REKINDLE

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WHY MOSS SIDE? WHY REKINDLE?

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Introduction

The narratives surrounding Moss Side to all of those not from this pocket of community in South Manchester rarely speak to the rush of aromas as you walk down Claremont Road flowing from Somali, Jamaican and Pakistani kitchens or the energy that flows from Alexandra Park on Carnival morning. It is more probable that you have heard about Moss Side from people who do not live in the area. You are more likely to see sensational headlines that mirror reporting of active warzones. You will seldom hear about the huge impact this cultural powerhouse of a neighbourhood has had on South Manchester and the world beyond.

At a time when the word ‘community’ has become overused and manipulated by many of those in power, Moss Side serves as a reminder of a special place where community remains strong despite a lack of investment in the people and growing inequality across the city. Moss Side has long been a hub for activism, migration, culture and celebration, but the fast tide of gentrification and the destruction caused by over 10 years of austerity threaten all of this. Moss Side needs investment in its people perhaps

It’s just unique in its demographics. You had the time when it was demonised in the ‘90s with the whole gun culture, but the area is so much more. People are always outside, music is playing loud, there’s just a different vibe and energy here. There is still a sense of community and it’s a demographic of change.

It has always been a working-class area where the outsiders have come to and then out of that creates a real vibrancy. It was multicultural before multiculturalism existed.

Darren Pritchard, teacher, producer and creative
now more than ever. From this understanding, it is clear that Moss Side is the perfect home for the first Rekindle School to build on the knowledge embedded in the social fabric of the area and help young people fall back in love with their education.

Welcome to Moss Side

While Manchester rose out of the industrial revolution to take the world stage through its manufacturing might, Moss Side grew to fame through its bold and diverse cultural identity. The 1800s saw large influxes of Irish people flock to Moss Side. In the aftermath of WWII African and Caribbean people settled in the area, answering Britain’s call to its colonies to support national rebuilding efforts, forming much of the well-known Windrush generation. That time also saw many from the Indian subcontinent migrate to this long-standing working-class expanse two miles south of the city centre. In the 1990s the area welcomed large Somali populations escaping the 1991 Somali Civil War, and since then there have been more recent arrivals from Eastern Europe.

The area has long served as the centre of Manchester’s Caribbean community, hosting the annual Caribbean Carnival since 1971. It is truly a community affair for Manchester and Moss Side is at the centre of it.

As the changing demographics have shaped and made their mark on the area, Moss Side has constantly reacted, resisted and transformed. In the ‘80s, Moss Side grappled with an economic downturn and high unemployment levels. Tensions reached a high in the summer of 1981 when Moss Side erupted into riots against growing racism and abuse of police power. These riots were met with widespread violent suppression at the hands of the authorities, disproportionately directing such violence at the area’s black inhabitants. The fires were further stoked by the sensational reporting of news outlets, fuelling a deep distrust of the media and the authorities in the area, a feeling that remains and has not been aided by the dramatisation of the gang-related activities of a minority of people in and around the area during the ’90s.

To this day the unrelenting obsession with violence in Moss Side continues to facilitate the
Manchester held the fifth Pan African Congress 1945 and all of the Africans that went on to change the world and forge independence and revolutions in Africa came to Manchester because Manchester was popping. Manchester had a reputation for being a central point for black and African intellectuals at that time.

It’s a political and revolutionary history that comes out of Moss Side which of course is a disappeared history, because when you don’t have the institutions to pass those stories on where do those stories go? They disappear with the characters and the communities because we don’t have organisations or buildings that persist over time.

Ikem Nzeribe, artist and entrepreneur

vilification of the community and has enabled robust stereotyping of the area. Such negative labels further cement the lack of opportunities in the area and have suppressed its powerful and positive history of social change.

Prior to its labelling as a ‘bad’ area, Moss Side was known for its deep connections with pan-Africanism. Many will not know the Moss Side that people flocked to, finding themselves in the safe spaces of the Reno which served as a place for black and mixed-raced people to authentically be and have a good time. The pull of the area to many that seek to exist where their identity is not under scrutiny, or seen as a threat, continues to this day.

The area’s history with change and resistance is often reduced to being the birthplace of suffragette Emeline Pankhurst, who had a huge impact on the lives of women across the country. Less known are the changemakers that keep the community going in the face of a fast-encroaching wave of gentrification, which threatens to erase the history and culture of this vibrant neighbourhood.

For many of the area’s residents, such tides of change are not new; change is a regular part of Moss Side life. In recent years, however, the flow of change has increasingly erased the communities that make Moss Side. This erasure is clearly seen in the authorities’ decision to change the area’s ward boundaries in 2018 without consulting local residents. This decision meant the removal of the green and cultural spaces of Whitworth Park and its renowned art gallery from the area impacting the area’s some 20,641 residents1.

Education and young people

It is no secret that our education system in England lacks the flexibility and insight to meet the needs of large swathes of the population,

From an outsider’s perspective, one of the big takeaways for me was that Manchester … as a result of the past 10 years of austerity has seen a culture emerge where youth services in particular are forced to compete against each other, all fighting over the same pot of money.

I think this is really unhealthy.

