

Oxford Interviews

Interview: Simphiwe Laura Stewart

Simphiwe Laura Stewart holds a Masters Degree in Environmental Law and Energy Law. She is currently reading for a DPhil in Human Geography at Linacre College, Oxford, where she is an Eldred Scholar, Civil Society Scholar and Oppenheimer Memorial Trust Scholar. She is also a mother and co-convenor of Rhodes Must Fall, Oxford and Antiracism Kidz.

Please tell me about yourself and your work?

My name is Simphiwe Laura Stewart, I was born and raised in Eswatini, formerly the Kingdom of Swaziland. I went to school in South Africa for several years for high school, undergraduate, then completed my masters in the United States and worked for several years in a federal environmental protection agency. I left my job to start a Ph.D. at the University of Oxford, where I am in the Department of Geography and the Environment. I study populism, specifically protest as an ideological vehicle. I have a three year old son named Judah and I live in Oxford. I am also a convenor of the Rhodes Must Fall Oxford movement.

How long have you been in Oxford and what is your relationship to this city?

I moved to Oxford in 2018, somewhat discretely or unique to most students in Oxford, my relationship to Oxford isn't just a space for my academic development because I have a child. My son goes to school here, I recreate here, I consider myself part of the community outside just the academic community and the city center.

What has being in Oxford during the pandemic been like?

Initially, it was a distancing and isolating experience, especially when the pandemic was first announced by the World Health Organization. Like many people I felt because I was far from home with a small child that it was quite a crisis, I definitely went through a period of panic and it was definitely an existential crisis for the first month of the pandemic. Then, in the wake of the antiracism protests and the rise of this new movement in the black lives matter movement and the decolonial and anti-oppression work of organizations like Rhodes Must Fall, it [the pandemic] became a community-building experience in the way that the absence of a pandemic does not facilitate. So initially, it was an essential crisis but in the wake of the civil rights movement of our lifetimes, it has been a great conscious raising period for me, a great community-building experience for me and a project in many ways becoming reconnected with myself and my community.

As you know, this project explores workers, wellbeing and care infrastructures. What does wellbeing mean to you?

If I take my conception of wellbeing from my cultural socialization, so in terms of my perspective as an African and as a woman and a mum, wellbeing starts for me with Ubuntu which I suppose is a term you might be familiar with. Ubuntu means I am because we are. Wellbeing for me involves looking inside of myself and having a moment of introspection and pause to think about where I am at, to get back in touch with my emotional and mental self. So wellbeing I think is a moment of pause. I think often that wellbeing is reconnecting with others, so that their moment of pause is going as well as yours. I realize that sounds a

little abstract but essentially wellbeing is a sense of internal peace and a sharing of that peace with others around you.

How have you supported your wellbeing during this time?

I was going through an initial stage of panic because of the global health crisis, and I was worried about my and my son's health. So initially wellbeing for me was protecting my mental and emotional space so my son and I self-isolated from March 2020 - June 2020 and mostly stayed at home. Interestingly, I came to realize that I was having a substantive and fundamental shift in my internal sense of understanding of what wellbeing was. So the interesting thing that the capitalist world and white supremacist and institutionally racist world does to us as individuals, is that it actually switches off our internal barometer, it switches off our capacity to be in touch with ourselves, to think deeply about what is happening inside of us and outside of us because we are distracted and are consuming working, buying, traveling and producing. So you don't have time to really think about what has happened spiritually, mentally and emotionally. So once I realised that my connection to wellbeing had started to become framed by producing and my capacity to produce and so my capacity to consume, this then allowed me to take a step back and really think about what wellbeing means to me.

I think for me, wellbeing means honouring my body, honouring my mind so showing up for my mind, practicing meditation and prayer. I am Christian so this moment has allowed a lot of time for quiet prayer. I realize that wellbeing for me is taking care of my child, connecting emotionally and substantially with my child through activity and conversation and really having conversations with the people that I care about. This is not something that we have time, opportunity or incentive to do in this very capitalist and production driven world that we live in.

And have you taken part in any cultural practices or celebrations with others during the pandemic?

