

Gerry German, 1928–2012

'A Sort of Splendid Torch'



Gerry German, who died in early May 2012, had an immense influence on education for race equality in the UK. From the late 1970s to the '90s he was principal education officer at the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), and then over the last 12 years of his life was a passionate and tireless advocate and campaigner on behalf of young people threatened by exclusion from schools. Before joining the CRE he was a headteacher in Wales and the Caribbean. His later work on exclusions was through the organisation which he helped to found, the Communities Education Network, and this work continued till the very last day of his life.

Gerry's colleagues at the CRE included Jane Lane and Horace Lashley. He and they inspired, supported and assisted teachers, lecturers and education officers throughout the country with their reports, resources, projects and conferences, and with personal advice and friendship. Amongst many other activities, they provided invaluable assistance and encouragement for the development of the national association for multiracial education (NAME, later the national antiracist movement in education), the working group against racism in children's resources, and the association of local authority and officers and advisers for multicultural education (ALOAME).

Gerry's assistance for young people threatened by exclusion was both direct and indirect. Directly he met with hundreds of young people and their families every year and personally accompanied them to hearings and meetings of various kinds, speaking for them, encouraging them and advising them. He influenced thousands of others through the training and coaching which he provided. He deplored the punitive assumptions and procedures of many schools, and believed passionately in due process and fair procedures, and in the importance of student voice. Further, he believed forcefully that the troubled and troubling behaviour of certain young people in schools is mostly caused by the ways schools are organised and run, and by teachers' attitudes, outlooks and perceptions. At the same time he levelled with young people themselves, and helped them develop resilience, self-knowledge and patience, and assurance of their own worth.

Gerry was a fluent and convincing speaker on public platforms and in committees, and from the floor in interventions and submissions at various conferences. To those of us who knew him, he was an unforgettable extravert, endlessly cheerful and good-humoured even when (as was, however, often the case) indignant and furious about the follies of officialdom and the cruelties of institutional racism. The tribute to him by Adi Bloom in the Times Educational Supplement recalled he was sometimes described by headteachers and other senior teachers as 'a rottweiler dressed as a labrador – 'he seemed placid, but if you got on the wrong side of him he had a hell of a bite'.

He was widely known also for his wonderful singing voice, which he employed to great effect throughout his life. One of his signature performances was *The Song of the Banana Man*, celebrating the dignity and worth of people marginalised and oppressed by hierarchical divisions of labour.

At the funeral in May at an Anglo-Catholic church in Notting Hill, led by Gus John, there were Bob Marley songs, Hindu prayers and reflections, the great Christian hymn *Cwm Rhondda*, psalms from the Jewish scriptures, a poem about anti-slavery, a humanist reading from the works of George Bernard Shaw, the Welsh national anthem, and many warm and affectionate tributes from friends, comrades and family members.

On Facebook, tributes from former colleagues included

'Gerry was my boss for a few glorious years – a long time ago, but he was unforgettable: a gentle anarchist, what more could you want from a boss? Go in peace, Gerry!'

And from a former pupil there was this:

'So glad to have met up with you last year for lunch in London and talk about the time you spent as my headteacher. You left a legacy that many of us ex-pupils will remember forever. When I entered my own teaching career you were my inspiration. It is so rare in life to meet a truly great man.'

'This is the true joy in life,' wrote George Bernard Shaw, quoted by Gerry's son Deuan at the funeral, 'being used for a purpose recognised by yourself as a mighty one; and being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.'

Shaw continued:

'My life belongs to the whole community and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it what I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake.

'Life is no brief candle to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.'

Deuan added: 'That's my dad.'

Many people have reason to mourn Gerry's passing. His influence and inspiration, however, will continue for many years to come.

Source: tribute by Robin Richardson in *Race Equality Teaching*, autumn 2012



Later note (added in August 2024): on 3 May 2021 someone wrote these words on Gerry's facebook page:

'Gerry German – son, brother, husband, father, uncle, grandfather, great-grandfather, friend, colleague, mentor and inspiration died on this day in 2012!. However, his legend and huge personality live on in the hearts and memories of the many who knew him.

'Let us all do a "Gerry" today! Whilst about your business, say hello to all those you pass, give them a smile and wish them well! And whilst you're out spreading the good vibes, consider what actions you can take today, this week, this month, this year and this lifetime, to do good in your community! It doesn't take much, just courage! 'Be a lion like Gerry, go about your business with determination that everyone deserves to be heard, and everyone deserves a chance!

'Enjoy your special Gerry day!'

(<https://www.facebook.com/gerrythelegend/>, last accessed 8 August 2024)