

GIANTS

# Recipes of Life

Stories of Migration & Brotherhood



**GIANTS**

Recipes of life: Stories of Migration and Brotherhood

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Stories of Migration & Brotherhood

Edited by: Dr Romena Toki, Dr Jennifer Nicholas, Wilhelmina Perry, Laura Stahnke,  
Phoebe McMahon, Mia Cooke-Joshi, Gjori Langeland and Siobhan Sollis





“ Praxis is my GP and  
GIANTS is my medicine



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“ We are so beautiful because we are different. We must celebrate this diversity. Beyond our immigration we have passions, interests and heroes.



# Foreword

## **Debbie Weekes-Bernard**

Praxis Chair of Trustees and London's Deputy Mayor for Communities and Social Justice

This is a wonderful, life affirming publication, filled with recipes curated from the heart by our GIANTS, a group of men who are part of the wider Praxis community.

This cookbook emerged from the Recipes of Life project that the GIANTS participated in since 2021, alongside the Tower Hamlets Community Mental Health team.

Each week a GIANTS member cooked a meal for the group and through this, beautiful conversations about childhood, memories and their love of food emerged. This cookbook is the product of those conversations and is testament to the way that cooking and sharing food can bring people from all over the world together, can ignite stories of home and can enable us all to share in wonderful, uplifting experiences at a time when everything can often feel so incredibly challenging. To our amazing GIANTS: thank you for producing this book and providing us with a glimpse into your stories from home.





## About Praxis

Praxis is an award-winning charity, established in 1983 to provide support to at-risk refugees and people that have migrated to the UK. From our East London base, we work with some two-thousand people every year. We help people in crisis or at risk, ensuring they can live in safety, overcome the barriers they face, and take control of their own destinies. We strive for a world where people are not defined by their immigration status, and where everyone is treated with dignity and respect.

In the UK, thousands of at-risk refugees and people that have migrated are in need of expert immigration advice and support to secure their right to live and work in the UK and access services so that they can rebuild their lives and live safely. The immigration system is complex and extremely difficult to navigate alone. However, free expert immigration advice in London is scarce. Unable to afford expensive legal fees, thousands of people are left without the specialist guidance they need. Until their status is resolved, they can be prohibited from accessing employment and government support and find themselves falling into homelessness and crisis. At Praxis, our expert advisers help people turn their lives around by supporting them to secure their immigration status. They also help them with other issues they may be facing, such as accessing housing, education, or employment.

We believe in a holistic approach: we run weekly community-led groups to build confidence, develop skills, and forge friendships that will last lifetimes. From men to mothers to young people, our community finds strength through shared experiences. Our groups follow the key guiding principles of trauma-informed care: safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration; empowerment; and choice. Our community members are not boxes to be ticked; they are people with a wealth of abilities, experiences, knowledge, interests, opinions, and insights. Our group work leads to healthier lives, improved physical and mental wellbeing, and a sense of belonging and community.

Our groups' members are at the heart of our influencing work. We stand side by side and take action to support each other through the complexities of the immigration system. In 2018, we were instrumental in exposing the Windrush Scandal, supporting members of the Windrush generation to speak out on national and international media platforms, at consultations, and at public events. In 2022, we helped secure the win to extend free school meals to all who have No Recourse to Public Funds. We launched our #StoptheWaiting campaign, calling on the Government to shorten the length and reduce the cost of routes to settlement.

The Recipes of Life project has brought our GIANTS community back together after the pandemic. Each week, the aromas from the kitchen have transformed Praxis. GIANTS have shared their ideas, passion, and stories to talk about their shared experiences and build a community that centres around open dialogue, support and respect. This project has shown the importance of community-based mental health support and the powerful role food can play within migrant justice.





# Welcome to GIANTS

I am writing this part on behalf of the “GIANTS” Group which was set up and is maintained by Praxis.

GIANTS is a dynamic interactive, compassionate, self-help, motivational, social, educational group of adult men of all ages who have migrated to the UK and are surviving the government’s hostile environment. We have a diverse range of cultural, religious, educational and vocational backgrounds.

GIANTS meet every Friday between 2-4pm to fellowship over a freshly cooked hot lunch, then engage in different varied activities mostly indoors at Praxis. However, we occasionally enjoy outdoors activities or trips too whenever Praxis has raised enough budget for us to go outside and to enjoy longer sessions.

I take this opportunity to acknowledge and appreciate all our generous donors, all our civil society partners, all participating London boroughs, all our volunteers, all our fundraisers and last but not least all of Praxis staff without whom there would be no GIANTS.