I think it depends on what your conceptualization of cultural practise is. The pandemic has given me an opportunity to fully join, experience, and participate in the culture of protest and the culture of disruption and dissent that frames blackness, the black experience, the black African female experience. So I have participated in that culture and in the culture of African humanism, in the sense that I have gone outside of myself to connect meaningfully and substantively with new people. I have engaged perhaps in an anti-culture, an anti-predominant culture and tradition. I have come to realize that even our conceptions of what it means to practise culture and tradition is very much framed in othering frameworks. In frameworks that reproduce colonialist and white-supremacist notions of even what it means to be African. So this idea that there is a way to be fundamentally African manner of being or expressing culture can be quite isolating and othering. So at the moment, I choose to express my culture and tradition in terms of what we would really call African humanness and an anti-cultural dissent.

There is this concept that a South African writer, Herbet Isaac Dhalmo talks about. He talks about spiritual striving and counteracting the first exile. So if we consider that the objective of colonialism is to separate the colonized from their systems of knowledge and their ways of understanding the world, then colonialism is successful when I am exiled from myself and I am exiled from other people and the unassimilated majority. And the unassimilated majority tend to be people whose cultural practises do not fit into our very westernized and structured framework of what it means to be part of the community. So my cultural tradition this

summer has involved [Dhalmo's concept of] counteracting the first exile, by broadening my sense of community and broadening my sense of what it means to be in community with other people and counteracting what I see as a divisive and elitist conception of what community, culture and tradition looks like. I hope that answers your question.

Returning to Oxford itself, are there any places or groups in the city that have helped your wellbeing?

I live in University-owned accommodation that borders a very affluent part of Iffley Village and a part of Oxfordshire that has the highest concentration of council houses, so we are really the greenbelt between Iffley Village and Rose Hill. Initially, when we moved I lamented at how far outside of the city it is, but we live in a very well maintained property. So I have been very lucky that even during self-isolation, my son and I have had a really big garden, direct access to the waterfront, and walking routes. So that has been a huge mental and emotional health support. Being able to go outside and being able to enjoy the sunlight without worrying about getting ill, being able to eat outside with my son, we spend time eating outside, we spend time reading outside.

The air out here is really clean and the green space for me has been huge. I am an environmentalist and an environmental lawyer by training so green space has always been so important to me but I do not think I fully appreciated it. As policy practitioners, we talk about the benefits of green space and access to it, but for the first time [during this pandemic] as an individual, I really came to appreciate how access and proximity to green space is a huge help to mental and emotional health.

Has access to green space differed for anybody in your life or extended community in Swaziland or South Africa?

Yes, I would say most Black South Africans and most black people, do not have access to recreational space. If I think about my own grandmother in Swaziland who lives in a relatively large piece of land in rural Swaziland, some 11 hectares. That land is in the way of most agrarian or pastoralist communities. That land is the land that we live on, there is a working farm and subsistence farm, and there is space, but there is not necessarily a space that is meant for recreation per say. A lot of the land surrounding it is increasingly sequestered by corporate farming, there is a sugar plantation adjacent to it, the river that runs on it, during my childhood which we were able to swim and drink from has since been restricted by the sugar cane farm. There is sort of a canal that was constructed to divert water from the open riverway into a private canal. It is privatized so the plantation and company hire private security so that the community can't drink from or collect water from that well.

So generally, that experience with my grandmother and my cousins that live with inaccess to recreational space is a story that repeats itself across black or oppressed communities. And because of the inherent value of recreational green space, which our society or white supremacist society is aware of, they employ the same sense of ownership and securitization of that space as they do every other asset to wellbeing. So definitely many members of my community and extended community do not have the same green space.

Returning to life during the pandemic, has the economic impact of the pandemic changed the way you look after other people or yourself?

Most of the work that I do was just shifted online during the pandemic. I have managed to stay employed and economically afloat, so I don't think I have been majorly economically impacted. I think the fact that I am a student who works within a constructed budget around

this reality has made it easier to bear the potential economic impact of the pandemic. Perhaps I will begin to feel the pinch a little bit more if things begin to close, if there are more closures or if it becomes implausible or impossible to do remote research work. I think being a member of the academy has somewhat insulated me from the economic impacts. The knowledge production machine has continued to work in the pandemic, I am sure you know as well that the pandemic has opened new opportunities for research and new ways of working in the digital and remote spaces.

