

YMCA 175

# Oral Histories and Stories

Story teller ..... Paul George

Subject ..... Personal Reflection

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**Interview with Paul George, General Secretary, YMCA Bombay  
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**Interview conducted by Malcolm Smith, YMCA Heritage Project Coordinator**

**MS:** Okay good afternoon, hi Paul, one of the things we're doing here at the Epic Storytelling Place is inviting some the leaders of YMCA around the world to come and share some of their stories, for us to ask some questions to understand how you got into the YMCA and to share some of your experiences and wisdom into the time that you spent within this fantastic movement. So, I just wondered if you could introduce yourself, what your role is now to everybody.

**PG:** My name is Paul George, joined the YMCA way back in 1982, many ways a relic, I've survived - well actually not survived I've actually gained immensely over the past 38 years. It's been a journey, a journey of faith, a journey of hope, a journey of excitement, dealing with young people all around these days. In many ways, rejuvenated my life, in more ways than one. Today as the CEO Bombay YMCA, I oversee a large number of young people and their projects, we have about 16 branches in the city and we are always expanding, we are growing, and we feel while we are tending to rest on our laurels, we always know there is much more to be done.

**MS:** So, taking us back to 1982, wondered if you could tell us a little bit about how you came to be within the YMCA?

**PG:** Oh that was providential, because it was never my dream or may aspiration to be in the YMCA, I had a good pastor in a level of the church, who felt I could in some ways contribute to the YMCA. I was more from a kind of commercial background, I'd done my business management, and God willed otherwise, that's why I believe in the largest schemes of his plans he found in me as a little instrument to work with the YMCA.

**MS:** So in '82, were you in India at the time? Were you in the UK?

**PG:** I was in India, but I was in the UK [inaudible] in 1994, I was based in Nottingham, the YMCA and the Bombay YMCA had an exchange programme, I was there for a good part of five to six months, and coincidentally I was there for the 150th anniversary celebrations. So I've got that stone in my pocket and I've got this 175 year celebration as well.

**MS:** So in 1982 you joined YMCA, what was it that you first did within YMCA?

**PG:** Interestingly I had the work in the youth department, which was actually working with school and colleges students, we had many competitions for them, there was public speaking, there was art and craft the kind of work, there was drama and theatrics, and so the YMCA afforded a platform for these young people to come there and to display their talents and to use that as a forum to take their growth patterns to another level. I think the YMCA was instrumental in bringing out some of the finest speakers who went on to hold very eminent positions within the political and social sphere.

**MS:** And that was in Bombay?

**PG:** That was in Bombay.

**MS:** So do you remember within those early days within YMCA, how did you find the YMCA shaped you as an individual?

**PG:** It shaped me in more ways than one, I was a raw young person, one of the good things about Bombay YMCA, probably the Indian movement as well, was the fact that after a couple of years of training with a local YMCA, you are then sent for theological training, in one of the most prominent colleges in India for theology. So we spent a year studying theology, studying the bible, also a part of that curriculum was social work, and management studies, so it was a very comprehensive year of time that we spent learning, more about the work we were likely to do. So that gave me a great boost, and kind of encouraged me to stay on with the YMCA - that's a critical time when you want to stay, or whether you want to leave, and that training at that wonderful college which I am an Alma Mater, United Theological College, as a great force in continuing with the YMCA.

**MS:** So you said you were at a point where you considered possibly not staying with YMCA?

**PG:** The thought didn't occur, but it's a critical point where you want to make a decision if you really want to stay, or you want to move out, but I think what enabled me to stay longer was the fact that I was at the college.

**MS:** And is there anything that you specifically learnt through that time that drew you to the point where you wanted to stay?

**PG:** They had a unique programme known as their Halfway Home, this is a home for people who have attempted suicide and daily we had a rotation. So I did a lot of counselling, and that played a very important role in my subsequent years, we set up a legal aid cell for women in distress and we were able to do, with my counselling skills to use, and that in many ways helped me to another horizon that I'd never explored before.

**MS:** Tell us some more!

**PG:** Okay, very interestingly the YMCA has nothing much to do with women, we were totally concentrating on young boys and men and the youth, we felt that the YWCA, that was their terrain and we should not be jumping into their space. But I had this conference in 1994, when then President [**inaudible name**], if you want the YMCA to be complete you needed have a black man, you needed a white person, you had to be yellow, and brown, the young girl, the young boy, the young women, and then only the YMCA could be seen to be complete.

So initially I had reservations kind of in my own branch, where they said 'do you really want to get into this space?'. But let me tell you Malcolm, it was one of the most exciting times of my career, we dealt with an entire range of women in distress, that could be from the slum, right up to the airline pilots wife, we're talking about an entire reach and they had issues at home, there was drunken husbands that were beating up their wives, we had the airline pilot who was not taking care of his children, there were divorced matters, and property matters, and all those kind of things was something that we reached out and touched a lot of lives. We started with one day in a week, and when we finally finished we had four days in a week. That was the kind of numbers that were coming to the YMCA. Of course we had people from the legal fraternity, people from the counselling background, so it kind of helped to put this together.