GIANTS also acknowledge and appreciate the Tower Hamlets Community Psychology Team our graphics designer and the editorial team who contributed their time, their thoughtful energies and their professional services. GIANTS can never thank you enough. Thanks a million.

To us the members of GIANTS, this book is a lot more than just a cookbook. In fact, it is a durable tangible reminder of all the unforgettable memories that we share.

Our GIANTS mantra or slogan is “We are Still Here”. However, very sadly one GIANTS is no longer here with us. We lost him and we mourn his untimely loss. His name is Eric, and he came from Belgium. We tried our best to locate his biological family in Belgium but in vain. So, in effect we, his GIANTS brothers are his only surviving family to mourn his loss. We have decided to hold a church memorial service for Eric later this year to remember him, to pray for him to rest in peace and to thank God for his life and for giving us his missed valued friendship.

We dedicate this book in memory of Eric.

Greetings & Much Love from Giants to everyone who reads our book.

We Are Still Here, by the Grace of God.

**Onsy Max**





## A GIANTS Story

Let me tell you a story of migrant men. It is our story, a GIANTS' journey. It is a story of struggle. A story of brotherhood and resilience and finding a home in GIANTS.

When applying for asylum in the UK, everyone is treated with suspicion. The Home Office has a culture of disbelief. You apply for asylum, but they reject you and don't believe you. The level I had to prove I had experience abused was shocking. I was expected to give evidence of coercive abuse, how could I do that? They didn't believe me. My application was rejected. All I would hear was "insufficient evidence" but how could I give more? I appealed over and over. Each time I was met with disbelief. Some people have applied several times.

In 2015, my application had been in for 5 years, and I'd heard nothing. I took my kids to school, waved them goodbye in the morning and jumped on the bus with a smile. I was excited about my future; I'd just told my solicitor I wanted to go to college.

I was heading to London Bridge, to the immigration centre where I welcomed each of my friends who were waiting in the queue with a fist bump. But when I joined the long queue, I felt nervousness creep in, it's the same every week when I have to sign my paper. I watched the queue getting closer and closer to the dreaded door. I didn't blink. We all know that if you go through that door, you will never come out. My heart started to beat fast in my chest, and I felt my body tense. Then I heard the dreaded words,

"Come round the back. I will meet you at the door."

We went through and he said my application had been rejected. He said I was to be deported in two weeks and had to go to the detention center. I couldn't speak to anyone, not even my solicitor. They took away my belt and phone and I was sent away.

For weeks and weeks, I waited for the day I would be forced to board a flight. But after 5 long weeks, my flight was canceled, and I was sent home. But what could I do now, there was so much still unknown.

I was separated from my family, with no place to sleep at night, struggling financially and I needed a place to feel safe after everything I'd been through. I was scared to ask for help, scared that I would be sent back to detention.

I went to look for housing support, but they couldn't help me. I didn't have recourse to public funds. "There is nothing I can do, I'm sorry"

I wasn't eating enough and went to my local foodbank, but they couldn't help me.

"You need to be referred before we can give you food to eat."

I needed a place to talk. I went to a community group, but they couldn't help me.

"There were no groups for men."

I would just walk and cry to clear my mind. On the outside I seemed ok, but men struggle to tell their story. Our culture tells men that they have to suffer without opening up. I trusted no one.

One day, I met someone at Praxis who listened and knew where I needed to be. She said, "We have a group for migrant men, and I think you would benefit from joining".