I think one of the main impacts of the pandemic has been the rates of cash transfers between developed countries and developing countries. So in the midst of shutdowns and other economic strictures, I have definitely had to support others financially and so that has certainly been a way to express care. Usually, help would mean going to their help and checking in but in the absence of physical connection, being able to use digital communication and cash transfers really to express care has been careful. So using digital space to send food, flowers and to express care in nonphysical ways has been the economic impact.

How else has the digital supported care infrastructures during the pandemic?

So the digital is one of the most salient things that has come up in terms of expressing forms of care during the pandemic. On one hand, the occupation of our screens with violence and the penetration of violence through the digital has been a huge facilitator to the consciousness-raising project of the world. For the first time in a long time, everybody was at home, everybody was somewhat attached to the digital space and it really became a forum for community making which I hope somebody will do research on. I think the convening power of the digital space has shown itself now more than it ever has, whether it is through the penetration of our screens with violence and how that has raised the consciousness of antiblack racism and depression in general. And on the other hand, how it has been a galvanizing and community-making tool, so that expressions of care and expressions of what would otherwise be physical manifestations of care have shifted online in an almost seamless fashion. This has really been remarkable to me and I suppose I began to start thinking about this in the context of Rhodes Must Fall. There is a picture of me, where I have the mic in one hand, my phone in the other, a black power fist and there are a bunch of cameras. I think that represents how much our phones [were crucial] to organizing the [Rhodes Must Fall] protests in July.

That was the largest protest in living memory in Oxford, so the fact that we have been able to leverage the digital space in such a transformative manner to build community and create community. I know many people watched from across the world who felt a part of it and that carried on throughout the Freedom Summer period [Rhodes Must Fall Summer organizing festival] and it is certainly one of the most remarkable impacts of the pandemic and of course an illustration of how the sentiment of care and community can be expressed in times like this.

You mention Rhodes Must Fall. What has organising amidst a pandemic involved and what challenges have you experienced?

As a brief introduction for your reference and your writing up. Rhodes Must Fall is a group of Oxford Graduate students, alumni and community organizers who are committed to decolonizing the space, the academy and Oxford University. One of our primary ways of doing that is by contesting the ubiquitousness of colonial iconography at Oxford and the othering of non-western epistemic traditions in the academy and that includes the

disproportionately non-Indigenous and non-Black staff at the university and how their writing is reflected in the curriculum. So that is Rhodes Must Fall. How have we organized in the midst of the pandemic? The two salient things that I will say is that the pandemic offered a moment of reflection and pause for many people who perhaps did not have this time. So it became a crucial moment for consciousness-raising and catalyzed the resurgence of Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford.

I think the fact that we had this crisis in the political economy, or brought to the fore the crisis in the political economy in terms of employment, in terms of income and access to public health and access to opportunity in general. I think of the proliferation of the digital space and those two things together created an unprecedented opportunity to create community across the aisle, so across liberal and conservative spaces but also across geographical divisions. So what we tend to experience when we are organizing which is partly deliberate is the fact that geographical divisions make it difficult to build community, to organize and to galvanise something like a protest. In the absence of that isolating and othering framework, Rhodes Must Fall has been able to leverage digital space and popular attention and frustration in a productive, peaceful and anti-status quo way.

I am also interested in your work in Geography and environmental studies, how are you responding to the pandemic as a researcher? What insights are coming out of your field on the global health crisis and mutual interdependence?

My work in geography is on human geography. I study populism and protest as an ideological vehicle and really how moments of crisis facilitate a populist politic in discreet geographical areas. So the two political parties that I use in my case study [Dphil thesis] are in South Africa and in France. Here, my interest is in how historical practices of spatial segregation and of nation-building, whether that is denationalization, removing some people from the concept of the nation or renationalization, people trying to reintegrate into the body politic. How those historical or spatial historical movements have facilitated now more than any other time in history the rise of a populist moment. What has become clear now is that there is a coming together of crises in the political economy, historical ways of being, austerity measures by the government and the othering of the majority and the non-elite or what we can call the unassimilated majority and the kinds of fallout this is creating. So what is coming out of my field? I think on one hand, what is coming out or what is becoming apparent certainly in terms of 'Geography', I study geography in Oxford in a department that is traditionally very western-centric and follows a very western centered ontological and epistemic tradition, is the kinds of critiques that Rhodes Must Fall is bringing up.

