

SPECIAL GUEST



KAREN MULLINGS

NSS: Greetings Karen thanks for taking time out to be interviewed by PANTHER NEWSLETTER. Please tell the readers a little about yourself.

KM: I'm a Brummie, I was born in Birmingham. I've lived here most of my life. I also lived in London for seven years and came back to Birmingham. I have two children. I've been a counsellor for 12 years.

NSS: What prompted you to take up counselling as your vocation?

KM: It was my calling. I think I've always been a counsellor in the respect of people always wanting to talk to me. Even when I was growing up, for some reason, people would tell me their story. Whether they were my best friends or people I didn't know that well. It came apparent throughout my early adult life.

I used to do a lot of temping work for a day, a couple of weeks, or a few months, and, for some reason, people would still tell me their story. They would say: "*you look like someone I can trust.*" So there was something there. Once I had had my children I wanted to retrain. My early education wasn't brilliant, I wasn't encouraged at school, but I decided there was more to my life, I wasn't fulfilling my purpose and there was something more I wanted to do. One day I was looking for something in the Yellow Pages and I saw an advert for a counselling youth

agency. I dialled the number, had a chat with them; they said they were having an open day that I could attend. I had no experience of counselling, but I went along to the open day and then attended their recruitment day. I was accepted on their training course. After doing the training course I was accepted as a counsellor. I was a volunteer counsellor for young people for about four years, and then I decided I wanted to go on and get a qualification.

NSS: How long did it take you to be trained as a counsellor?

KM: All in all I'm always training, but in terms of getting qualifications, I was training with Open Door Youth Counselling, that qualified me to get a certificate; then a two year diploma. From there I went on and gained a certificate in couples counselling. I've done lots of other training, part of my continuing professional development. I'm also a trainer as well, so it's an on-going process.

NSS: What area of counselling do you specialise in and why?

KM: I specialise working very much with the whole person. We have problems in all areas of life. I remembered my years of growing up at school, sometimes not knowing when you have a difficulty and feeling that maybe there isn't anybody to turn to, or they won't understand. So I had this special feeling to initially work with young people. Working with them for many years, I realised the problems they were often experiencing was in their home around adults.

That then motivated me and spurred me on to want to work with adults, particularly couples and relationships and also to train in family counselling. We see the family, young people and couples as part of a system, in terms of our relationships if we look at our families we grow up in, that's part of a system as well. We bring all that into a relationship and its how we communicate with each other, based on our own experiences of growing up. So it's a broad arena. People may come stressed, have depression, anxiety, they may just want to develop themselves, you know, walk along a path of personal development. It may be young people being bullied at school, low self esteem, anger issues, bereavement, loss, really across the spectrum. It's looking at the person as a whole, even if they come with one issue. If you think of a puzzle, there's gonna be lots of other things where that stems from. So I work in a very holistic way. By that I mean looking at the mind, body, spirit and environment. If we look at just the emotional impact, we're missing the other aspects of what helps us in terms of our own development. Emotionally we set things straight, but in terms of our spirit, we're not meeting our purpose, we're not feeling fulfilled in life. If our relationships are not working, if our environment is not in a place we feel relaxed and safe in, then it undermines the work you do emotionally. We're whole, we're not one dimensional.

NSS: Have you undergone counselling yourself?

KM: Yes, I have undergone my own therapy, I'm pleased to say. I think it's an integral part of any counsellor. Depending on the courses you go on. Once upon a time, it was essential that training counsellors had to undergo their own therapy. I don't think it says you must do that, but I would say actually it is essential because for me to ask someone to open up and trust me with their personal stuff and intimate details of their lives, I need to know what that feels like. So, for me to ask someone to do something I'm not willing to do it lacks integrity and also I understand the challenges of taking a journey within. You know, the hardest journey we take is the journey within. We take the bits of ourselves we want to keep hidden which we don't want anyone to know about and that can be scary. I know what that's like, and I feel I'm in the best place to support someone through that because I know the challenges it brings with it. I know what it is to be a client, so to me, I feel that is a really important part of my journey. The other side of that is if I haven't dealt with my issues and the things that limit me and keep me stuck – when someone comes with a similar issue I don't feel I'll be able to help them through that, because if I'm blocked off to my own emotion and someone comes with that issue, I'm going to be blocked and I'm not going to be able to help them through. So it's absolutely essential to undergo counselling yourself. The best therapists are the ones who have looked at themselves in the mirror and put themselves under that scrutiny, and opened themselves up. So yes, it's essential.

