garden, the oak tree there as well and the myth behind that. So that's lovely.

Interviewer
Well, thank you very much. Is anything else you would like to add or are you quite happy with what you've said?

Interviewee
I don't think there is really. I've covered my life in Newham. I'm still living here at the moment. My family live elsewhere, so as I get older, do I want to stay here? London has a lot to offer and when you can travel around so easily. One gem about Stratford is the transport. I think there are 10 train lines that come into the station, so you can get here from everywhere. So, I think it's helped the infrastructure in Newham. Before that, the Millennium helped and the Jubilee Line. The Jubilee Line opened the area a lot which also fed into the bid. So, we've got the Olympic Park partly because we've got the Jubilee Line. It's brought a lot to the area and it's good.

Interviewer
Thanks very, very much.