So perhaps for the benefit of your study, some of the critiques relate even to the nature of work. If we really sit down and consider the nature of work (speaks to son) and the objective of work, it was very much in a Marxist tradition to produce and to contribute to socialization and the capitalist machine that our society has become. So education was never for enlightenment, it was to teach a certain set of skills that could be directly translated into particular fields for the production and productivity of those certain fields. So, even for what academics call the wageless class, dignity was conferred through these lenses. What is coming out of my field is a critique, going from feminist geographies to contemporary iterations of the marxist geographies about how education and work are not the only mechanisms for conferring dignity or for assimilating the assimilated majority.

We can also think of the critical reflections offered by Martin Luther King Jr. that have become so apparent in our anti-oppression and civil rights political work which is that perhaps the function of decolonization and consciousness-raising isn't to assimilate the unassimilated into white supremacy, but rather it is to counteract the system that exists and to create an entirely new system. Geography is important in that space because when we think about geopolitics and how nations relate to each other, and then critical geopolitics at the local level, so how those relationships are framed by ideas and notions of dignity and productivity which prioritizes western countries. These are some critiques that are coming out of, and can be attached to geography and can be carried into some of the work that I have been doing. So major critique, the curriculum is too white, ways of knowing are too white, formations of society and what is and isn't society, i.e the ontological framings of society. We are counteracting how white these systems are and we have an opportunity now more than ever to reframe what those things look like. The pandemic in my perspective, and certainly in the lens of my work has presented a fundamentally unprecedented opportunity to transform and reframe life as we know it. And so my hope, is that business, as usual, will never resume. And that we have an opportunity now more than ever to think beyond the confines of what we thought before and to consider what is wrong with our society and what we do not like about society.

We can also consider what we do like about our society and what we want to perpetuate in a new society. We can also consider how we might work at home, raise our families and still perform the functions related to our careers. We can consider how communities of care are created and can be sustained through the digital space and how rage, and how both leveraging and cultivating rage, can lead to community-building opportunities like the protests have shown across the world. Perhaps what you are realizing is that geography is quite capricious, so capricious as to be nothing. There is so much that is geography because everything is geography and related to a place or a position. So my field is capricious and there are certainly dynamic ways to look at it. These are the fundamental reflections I have had from my vantage point.

The author Arundhati Roy famously described pandemics as portals that force humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. What could a post pandemic or future with an enduring pandemic look like?

On one hand, it is an unprecedented opportunity for dissent and for doing away with the old world. The “bc”, the before corona world. We have now, for the first time in a long time a real opportunity to think about what is that we want for ourselves and for each other in a post-pandemic world. [The future involves] the return to the self, to values and principles centered on African humanness, [it involves] counteracting the first exile, so working on our inner selves and those in our communities. [The future] is returning to center, about doing away with the notion of what dignity is and looks like, and perhaps really thinking about how the world we existed in before corona was one that privileged and legitimized frameworks of white supremacy that pitted even decolonial and activist minds, policy practitioners and anti-oppression advocates against the very communities that we claimed to be trying to free. So we lived in a world that by many lines, especially in terms of work, separated those who are practicing a western-determined manner even of opposing systems. So there is a right way of protest, there is an organized way of protest, there is an organized and right way to talk about your grievances. I hope the world we are going to does away with those othering structures and really comes to terms with and settles on a very humanist, an African humanist expression of community and wellbeing. For the first time in a long time, I think that there is

more that unites us than what separates us and it would be a shame to allow those degrees of separation to come back again or to extend after this pandemic is over.

That was very insightful, thank you for being so generous with your time and thinking. I will now close the interview. Is there anything you want to say to close the interview at all?

My colleagues at Rhodes Must Fall would be devastated if I did not say, Rhodes Must Fall. That's my parting statement, that Rhodes Must Fall.

Interview: Ash Bodel

Ash Bodel is a market trader based in Gloucester Green Market, Oxford. He sells tapestries, jewelry and materials from the Indian subcontinent. Ash is deeply involved in his stall's production and making process, and often travels to Kashmir to collaborate with, and assist the artisans he works with. During the pandemic Ash has started to develop his own tapestry and jewellery.

Please tell me about yourself and your work?