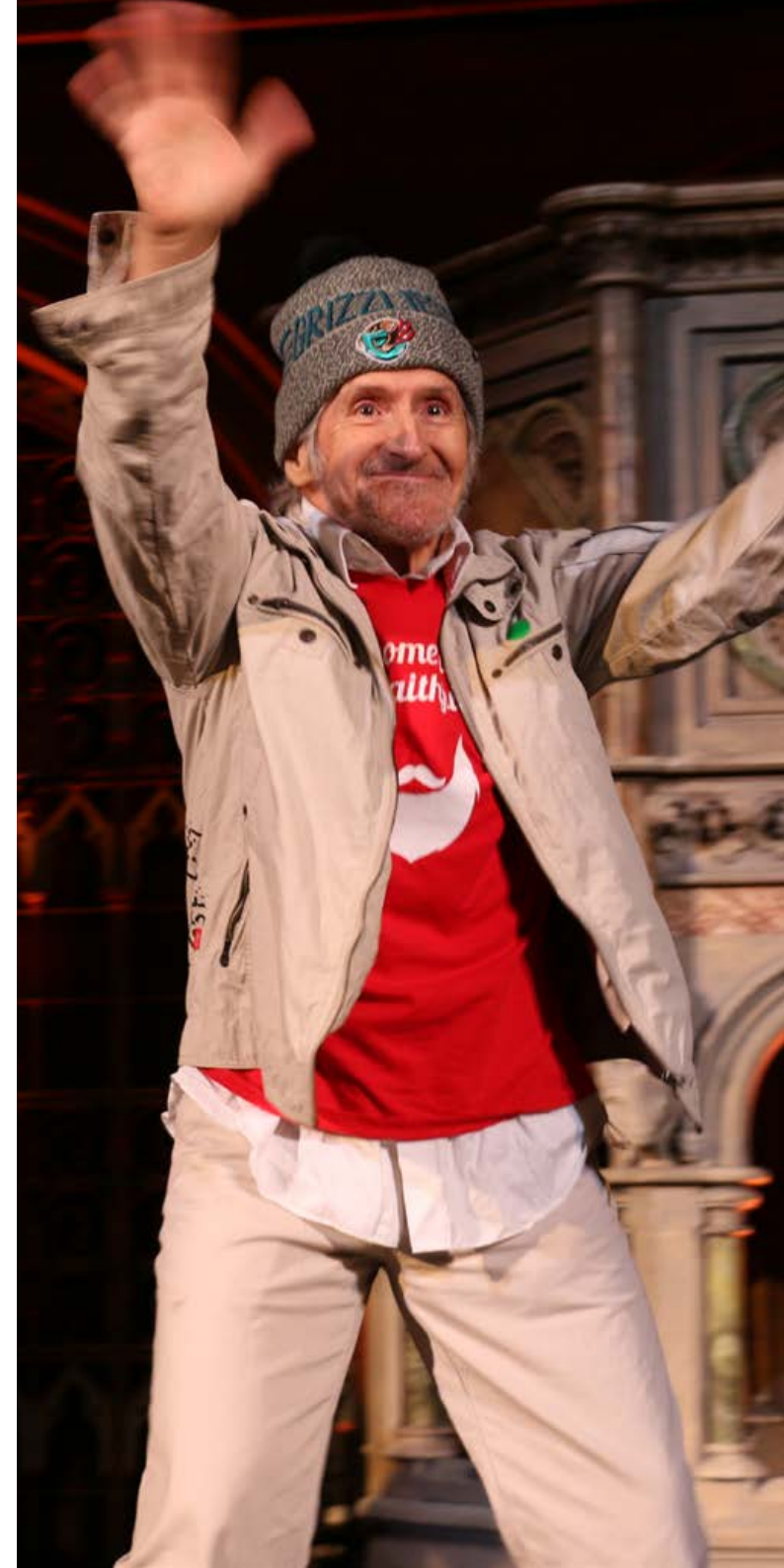
I didn't trust her, but I took up the invite.

On the first day I joined GIANTS, I was on edge. I had a very short fuse, constantly on the lookout for danger, constantly near tears. I peeped through the door and saw a room full of people. Someone gave me a cup of tea and welcomed me into the group. They made a space for me to come in and they all showed me respect.

In time, I opened up. I sat down and quietly watched a group member sing and in that very moment I knew everything was going to be alright. I knew I had found my place. I knew I had found friends. I knew I had found brothers. My future didn't feel so scary with GIANTS by my side. GIANTS is a family, we stand together, grow together. After so many years of holding back, of holding everything together, we can finally share with men who understand what we are going through. We can tell our story and get advice. We can find strength in each other and help to be positive.

In our times of need, GIANTS are there for each other. At immigration court hearings, we stand together. In the good and the bad days, we stand together. I always say: "Praxis is my GP and GIANTS is my medicine". It has made me the man I am today. There is so much joy that comes out of this group. There is a culture of belief.

**We are still here.**







“ GIANTS is a family, we stand together, grow together.”



# Recipes of Life

## Dr Romena Toki and Jennifer Nicholas

Recipes of Life facilitators with Tower Hamlets Community Psychology team

Our story begins towards the end of the pandemic in Weavers Field, a local park behind Praxis. We saw a group of men sat around the table and that was our first encounter with the GIANTS. San, a volunteer at Praxis, walked in with carefully packaged containers of hot food that had just come off the stove. Other men followed and found their place around the table.

