THIS WAS
TOMORROW

MARIA SANTOS

Long-time resident at LILAC

In conversation with Enrico Policardo
LILAC, Leeds
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Edited from the recorded conversation.

01 Who are you, and where are we?

My name is Maria. I live in LILAC. It's a co-housing project in Leeds - you've spoken with people from LILAC, so you know what it is. It's a nice eco kind of oasis, as people say. We have these massive, strange houses made of straw bales, with the intention of leaving a small footprint on the world. We share lots of passions and enthusiasms about how we'd like to live, and the world we'd like for us and for our kids and for everybody else. We're a gang of mad people who live together and get together every so often. LILAC is a gathering of people who believe they can change the world - but they start from their own houses first.

02 Have you been here from the beginning?

From the beginning. I came across it when they were thinking of buying the land. They already had the design and were negotiating with the council. I joined just before the land was bought.

03 Did you know people before?

No. Life is really interesting. I had a small child and I was expecting my second. We'd come to England, studied, settled, and we were at that point in life of looking for a place to live. I'm Portuguese - I don't have family here. With a child, I realised I was less social, because I had this kid to look after. So when we were looking for a house, I wanted a place where you feel at home but also know your neighbours - a nice atmosphere, where the kids are safe and can learn and experience things with other people. Friends, neighbours.

And it just happened. I was going to buy some milk on a Sunday, it was raining, and we passed a park where there were some puppets, and my child wanted to see. There was a stand with straws - drinking straws, and straw

bales - and I thought, probably an activity for the kids. That's when I came across LILAC, and I totally fell in love. I remember saying: this is what I'm looking for. This is what I want. A place where kids could play in the street and feel safe, a bit of land - because of my origins - and a community spirit.

The following weekend I went to a birthday party of one of the members, and that was it. It was really quick. I was at the end of my pregnancy, and I had to decide before the baby was born, because once the baby's born you're busy. So I just followed my heart. Some people said, you're totally mad, you don't even have the land, this could take ages. And I thought, well, let's try. And I don't regret it. Not a bit.

04 What makes this place special for you?

To be honest, the community spirit. Belonging to something, being part of something, with that safety net, the family. When I moved, I wanted an eco-friendly community where we could live a better life, with less pollution. But the main reason was community. I was feeling quite lonely. With a child you're cut off from all your social networks. I was still working, but you don't go out in the evening like before kids. I really felt the lack of friendship and community and sharing.

The process of joining is that you meet everybody, and you have to be happy with them and they have to be happy with you. So there's a connection straight away. And I could let the kids run free and feel safe. They had an English grandmother, people who looked after them, friends. I'm not saying we're all friends, but it's a kind of family. You have the mad uncle. You have the grandmother who knows everything and wants to know everything. You have the cool auntie all the teenagers like. That's the feeling of belonging - the continuation of a family. That's one of our values, and it's important to

me. And I like the diversity: the kids being in contact with old people and different generations, different views, religions and sexual orientations. That's a gift for them, and for us.

05 What's your background?

Social work and arts. In Portugal I worked as a "social animation technician", which doesn't exist in England - I think it's what you'd call an activity coordinator. Working with the dynamics of groups, mainly groups with social issues, with kids but not only kids. In parallel I did theatre, and props and construction. When I came to England I studied entertainment design in Cleveland, near Newcastle, and worked as a prop maker for a while. I came to Leeds because it was cheaper to live, and York and Manchester were where the prop-making work was.

I soon realised I couldn't keep that job if I wanted kids. I finished my degree in my thirties, and it's freelance, all deadlines - you start at seven and finish when it's done, maybe all night. That's fine when nobody depends on you, but not with kids. So I worked as a community artist, and then with autistic people, in pottery. With Covid I couldn't stay at home, so I joined the NHS, and I've stayed since. Pottery workshops are something I want to develop, but they're on standby. […] So that's my background: arts and health care.

06 How does living in the UK compare with back home?

The difference is that here there's also social control - we know about each other's lives - but we respect it. At LILAC there's more communication. One thing we've learned is that we all have to live together, and the way to do that happily is to communicate. In Portugal, if my neighbours saw me, it was more negative - they didn't build anything with it, it wasn't "there's a problem, let's solve it". They made up stories.

I left Portugal quite young. I was a young adult, quite rebellious, and I didn't care. I learned that if I wanted to live my life, I had to do what I wanted and not expect everyone to accept it. I was in theatre, I dressed in a strange way - strange to them, comfortable for me. […] In Portugal they always comment. Kids are awful - they call you four-eyes, horse-face, anything. But what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. So it didn't really matter to me what other people said. And I had a community: I've always built communities around me, friends I trust and who trust me, and we look after each other.