This is my living and my job and I thoroughly enjoy it because I get to talk to other people and see different people on different days, which is so enjoyable for me and for others because I can talk to them. Not related to the business but related to life.

How long have you worked here?

I used to do it part-time one day a week, but almost 18 years.

How long have you lived in Oxford?

I am not from Oxford but I do come here to travel, from my place to here. I am from Kashmir. I am Kashmiri British, that is how I always identify myself.

And where is that place?

It's in Buckinghamshire. I work here [Oxford], I spend most of my time here. (speaks to a customer for several minutes).

As you were telling me, you don't live in Oxford but you live here. How has COVID-19 and the restrictions affected you and your work?

Well, it affected me a lot not really in a small way but a quite big way for me, people and the rest of the world. Because of the risk of infection rates, you have to help people because it can be quite dangerous (speaks to the customer for several minutes, shares that he, "took time off, Forest of Dean [Wales] just walking on the mountains, it was beautiful. It was medicine for mental health").

What do you define wellbeing as?

Wellbeing is not simply about money, it is about happiness and comfort. It is not just about myself but about the world. If I have a problem within myself, I do not want others to have that same problem. It gives me pain because I come from nowhere, where there was no luxury or items to see. When you grow up without this, you understand life without this. When I look at people who are in pain, I feel this pain. With you, I can tell you, Somalia is

not my country but when I see the conflict I feel pain. There are people, who live out their lives and then they come back home in a body bag. It does not matter if it is in Palestine, Germany, America. Human beings, it hurts me. It doesn't matter what culture or religion these human beings are, when they get hurt and harmed it hurts me.

What wellbeing practices have you taken in this period, you just mentioned that you went on holiday to Wales?

For wellbeing, I have done lots of exercises, physical and mental. By looking after myself it really helped me, like exercising, cycling, and gardening, which I didn't do before, but now I do it quite regularly and it helps me physically, mentally and spiritually

Are these spiritual practices related to God, or a form of personal healing?

Of course yes. In Ramadan, it was the best time to keep up with my religion and keep healthy myself and cook in a healthy way.

Have your wellbeing practices increased during this pandemic?

Yes and I would like to do more, because of the risk of infection and because of the time off which gave me time to do this away from the social activities.

Was this easier to do when you were away from work and the market was closed? How long was it closed?

Almost three months. It was 15 March 2020 exactly and on 17 June 2020 it reopened.

Did you find any other means of supporting at this time and did the Government help?

Yes, the government did help and I also did help myself by doing some social work which was voluntary, which helped me to use my time wisely.

How did the Government help?

I got a grant for my business (furlough).

And what kind of social work did you do?

With older people, I did mutual aid during Ramadan, distributing food and so on.

So this was community work?

Yes, I was helping the community, friends, and family. And I also tried to find voluntary work but there were already lots of people who were applying.

Has the economic impact of the pandemic changed the way you look after other people?

Economically, it changed a lot. It gave us more time to do more social activities. As a human being, it is important to do this in your spare time. I was brought up with the view that if you help, you will be helped.

Apart from the wellbeing practices you conduct yourself, are there spaces around your area or in Oxford which help your wellbeing?

My market stall is the most important for my well being. I also spend a lot of time wandering in the parks and lakes (talks to a customer who shares that since they brought the rug from him, they have been able to sleep properly.)

Your customer said that they felt better after buying a rug from you. Recently, you shared that people who make the rugs [artisans] bless them during the weaving process. Can you tell me more about that?

Yes, they make it with love and their dignity, so it helps people and it helps me to sell the product because I am happy to sell something with this meaning (speaks to the customer).

Do you think people feel better with the material?

Yes, you heard the people yourself and have experienced it yourself. There are lots of people who say this. On Saturday, somebody [a customer] came to see me after five years and said, "seriously, this is my life now, every time I have to see it and instantly I feel better".

And what is your relationship to the materials you trade, do you feel connected to them?

I am connected to them deeply, particularly the colors. And I think colors affect human beings deeply.

It's interesting because when you sell a material, there is an incredibly long process that precedes it. You have to find the materials, display them in a certain way and then a customer buys it and returns to tell you about the impact it has. It's a long process. Can you tell me more about this?