**MS:** So, talking very overarchingly about that project, do you remember one person who you journeyed with?

**PG:** There were a couple of people who I hold in very high esteem, unfortunately all of them have passed away, one was a legal luminary, who was Sheila [inaudible surname] by name, and there was another lady who was associated with the YMCA [inaudible place-name] this is a home for children and both of them were an integral part of this, that was Mrs Singh, and both very very fond memories of having worked together. There were time Malcolm, when we were sitting long past midnight, just trying to get families help, the thought was not to break families, it was repatriation, and if that was possible - it had to be explored first.

**MS:** And reconciliation happened?

**PG:** It happened! In most cases it happened, of course there was very difficult cases, we had a fair share of success and failures too, But the success far surpassed the rates that we had when it came to the failures.

**MS:** We often talk about our successes, in that context - how did you cope with the failures that you experienced?

**PG:** That again was a difficult time because we invested a lot of time, and we thought we got everything right, and we hoped that there would be - because we tried to probably emotionally blackmail the husband and wife - because the children were going to be suffering! So why didn't you do that - and it didn't work out for whatever reason, but considerable amount of time was invested and then we, there was a sense of disappointment also, but then the success stories brought us back and we were able to feel that we were doing the kind of good that was expected of us.

**MS:** Could you share with us one of those success stories?

**PG:** Oh yes! We had a young family, you see there's a country of lost cultures, and sometimes the community will be the same, but the cast will be different. The community don't just have problems at home. And we had a young couple and boy, who were brilliantly educated, top-notch college educations, and I think that the wife was wanting to use her education skills by way of a job, and I don't think the husband was too keen on that, being a little more orthodox, and he thought he would be the breadwinner. And I'm talking about 1988/'89, and so there was this little difference that then got magnified, and they also had a child by that time, so the husband was very insistent that - look, we need to stay home - and take care of the child, while they could have worked out an arrangement where she could had the workspace as well, but he was very adamant and it was so difficult to cope with that.

But at the same time we told the lady, look we need to spend at least a couple of years, and then you can join back your career. And that made a lot of sense, and we had to get the families involved, the parents, the in-laws and there was a lot of talk that went in-between, a great deal of time was spent with the in-laws especially, because they wanted somebody to look after them as well. India as a country, parents they stay home, so they thought - you know - that she was going to work, and they were going to be neglected and she was thinking they could stay home and take care of the children. So, it was a time when we felt that we needed to get both the families, not just the individuals, we needed to get the families on the same plane.

**MS:** You mentioned that you were at the 150th anniversary, we're now 25 years on, so I've got two questions to finish with - the first one is what do you feel has changed within the Movement in the last 25 years?

**PG:** Change has been most phenomenal. I say this because when I went to Warwick, for the 150th anniversary celebrations, we found that the people - me included, I was in my twenties, but we were just a handful of us, that age, most were in their sixties, probably even in their seventies, they brought to the table a wealth of experience, but we didn't have the innovation and the initiative and the enthusiasm of the youth of that time. And I've seen this transformation happen, at least in the last two of these World Conferences. I was then at Estes Park, in Colorado, and I saw this transformational shift taking place, where youth were given the space, and my word they did a good job! Then I saw them again in Chiang Mai, and they went to another plane, and I felt so good - that the YMCA is in good, very good, capable hands. I'm so delighted I've been here now for the 175th celebration and I've been looking at some of the plenary speakers, some of the TED-Ed speakers, 19-year-olds, 20-year-olds, and the stories they've been telling us! It's mind-boggling, and I'm so happy and so thrilled that in my journey I've seen this transformation take place.

**MS:** So lastly then, the next 25 years, what's your, what are your hopes for the next 25 years and if you're fortunate enough to be there for the 200th anniversary, what would you hope to see, have changed, or YMCA to have achieved in that time?

**PG:** Putting on my future vision cap, I would think that you would have the YMCA headed by the under-thirties. If I can get there to see under 25 I'll be even more thrilled, but let's be practical about this, I see - lets go back in time - 1844, we had a 22-year-old! So giving that as an example, I would see that a 25 year old, even a 22 year old heading and leading the YMCA, I see the dramatic change in some programmes, I think it's going to be youth-centred, we are going to be looking at issuing troubling them, climate change of course is going to be high on the agenda. We're looking at migrant populations, and again there was a lot of talk in these sessions that we've had as to how invest - these were not problems when we were there, I mean there were migrant issues - but not the kind of scale and magnitude that its happening now.

So I see the YMCA intervening in this, playing a very special role, climate change of course is a given, and I'm a little surprised, or taken aback, at the kind of mental health issues that are being talked about. Maybe we've not given it so much thought in our country, but I think it's a serious issue for countries in the western world where this is a major issue. I think this needs to be tackled, and I'm sure YMCA will have [inaudible] to handle the issues, we handled the World War, we took an active part, and we played a very active role, and I think this would be our war against mental ill health.

**MS:** Paul, thank you very much for your time.

**PG:** Thank you my friend, it's been a pleasure, and I wish you all the best in your work in the days ahead, and look forward to seeing you in 2044.

**MS:** Absolutely! Cheers, thank you.