When I came to England, I found the rules of friendship really different. In Portugal they tell you what time a party starts, but it's just an idea - and there's no time it finishes. The first time I went to a party in England, it said three till six. I got there at half past five and it finished at six. I was like, what? My mum always said, in Portugal the doors were always open. There's always space at the table for another one - if four eat, five eat. And cooking is one of the ways we show love. Here you have to ring first, and finger food - I was never used to that. It isn't done with passion. You just have to learn, and find your gang. So it was strange going from one extreme, where they want to know everything about you, to a place where people don't want to connect. But I like to feel part of something, to look after people and have people look after me.

07 What's hard about being here?

More the admin side. We probably have too many meetings, and sometimes very strong visions. I won't give details, but I'll give you the idea: the chickens. The chickens were a massive conversation. Some people really wanted chickens, others didn't. It's never about caring for people - it's about what we'd like to change. That can be very frustrating. Imagine in your own home: your partner wants to paint the walls, and you don't want to spend the money on that, you want a coffee table. It's that kind of conversation, and it can take a long time. We had three bike sheds and wanted a fourth, and it

took ages: first we all had to decide we wanted a bike shed, then where it would go, then the budget. It can be very draining. It just consumes lots of energy.

08 Have you changed since you moved in?

We all change, my goodness. I haven't analysed it. Probably tolerance - being with other people, and feeling protected and loved. You're inside your own life, so you don't notice. The vision of community is really strong in me, and I want to keep it. Even thinking about going back to Portugal, I'd like a house with all my old friends. If I have to go into a care home, I don't want to be with strangers - I want to be with my people. And probably the individualism outside these walls - I don't have it. I believe we could all come together and help and support each other. That's what happens here in everyday life. We're like a walking stick: if you need someone to hold you up, it's there. So it's made me more aware, more considerate, more loving and caring.

09 Is this the future you were dreaming of?

Totally. I think that should be the future for everybody - what we used to have: communities that look after each other. In Portugal - I don't come from a village, but my children's father did - all the farm work, making the wine, bringing in the harvest, was done together. That was the only way they survived. And studies say our mental health is much better if we're surrounded by mad people like us! I'm joking. But yes, this is the future: community-oriented, looking after each other, aware of where you are in the world, and respecting it. People are job-oriented or career-oriented, building an estate. This is my vision.

10 Why aren't more people doing this?

I think it's fear. The idea that we don't trust each other. One thing I've learned here is to ask for help. I found it really difficult, because I always thought I could do it myself - if I can't do it on my own, who can? And that's wrong. And I thought, if I ask, I'll owe something back. It's not that. Asking for help gives someone the chance to do something that will make them feel good. It's a simple example, but if someone's drowning, the person who saves them is going to feel good about it. So I think it's the fear of connecting, of asking for help. Because people can hurt you. They can disappoint you.

11 How did we get here?

Individualism. We have a word that didn't exist thirty years ago: selfie. That's the reflection of a world where your phone decides what you want. I used to go to YouTube and choose what I wanted to watch; now I scroll Instagram and someone else decides. It creates an individualistic world where everyone's in their bubble, connected but not exchanging ideas. We're not a force - we're just small, separate bubbles instead of coming together to create something we all want. And you watch the news and it's always something bad, so you don't trust anybody. You don't trust your neighbours.

12 What would you tell someone who wants to start something like LILAC?

If you believe in it, just go for it. You grow up with the project. Find the right gang - people who share your vision, with the same intention and the same energy. You're not going to change people; people change if they want to. Lots of people are interested in this kind of community, and you can see it growing. So find your community, your gang, and open up and talk about your dreams and your visions. People will be attracted to that. That's what

happened here. This project started with the idea of two or three friends who'd finished university, and it slowly grew. If you're persistent, you'll get there. Don't quit, if it's really what you want.

13 What makes you happy?

Blue sky, a smile and a hug. A coffee and a shot. And seeing plants grow - from a seed, a pumpkin, or three pumpkins. I think that's so magical. Such a gift, such a positive energy. Just watching a plant grow is one of the best gifts God, or the universe, or Mother Nature, and the trees give you.

14 Anything else you'd like to say to people?

Just trust each other. Follow your heart. Live your life - if that's in front of a screen, go for it. If it's connecting with other people and creating what you believe in, go for it. Life isn't just money. At the end of life, we die. So it's best to leave good memories. Change people's lives with a positive vibe, instead of just building structures. Money shouldn't rule the world - though I'll say, we do need money to live in these houses!

This Was Tomorrow – Is This the Future We Were Dreaming Of?
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