NSS: **What are the highs and lows in a typical day of seeing a client?**

KM: You know something I thought about that question and I can't say that there are any lows. I think the high is that someone trusts me enough to be vulnerable in front of me and they feel safe to do that. So to me, I just see it as a privilege and I don't really see it in terms of highs and lows. I just see it's someone who wanted to take that journey and trusting me enough to be the one to help them and to sit alongside them on their journey – So I don't really have any lows, I see it as a privilege.

NSS: **Do you make a report of your client's progress?**

KM: I don't make a report about my client's progress, but they do. Not in terms of a written report, but in terms verbally of progress of their journey and the challenges they're facing. They will always report to me how they're doing. They may feel that they've gone so far, something then happens and they feel "*oh my God, I've undone all this work*". My job is to look at it in perspective. The reality is, we haven't undone what we've done, we've just faced a new challenge and each challenge we face is there to teach us something. My clients are the experts on themselves. They will look to me to be the one to answer how well do I think they're doing. I always give it back to them. I tell them "*you're the expert on you – you tell me how well you think you are doing. You are the one that knows.*" I'm not there to tell them you are doing great, because they're handing their power over to me. My role is to actually empower them and for

them to recognise their growth and whatever challenges are and how we can overcome them.

NSS: When does a client decide when their counselling is over?

KM: Sometimes they don't want it to end. It doesn't mean that when one walks away, there won't be any obstacles. Actually that's probably when you'll find there are going to be lots of obstacles. I always liken it to a driving test. When you pass your driving test that's when you learn to drive. When you're out there on your own, you're doing it. As I said they are the experts on themselves and the way I work is very holistic. The mind, body and spirit and part of the journey is looking at lifestyle. We discuss it as we're journeying along together. Once we've come to the lifestyle phase in terms of diet, exercise, how one supplements their body, their mind, their affirmations, we have to get all of those things in place. That's what keeps them going; it's certainly what keeps me going, because there are always challenges and obstacles. That's the journey of life. So once we've got to that lifestyle phase and the person seeing me has those things in place, what keeps them going, that's kind of how they know. The idea is that they don't come back again, so hopefully they can sustain what it is they've done on their journey to move on to the things that have limited them in the past.

NSS: Do you think black people have an issue with speaking honestly about emotional issues?

KM: I say people have an issue speaking honestly about issues. It's not just a black thing. Yes that is a cultural thing, it's also prevalent in other cultures. So I'm not going to say it's just a black thing. It can be your family. What were the messages in your family? Certainly the messages culturally for black people are – you don't bring your business out on road. What happens indoors stays indoors. It very much stems from our fore parents and parents. If they had any problems we wouldn't be aware of it because everything was kept hush, hush. You kept your mouth closed. When we were growing up, we would chat with our friends and we realised actually what was happening in our house may not be dissimilar to the majority of homes. I think more and more black people are opening up because they want to have fulfilled lives and they recognise that whether it's in their relationships and they keep getting it wrong, they want to make that change. So I think more and more people, whether they're black, Asian or white want to make that change. Yet black males don't open up. They don't speak about issues, they keep it hidden. People have this misconception of what good is talking about it going to do? Let sleeping dogs lie. Nonsense! Until they actually have that experience, people generally underestimate the power of being heard. It's very, very powerful. Unless you've experienced being heard on a very deep emotional level, that's when they start to change. With any change, there's always going to be resistance.

I understand where they're coming from. Often I would ask them; "*whose belief is this?*" Often we are carrying beliefs from family, parents, culturally, and we just take it on board with us; but when we really open up and say why do we believe that the answer is, "*bwoy, I really don't know 'cos that's how its always been.*" and then again the answer might be, well, what good would it do to talk about it. What's the point? I say, don't knock it until you've tried it. So again it's just questioning where the beliefs came from.

NSS: Do you find that you may judge someone as they walk through the door?

KM: We all make judgements. We make a judgement about a person within 30 seconds whether we're aware of it or not. We all make snap judgements. The way I look at judgement is if we're judging others we'll make a snap decision but are we then willing to hold onto that or open up to actually find out who is this person? If we judge ourselves harshly then it only stands to reason that we're going to judge others. So I work very hard at not being judgemental of myself or being critical. I'd rather be affirming myself and seeing myself in a very positive light. That's how I see people. Yes, we make a judgement about someone's appearance, but actually it doesn't get in the way of who this person is. Once they start to tell their story that's what I'm really interested in. Our appearance will say something about us, how we dress, all of those things says something about us. When we don't know someone we make those judgements or assumptions about them. I don't see that as a negative thing, that's just human nature, and I'm not making a judgement and being critical of a person or holding onto that. It's kind of a snap shot. I can put that to one side and find out who they really are.

