



**Making Things Happen:
Sybil Phoenix in Lewisham, 1985.
Photographs by Geraldine Walsh.**

**23 June – 15 July 2022
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**WE ARE
LEWISHAM**

London Borough
of Culture 2022

Making Things Happen: Sybil Phoenix in Lewisham, 1985. Photographs by Geraldine Walsh.

Exhibition curated and produced by
Lucia Tambini + Woodrow Phoenix.



above

Sybil at MPMT,
celebrating the
birthdays of twin
sisters, Joanne
and Jeanette.

below

Sybil at MPMT,
Christmas with
Friends of Marsha
Phoenix.

WHEN someone has confidence in you and they show love and care – you can feel as if anything is possible – the world becomes a do-able place – it lifts your spirits – it opens your heart to others – and hence creates a better world. That’s why Sybil Phoenix is so important as she has played such an extraordinary role in our community.

I have very fond memories of the MPMT Arts Project. It continued into a further 25 years of my work as a visual arts worker at the Trust with the young women in care. I learnt so much from working with the young women and Mrs. Phoenix. Sybil would literally make things happen. I don’t think I have worked anywhere where my contributions and ideas were so enthusiastically taken onboard. I would have an idea for something and Sybil Phoenix would run with it – she never felt anything was impossible or too much effort – she had such a strong belief that things could happen – and such a strong desire to encourage and help other people to fulfil their dreams – in this way she was unstinting in her support. Sybil’s great skill in communicating with people – her life force – loving countenance and putting people at ease, is her forte.

I first encountered the Trust on applying for a job as an assistant photography worker in 1985. That was where I first met Lucia Tambini who became one of the managers at the project, Leticea Phoenix, who ran the pottery workshops, Mr Joe Phoenix and later the rest of the Phoenix family including Woodrow. I ended up with the job as the Photography worker. My role in the project alongside all the other arts tutors (art/pottery/music/drama/dance) was to document the working of the project and assist in teaching basic photography skills. I went on to run visual arts workshops there too. The project was unusual in that it was an in-house project, occupying the ground floor of the Trust within the communal areas of the house. We also fund-raised in order to have a studio built in the garden for dance, drama & music.

Sybil Phoenix initiated the project – and as well as Sybil, most if not all of the staff lived in Brockley. Brockley became the center of the universe, all under the umbrella of Sybil’s warmth that made working there feel very much like home.

Geraldine Walsh

Geraldine at Kaitour Falls, Guyana.



Sybil outside her house, Brockley.



The Marsha Phoenix Arts Project and me

IT'S 1985, I'm 23, on the dole and wondering what I'm going to do with my life. I look back on that time and it seems like we were living in a different country. Thatcher's Britain, yes – but still a Britain that tried to look after its unemployed people, and through a government funded scheme, I was offered an arts-based job. I couldn't believe it. I was going to help run a community arts centre in Brockley.

But Thatcher wasn't the biggest influence on my life in 1985. That was Sybil Phoenix. She had offered space to run the arts project so around 20 young people spent the year taking photos, making music, filming, and making art (and running the project). It was a wonderful experience for me and really did kickstart my career. Sybil fundraised and took a group of us to Guyana. There I made my first film. I went on to spend the next 20 or so years working in television.

Having the space to develop creatively at the Marsha Phoenix Arts Project was invaluable to me. And that was down to Sybil. She helped and inspired us. She really made us believe that we can 'make it happen' for ourselves.

Lucia Tambini



left

Lucia in Georgetown, Guyana. The man on the right is Buddy Larrier, longtime friend and supporter of Sybil's work.

above right

Sybil at St. Paul's, Deptford. Next to her is her great friend Jim McGoldrick.

below right

Sybil at St. Paul's, Deptford. Behind her at left are Councillor Alan Till, civic mayor of Lewisham 1995-96, and his wife.



A tribute to my friend Sybil Phoenix

WHEN someone has led a well-documented life of public service it is easy to assume that this tells you all you need to know about them, but if you have never met that person their achievements can obscure the human being.

