

The Voice Interview

MAXINE JAMES

On one of the warmest days of the summer, in the middle of the afternoon, I found myself knocking on a nondescript white door between Pizza Hut and the NatWest Bank in the heart of South London's Brixton. Not being able to gain entry I phoned through to Maxine James and explained that the door was locked.

She promptly comes down and lets me in, greeting me with a 'hello' and a smile as welcoming and warm as the weather.

Maxine is a management consultant and one of the business partners of Equinox Consulting.

Equinox is a sort of A-team of business, helping other people to succeed by providing consultation, training and market research for new firms.

Born in Jamaica, Maxine came to Britain - Birmingham - at the age of 12. Her father was a shoemaker, but Maxine insists this was not a big influence on her following a career in business.

"Maybe it's in the blood; I don't know. They do say that people go into business partly because it is genetic."

Her biggest influence came from a couple of Liberian student accountants who she met just after she came down to London 20 years ago.

"They were the people who taught me that you can be or do anything you want in life. I

'Black people are very good at business. Jamaicans, who are not supposed to be doing well here, are doing well in the United States. But in



Robert Lewis

have to credit them with being the greatest influence on my life.

"They were the first people I knew who were studying to be accountants.

Their fathers had businesses and lived a lifestyle I could only think of aspiring to.

"Maybe I aspired secretly but didn't think in my wildest dreams that I would be living a similar lifestyle."

Britain they are looked at as criminals'

Balloon

The smile she constantly wears drops from her face as she explains the importance of having Black role models: "We never had any Black people on television back then, so where were we to get the inspiration from?"

A confident and focused woman, she always knew that she would be running her own business one day, but was never sure exactly what it would be.

When she left Birmingham for the opportunities that London represented, her family and friends had their doubts, but she was sure she was doing the right thing.



MAXINE JAMES: "You can be or do anything you want to in life."

Maxine means business

As a management consultant, workaholic Maxine James provides vital help to Black firms. She tells *Sylvan Cumberbatch* about work, role models and how two Liberian students changed her life forever

"It has turned out to be a good move. Since I came down here only good things have happened to me."

In 1978 she gained a London Chamber of Commerce Private Secretary's certificate and began to work as a secretary.

She planned to set up a secretarial business somewhere in Africa.

And so six years, an HND and a

postgraduate qualification later, she travelled around Ghana and the Ivory Coast.

She now explains: I just wanted to leave England. I didn't want to be here any more."

To her surprise, her desire to live and work in Africa soon vanished. "It's like someone had just pricked a balloon and let the air out slowly. My

desire to leave England and live in Africa sort of evaporated."

Money

It was not because she had a bad experience, but because having spent time there she realised that in some ways it was not much different to England. She found the lifestyle and in some ways the people very similar

to what she found in Britain. She returned to England and, in need of a job, an old college friend introduced her to the first Black consultancy agency in Britain, New World Business Service (NWBS). The friend, Ade Sawyerr, eventually became her business partner.

NWBS later folded after money problems and she formed Equinox

Consultants.

She says: "If we were to give advice to Black people, we needed to experience the same sort of problems they were facing out there. Only then would we know how to find funds and help them deal with the problems they would face."

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