NSS: What other work did you do before becoming a counsellor?

KM: Previous to me coming into counselling, I was a story teller. So I guess I'm going in reverse really. I used to help run an arts company in Aston, Birmingham. I told stories to children. Firstly to children in nursery schools, then primary schools, junior schools and secondary schools. I'd tell stories by dressing up in costumes, bringing a bit of African and Caribbean culture into schools and promote cultural awareness through music, singing and stories. I absolutely loved it. That was me expressing my creativity. It was something within me that I didn't even realise was there. I had the privilege of travelling up and down the country, visiting lots of schools, meeting lots of children and leaving them with something. We would often go back a year later especially with the early years and find they remembered songs I taught them, or a story, like the Anansi stories, so I left something with them.

Prior to my storytelling I worked in administration in various offices, I worked in accounts and could type, things that I never really enjoyed. I realised that they were a preparation for me to have those skills for when I started working for myself so they helped me. I know my way round a keyboard, and understand

accounting and finance. So I was finding my way, it was all part of my preparation.

NSS: Outside of writing, what other interests and hobbies do you have?

KM: Music! I absolutely love my music. I'm very passionate about it, always have been and always will be. I love the arts, storytelling. I love dance and the theatre. Some of the things I've come to love is ballet, maybe since I had my children, I just love going to the ballet. So any art form, whether visual, creative arts, photography just anything that's about people expressing themselves, I see that as being very therapeutic and a way of communicating also. I love reading and sitting quietly to mediate and be still. I enjoy walking and yoga. I'm going to be doing my teacher training for yoga. Yoga is a very big part of my life.

NSS: Finally, is there anything else you would like to add in respect of advice uplifting and encouragement for the readers?

KM: Be true to yourself, whatever challenges life throws at us, it's there for us to not run from our problems but to face them head on. Otherwise we'll spend our lives running. Running can be seen in many guises, we find ways to avoid. So whether it's drinking, gambling, drugs, spending or food, it's avoiding something and to be free from those things. If we just face it, it frees up our space. The time we spend running we could be doing something more productive. The only thing to fear is fear itself. I think one of the timeless truths is the only mistake we ever make is not learning from our mistakes. So the challenges that life throws at us is really there to teach us something. If we can grab hold of that lesson it's a blessing. If we're in the midst of a trauma, a drama or a crisis, sometimes it's hard to see the jewel of benefit in that situation. If you stand back from it, you will see there is something very precious even in the midst of the heartache. Something comes out of it and it's looking for that when we can find that it helps us to move on, and it keeps us going.

NSS: Well Karen, thank you very much for taking time out and being interviewed for this issue of Panther Newsletter. May our Creator guide you and protect you in all your future endeavours.

KM: Satnam and thank you so much. It's been a pleasure you inviting me to be your special guest for the month.

Do you want to know more about Karen and her work and would you like to get in touch with her? Then read this excerpt and get her contact details below....

KAREN MULLINGS

Karen is someone who has understood from the beginning that a practitioner is only ever as good as the work they have done on themselves. And so she has

spent many years not simply acquiring the academic credentials necessary to work therapeutically, but she has also undergone her own personal growth process and continues to do so. We believe this is what makes her so effective at what she does. She has, for many years, worked closely with Reach and through her practice (Reflect), done some wonderful work with individuals, couples and groups. Hence we are more than happy to endorse her work...

My name is Karen Mullings and I am the lead practitioner at Reflect Counselling and Personal Empowerment Services. I am an experienced counsellor, supervisor, trainer and group facilitator. I specialize in working with individuals, couples, adults, children and young people, and I have been working in this field for ten years. I deliver a variety of innovative and creative workshops to both the public and private sectors. My workshops include: parenting skills, life coaching, self-esteem, managing conflict, stress management, first relationships and parent mentoring. I believe in an integrative approach, encompassing mind, body and spirit; this is at the core of my training and is what informs my practice. I welcome self-referrals as well as referrals from employees and other organizations. For further information you can contact me on **07854 955 501** and email: reflectcounselling@yahoo.co.uk

<http://www.thereachapproach.co.uk/>

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