I got to know Sybil many years ago and our paths crossed in different places as we worked for the community we both care about. Sybil has an enormous heart and I was fortunate to become a friend and learn to love this truly remarkable woman.

She is warm, funny, determined and bakes wonderful cakes. She will not tolerate injustice, bureaucratic failure or indifference. She cares – and expects others to care too. She acts on those things that she cares about and expects you to do the same. One Saturday morning in July 2008, Sybil was awarded the OBE and I decided to call in and give her some flowers. Sybil agreed to pose for a picture but only briefly, as there were things she needed to tell me about and celebrating her honour was not the priority! It was never about Sybil but always about what could be done for others.

Yet Sybil always found time to do the things that mattered to individuals – she attended endless events organised by the Mayoress's charity, civic services and even sat through council meetings in her role as freewoman of the Borough. Each year she hosted splendid dinners at Lewisham College – and some unsuspecting person would be singled out to have the full beam of Sybil's warmth and praise directed at them. One year she focused on my wife, Kris Hibbert who was then Mayoress, and Kris was deeply touched by Sybil's love and kindness as so many others have been.

Lewisham is a place many residents have travelled to before making it their home. Sybil journeyed from Georgetown, Guyana while I made a shorter trip from Teesside, but for both of us it is now our home without ever lessening the pride we take in where we began.

Every week residents of Lewisham choose to become British Citizens and a ceremony takes place at Lewisham Town Hall for them. Each time they are welcomed by someone who has been involved in the life of the Borough. Those who heard Sybil do this were lucky. Few people are better placed to tell the story of Lewisham than her, not least because she has, of course, been a huge part of that story herself. She is, simply, an inspiration to all who know her.

A few nights ago, I went to see The Young'uns, a band who come from the same part of England as I do, Teesside, and I bought a CD. Today I played that CD and to my great surprise and pleasure found that they had written a song about Sybil called 'These Hands'. It finished with these words:

**“So, whoever is your neighbour,
link arms and make a stand
And we will face the future
with these hands”**

Lewisham is a better place because of Sybil and I am proud to be able to call her my friend.

Steve Bullock

First directly elected mayor of the London Borough of Lewisham from 2002 to 2018.



Sybil in the council chamber at Lewisham Town Hall.

Steve Bullock presenting Sybil with some flowers on the day her OBE was announced, with Woodrow and Joy behind. Photo by Kris Hibbert.





ALL photographs were taken under the umbrella of the MPMT Arts Project in 1985 and 1986. In 'Making Things Happen' we are very keen to share with the public the diversity of work that the Trust has done over the years.

Every reasonable effort has been made to get permissions to exhibit these photographs. If you have been inadvertently overlooked in this process and for any reason you are not happy with your photograph being on display, we are happy to remove the photograph at your request.

SYBIL PHOENIX MBE, OBE, Freeman of the City of London, Guyanese Medal of Service, Fellow of Goldsmiths College, Former Mayoress of Lewisham, Honorary President of The National Council of Women in Great Britain; these are just some of the vast array of titles, awards and honours that make Sybil Phoenix legendary. They all derive from a long history of social activism that began after Sybil moved with her husband Joe to Lewisham in 1963. In response to the chronic lack of support for black children in the care system, they became foster parents for the borough. Sybil expanded this remit to open a supported housing project for young women, the Marsha Phoenix Memorial Trust (MPMT) named after her daughter who died in a car crash in 1973. The same under provisions for black youth led to Sybil beginning a youth club in New Cross which grew until eventually it became the Pagnell St Centre, the first purpose-built Black community centre in the UK.

Visual artist **Geraldine Walsh** began working with Sybil at the MPMT Arts Project in 1985, teaching photography, sculpture and painting to residents and other local young people. She documented a lot of the activity at MPMT and elsewhere in Sybil's orbit for a decade. This exhibition presents a selection from the vast archive of images that Geraldine has retained. Most of these images have not been seen in 30 years.