It is a longer process when you are involved in making. They [the artisans] put an incredible amount of effort into it. And when it comes to getting these items to the market from the Indian subcontinent, it is a different process. You know, this is what my life is about. When you begin to establish a business, it takes time to build it, and it takes time to make a profit because you are building a relationship with the customers, with yourself and with the artisans. Working with the artisans who make the things that I sell is important to me.

And who are these artisans? Can you tell me a bit more about them?

Some of them are my family members, some of them are in my community who do arts and crafts. They are mostly in India and Kashmir.

If they are based over there, how do you bring the products here?

You get the products shipped from India. It takes time, several months and when they are ready they send it to me but I do go myself, once a year and give them alterations to the colors and what to do (shows video of artisan weaving a tapestry).

The last time we spoke, you told me that you started designing your own tapestry designs. How is this developing?

Yes, I am trying to work on them (shares more images of artisans). When I am in the market, I think of designs that are inspired by the villages in Kashmir.

Returning to wellbeing practises, have you taken part in any community or cultural events during this period, either digitally or in person?

I have not taken part in cultural events because of this pandemic. One has to be careful and consider the rules from the government for our own safety. But I have done things online, by whatsapp, zoom and video. My family are calling me (from all over the world) and we chat. They call me because they are worried. I got so many calls. I get so many calls from Canada, Israel, Mexico from family, they call me because they are worried and want to know more about how the UK is handling it because it is a modern country. They want to know how the UK is handling its spatial affairs.

What do you mean by spatial affairs?

Well, the UK has been more organized than other parts of the world in its response to the pandemic. The NHS for example, but third world countries do not have these systems. So that is why people in my communities call me, to share information, to worry (speaks to customers).

The last time we spoke, you told me your family told you to consider working in another profession because of the pandemic, do they feel the same now?

I think they feel differently now. I think initially, there was an expectation to change course. In our culture, you are expected to be a doctor or engineer. I was not into that. I wanted to be face to face with people. I did once have a proper job, as they call it but I did not like it. Because I wanted to be open and explore what life is about, which is so difficult when you are stuck in one place.

And what has it meant for you to work during this pandemic, as a worker and trader?

Quite tough. Especially when I traveled by bus during the initial outbreak.

Did you travel by bus to get to the market?

Yes, and the pandemic was very unexpected. As I said, it takes years to build your business and suddenly, customers are weary. Before this, my customers would ask me can we hug? There were hundreds of people like that.

Was it difficult to work without physical touch?

Yes, it was very hard. People come and say, I really want to hug you but we can't. Human relationships are important and it is important to me to connect with other people. We are human, we must understand each other and provide intimacy with each other. Allah [God] has given us these hands to help, eyes to see, ears to hear, mouths to speak good. This is how I was brought up, this is my religion and culture and I am proud of it.

Does your job help you connect with others and help with this?

It helps a great deal. Because people are coming from all over the world. I have many discussions with people who are deeply unhappy and I attempt to work with them to change their way of thinking.

So you have changed people's minds about things?

Yes, and sometimes they come back or write to me.

And they talk to you in-depth about their own wellbeing?

Yes, and that is something I really love.

Has this changed during the pandemic at all?

To be honest with you, it has been going on for the last 18 years. I talk to them [customers] and ask how they are, and they are very honest to me. One has to be inviting and this is how it should be. We must be inviting and welcome others.

I think you are doing this for a lot of people.

And I don't want that to stop.

Is there anything else you would like to say to the audience and how do you imagine the post covid future?

Nothing is impossible. We cannot stop our lives, now that this happened, we can't stop going out of our homes and stop talking to people. I want people to try their best, and see that impossible is a word. If there are problems, there are solutions. We must prepare for the future, for the worst, and should not ever give up.

Interview: Jack Backus

Jack Backus is the co-founder of the popular Oxford workspace and cafe, Common Ground. He is also the Managing Director of Empathy Sustainability, VSM at Linacre College, Oxford, cycle coach and sustainability advocate. Located in Oxford's Jericho and former Barclays Bank, Common Ground aims to support local communities and student mental health. It provides visitors with workspace, free power, and wifi. In recent years, the pop-up has also morphed into a social space, providing space for yoga sessions, BAME knitting groups, discussions on Death & Dying, and more.

Please tell me about yourself and your work?