We witnessed these men coming together over food and inviting us to join them. We launched into a conversation with San about the story behind the food he had cooked, and we were amazed at how all the men joined in to share their own memories about food, culture and history. We witnessed the importance of respecting food through sharing it with others, taking the time to enjoy each mouthful and the words of appreciation that flowed for the chef.

Week after week we saw a different member of the GIANTS walk out of the kitchen with a feast they had prepared and being met with applause and appreciation. We learnt how food is a universal language that allows us to understand other people's cultural heritages, and how therapeutic it can be to give the gift of food and receive the gift of love and appreciation through sharing a meal together.

The connections were noticeable at every moment, whether when hearing their stories of survival and the hardships they had withstood, or when they found ways of uplifting and supporting one another through sharing their skills and knowledges. The men had created a community where each person could be seen as an individual, while never losing sight of the brotherhood.

Through this group we learnt a few key ingredients of what it meant to be a GIANT.

- A heapful of kindness
- An abundance of belief in one another
- A gallon of respect
- Bucketful of hope
- Tons of trust
- A sprinkling of songs
- Whisked together in the bowl of brotherhood
- Served on a platter of gratitude and applause

This book is filled with recipes that honour the world we live in, the natural resources we are surrounded by the practices that cultures have engaged in for years that help feed and take care of one another. The food was the cleanest, freshest and most flavourful we have tasted, and we are truly privileged to have been part of the process of collating and sharing the stories they are connected with.

Collective narrative therapy practices are a way of hearing the stories and experiences of groups, communities, and cultures, rather than individuals. This is done to help groups challenge dominant narratives, develop preferred stories that reflect their values and goals, and promote social justice and equality. Through our partnership work with GIANTS, we were able to honour and celebrate the skills, knowledge and strengths that has enabled them to resist and survive during times of hardships.

We want to acknowledge and thank:

- Dr Yvette Arthur for forging our first link with Praxis
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Lastly, a heartfelt thank you goes out to the GIANTS for their warm welcome, gracious sharing of recipes, and entrusting us with their sacred stories.





## Creating Our Cookbook

After months of sharing food and stories in GIANTS weekly workshops, we knew we had something special that had to be shared. With the support of Praxis and Tower Hamlets Community Psychology Team, GIANTS started to add their stories and recipes to paper. With support from Tim Anderson, a Chef and Cookbook writer, and a dedicated team of volunteers, we slowly improved our work and learnt so much along the way.

There is so much talent amongst the GIANTS members and they have led every decision in the development of this cookbook from recipe writing, editing, design and storytelling. This book is a reflection of their dedication, hard work and teamwork.

### Tim Anderson

Chef, cookbook writer, and MasterChef winner

Migration is something I feel very strongly about, perhaps because my own family simply could not exist without it. My children are of Japanese, Italian, and American ancestry – they are miracles of migration, who could never have been born without movement across borders and cultures, over great distances.

And beyond my own personal experience, migration benefits our society in so many ways. It enriches our culture and allows us to better understand others, opening up pathways to world peace. But despite the many positive ways in which migration can affect both individuals and society generally, the actual process of relocating to the UK is, at best, difficult and costly, and traumatic and dehumanising at worst.

While every immigrant story is different, leaving one's homeland behind is never easy – it takes courage and incredible fortitude to make a new life in a new country, especially when that country seems intent on creating so many obstacles to settlement. Xenophobia, racism, bureaucracy, and a lack of community all add to the inherent grief of leaving one's home, even if, as poet and writer Warsan Shire put it, 'home is the mouth of a shark.'

With the GIANTS project, Praxis has created something remarkable in how it mitigates issues that face all migrants, fostering connection within their new home country while celebrating and honouring the ones they left behind. I have had the enormous privilege of sitting in on GIANTS sessions and assisting with the editing of this book, and the stories shared have been truly moving, uplifting, and inspiring.

And what better medium for sharing stories is there than food? Taste and smell have a direct neural pathway to the brain's memory centre – this is why food is so instantly and deeply evocative. And the act of sharing a meal is inherently social, a ritual that forms a bond between people which is strengthened every time the ritual is repeated.

My mother always used to say that food is love. I think this is true – after all, cooking, feeding, and eating are acts of nurturing. In the case of GIANTS, cooking nurtures both new connections and old memories. The recipes and stories here are testament to the power of food as not just physical but also spiritual sustenance – and I have to say, they all sound really, really delicious!







“ Food is such a significant thing. You can make so many friends. When people are hungry and you put something in their hand, they go up





“ Who is there to represent the little man? That’s why I come to GIANTS. We stand together.