Charlie Fyfe-Williams, social worker, audio producer and creator of ‘A Moss Side Story’
that includes many young people in Moss Side. The Eurocentric curriculum of schools often falls far short in reflecting the realities of young people and in giving many young people from working-class backgrounds the confidence and critical thinking skills to transform their realities. Youth services have been central in educating and nurturing young people, making sure they are not lost in the gaps. In an area where 47% of children experience poverty, against a national average of 30%, youth services in the area have also been fundamental to providing food.

Moss Side once boasted a huge array of youth centres and services but, as austerity swept across the country over the past ten years leading to funding cuts, they were all but decimated. These services have long been the glue in creating social cohesion in the area, providing an outlet for many young people without access to extracurricular activities. These services also provided a place where the immense talent of the area could be realised and directed towards the future. They represent safe spaces for young people in an environment where limited opportunities and high levels of poverty created the perfect conditions for more destructive paths.

The Government’s decision to move 95% of the youth service funding to the National Citizens Service, a four-week programme that targets young people aged 16–17 over the course of a summer, clearly does not meet the needs of an area like Moss Side. Such a disconnect between central government funding cuts and the realities in places like Moss Side means that young people are being left to fend for themselves – and nobody wins from this. Youth services have the ability to create options and opportunities for young people and presently there is a desperate need in Moss Side to transform this situation.

I started high school in Moss Side in Year 9. I know how people at school can be treated unfairly most of the time just because people have a negative stereotype of people who grow up there. We’re stereotyped as violent and not welcoming and rough or whatever and the media doesn’t help when it comes to that either as they just amplify it. Schools, instead of helping them properly, don’t seem to know how to help them correctly. Putting people in isolation and excluding them from school is not solving the root of the issue.

When you have a school that only cares about results and doesn’t care about you and they don’t invest in proper psychologists for therapy, mental health resources, or things like critical thinking, it means that people can’t access things like leadership positions which is where all the decisions and rules are made in society.

It is an area that has been deprived of opportunities for way too long. It’s crushed too many peoples dreams because the education system is not working for people from areas like Moss Side.

Roukagia Afan, Activist, Rekindle Admin Lead, social justice warrior, law student and aspiring human rights barrister
The solution

We rarely hear of the success stories of Moss Side that engage with its deep history of social change, community and incredible talent. How different would things be if the articles and descriptions of the area were written by people from the area, capturing the spirit of Moss Side, the beauty and the everyday life that colours its streets? What if those residents with deep connections to social action and justice were heard at decision making tables? How different would the funding priorities be in the area? If the experiences of young people were understood and centred in their learning, how different would their relationships be with education? It is clear that solutions to many of the challenges facing Moss Side sit within the community, so why are they not being passed the mic?

Investing in an area is not the same as investing in its people. It is too late once someone is in the criminal justice system or someone is excluded from a school. It all comes down to prioritising needs and it is clear Moss Side needs.

Moss Side needs services, programmes and resources now that adapt to the requirements of the community and intervene early on in a person’s life. Rekindle seeks to be a part of the solution, supporting young people in Moss Side to develop the skills to change their future and fall in love with education.

References

2. End Child Poverty, Local child poverty figures 2017/18, 2019
3. Liam Kay, Government urged to redirect NCS funding to local youth services, Third Sector, 02 August 2018, www.thirdsector.co.uk/government-urged-redirect-ncs-funding-local-youth-services/policy-and-politics/article/1489439
About REKINDLE

Rekindle is a supplementary school for young people aged 13–16 in South Manchester. The school will focus on providing the pastoral care, community support and critical thinking needed to safeguard young people and ensure they have the confidence and networks to soar. It will spark a love of learning and encourage young people to be fierce critical thinkers. It will provide a curriculum to engage the head, heart and soul.

Rekindle will work with students who have not been given the opportunity to fall in love with education in their mainstream schools. Our primary focus is to design an approach that offers care, support, connection, hope and aspiration. That pushes disadvantaged young people to believe they can be more, but first establishes the solid foundations to catch them when they fall (and they will, often). An approach that helps parents who struggled themselves with schooling find a way back in through the gates, into a space they now feel comfortable and valued. An approach that first cares about what young people care about, where adults act as mentors and provide space for safe conversations that calm the raging fears of teenage minds. An approach that is eminently practical. What do young people without resources from struggling homes need? They need food. Good free food. Every night.

There is so much more to Rekindle. This is not a project that has been created because there is the possibility of funding available; this is a partnership with engaged, powerful, passionate young people who deserve better from their education. It’s an attempt to switch the school lights back on and lure them into loving literature, trusting their peers again, visiting industry and seeing that there are careers out there, within their grasp.

Thank you to everyone that helped bring this piece to life and so generously shared their honest insights. Unfortunately, we weren’t able to feature everyone interviewed in the report, but your wisdom was so central to building the case for Moss Side to be the home of the first Rekindle School and the need for more resources, respect and agency for the area.

This report is dedicated to the people of Moss Side, my grandma Miss Violet Kenora Manderson, who used to speedily walk the Moss Side streets with her smile of compassion and love for the area, and lastly to the Manderson family who continue to make Moss Side their home.

Eli Manderson Evans; pictured (left) with Kofi in Alexandra Park

Eli is a campaigner and social change researcher who grew up in the South Manchester areas of Chorlton, Old Trafford and Moss Side
All photographs courtesy of
Eli Manderson Evans