I used to work for a big multinational company, I was in the commercial team for that multinational company and I had seen a program about melting ice caps in Greenland. I changed my job to environmental sustainability and then after sixteen years with my company I left. So I now work for myself, I have an environmental consultancy, I work in air quality research, forest regeneration research, and active travel for Oxford City Council. I got Oxford city declared as a cycling city and I also have a social enterprising cafe. The social enterprising purpose of the cafe is to support student mental health. The landlord is Oxford University, we are not profit-maximizing but we have to be financially sustainable otherwise the model is not sustainable. Our cafe has morphed into a social space, we are quite relaxed people, it is quite a big space, its an old Barclays bank as you know. In some places, students are kicked out because they don't spend enough money, so we said come to us for free wifi all day long and free power. And if people are sitting there on their laptops, they are not really spending any money but we have quite a big space so that is ok. We, therefore, have a lower rate of sale than a normal cafe but that also means we have more time to connect with our customers and to make them feel comfortable. We have time to talk to people and this is really important to us. We want to help the community and support mental health.

We also support artists, every four weeks the artwork on our walls changes. People also approach us and ask if they can host their events in our space. So we have had Oxford writing circles, Jericho Comedy most weeks, we have had BAME knitting groups and the Oxford Climate society group host groups. Anybody can hire our space and use it in the evenings. So we are almost community defined, we also like to help out start-up companies when we can. Since we do not do the food ourselves, we hire pop up food stalls and help market stall people. Originally, we had Lula [Lula's Ethiopian and Eritrean Cuisine] doing her Ethiopian and Eritrean Cuisine and a French guy doing Mexican Food [El Antojito Oxford]. We also expanded this to include Nepalese food, of which we have two types, and Israeli food. We have a great relationship with Lula and help her improve her business, so it is a symbiotic and synergistic relationship. When things get better, we hope to have a different caterer every day, as it makes things exciting.

How have you supported your wellbeing during the pandemic?

I have two dogs, so I have to take the dogs for a walk every day during the lockdown. I have really enjoyed connecting with nature during this time. I have put on 3kg in weight, which is not good if you are a cycling coach but I have enjoyed connecting with nature for my mental health. I have enjoyed the reduced vehicle traffic which I find quite stressful and the improved air quality research. I also work in air quality research so I continued to get the air quality data from sensors [across the city]. I have also really enjoyed families cycling on the roads or on the streets. There are some positives from the lockdown and this whole situation. I hoped people would be more socially conscious and caring, in my street, there is a [mutual aid] chat, which was initially set up to help the elderly but now it has extended to broader communications. There are up to 50 messages a day. During this time, I have connected with neighbors some of whom I did not know before. This did need some kind of external intervention to happen. I enjoy the quiet time, working at home and fixing things.

Outside of Common Ground, what is the local area [Jericho] like? From what I understand, Jericho is a middle-class residential area.

There is a lack of holistic and systemic planning in the way we think about cities. People think in silos and they don't think about the perverse consequences. I am thinking about how Oxford can be a better city and how can mental health, economy, environment all be considered together. Walton Street, which is at the bottom of street, was closed because of a sinkhole and it later stayed closed. What you saw was far more people using the roads, whether they are walking, cycling or groups of families, and it made a much nicer environment. We call this a low traffic environment or a living street. There is a campaign to make part of Walton Street and a part of Little Clarendon Street cycle only and we support this. I have only had one customer who has come by car. So we can create better communities if we reduce vehicle traffic or the use of our neighborhoods as a shortcut to get to somewhere else. We continue to support low traffic neighborhood efforts in the area and it seems like business voices carry more weight than a residential voice. So we try to speak up and say we support these efforts. We have lots of Oxford University colleges and there is not as much diversity as there is in East Oxford. But there is less here in Jericho as an area so we are fulfilling a social need.

You refer to the relationship you have with local traders as a symbiotic relationship. Can you tell me more about that and why is this important to Common Ground?

I know two people who have tried to set up cafes and restaurants in Oxford, and they have both spent about a million pounds and went bust. If you spend that kind of money, you are under pressure to get your money back and you really have a different relationship with your customers. Because we were a pop-up, and because I have a background in environmental sustainability, I want everything to be second hand, we got our furniture from the auctions and donated by the community, or we found it in a skip. We try to keep our costs really low, which then means we can be much more relaxed. So because we are much more relaxed and easy-going, we have a much more relaxed and easy-going relationship with everybody else. We can spend more time, we can help them.

We also have community plant swaps where people swap indoor plants with other people, this is really popular. We also have repair shops where you can get a broken item fixed. So coming back to the market traders, it was partially because we didn't have any nice food that we wanted to help them out at the same time. Then during the lockdown, it was the law that all cafes would close. So we closed and then we started to reopen, we opened with a market

trader on the outside and not the inside. With people like Lula, she wanted advice like where did you get your protective screen from, where did you get your personal protective equipment from. Because the government does not help many small traders, if you set up as a limited business you perhaps do not get support from the government. So my own limited company, I have no furlough, no support, no anything from the government. The market traders were also in this position. So we were able to help by saying we are open again for fewer hours on the outside, you don't need to come in, so they [market traders] traded on the outside and then eventually we moved inside. I personally felt like it was better on the outside because it created a feeling on the street of theatre, after lockdown people wanted to come out a bit more and more life back into the streets. The city council permitted us to have tables and chairs outside of the cafe, so the market traders were outside. And they are still outside [today], but under a canopy.

So it seems like your relationship with market traders is mutually dependent, with everybody working together to respond to the pandemic. Can you tell me more about Common Ground's work with other social groups?

In 2015, 184 students committed suicide in the country including my own college. Many students are away from home, they are under pressure and therefore Common Ground was designed for students to feel less lonely than being in their room, and more connected to society than the college or library. Some [University of Oxford] libraries are very quiet outside of term, it feels like you are the only person in town, it's awful. So the point is you don't have to talk to anybody, but you can come to Common Ground all by yourself, or you can talk to the barista. At Common Ground, you can also connect with the community and find out more about events happening. We have also tried to connect with Oxford University mental health services. We decided our role is to be a quiet space to support student mental health and to act as a gateway to connect people to where they can go for help.

Next week, I am meeting with a group that does mental health coaching for people. We hope to develop training sessions at Common Ground and will advertise these webinars. Before the lockdown, I also wanted to develop mental health training for my own staff, so that they could advise our community in the right way. In our society, people are often isolated from the problems of other people, they go from their cars to their offices where there are middle-class people who they resemble. People who are striving [towards social mobility] and who might give to a charity to feel good about themselves, but they are not really deeply engaged with community and they don't understand the burden of mental health that the rest of society has. You are awakened to this when you work at the community levels.

How has the pandemic impacted Common Ground and the way you understand social responsibility as a social enterprise?

There is a social responsibility to not pass on the virus or make people ill. There is great pressure on places where people congregate, so we have taken away half of our tables and reduced our space. We offer people the opportunity to stay outside of our cafe if they do not want to come inside. I feel anxious myself about this, and do not want to pass on a possible infection to my parents. We were closed for a long time and during this period, the furlough scheme was really useful and helped the business survive but my biggest concern was my staff. Because ultimately, my staff had to pay their rent and are in lower pay brackets, so my number one objective was protecting them. Big chains like Pret or Costa have made so many redundancies, almost a third of their workforce have been made unemployed, but we have not made anybody unemployed. We cannot, however, employ two people at the same time, so we now do flexi-furlough where staff come in one day a week and work on their own. We now

only have one barista working at a time and we have increased this pay to the Oxford living wage. We reduced the hours we are open, and I am simply trying to make sure our staff get paid. We have managed to stay afloat and we are trying to remain afloat.

What is the future for Common Ground, how are you planning to continue adapting to the new normal?

It's really tough because we used to have lots of events. So not being able to have events and not being able to reopen for events in the evening has meant that Oxford Writing Circle is not there, Jericho Comedy Club is not there, our vault is not being used for yoga and pilates. This has been really challenging. This issue is not going to go away and it will be very slow to get back to normal. So we have to adapt, we know we can't go back to normal. When furlough support stops from the government, so many people are going to lose their jobs. It's going to be huge, so ultimately we will not be able to employ so many people but some of the people are very young and they are going to do another degree or they are moving home. So we are hoping to manage our staffing by the natural movement of people. I think things will be really tough, we will have to maintain one person working and not two. We also hope to continue working with market traders. One of them has done really well during this pandemic but others have not and I don't know how long they will want to continue doing market trading. Oxford University students return in October, and we hope for things to get better once they are back.