Marcia Rigg
The Congregation
Oral History Transcript

Marcia Rigg is the sister of Sean Rigg who died in custody at Brixton police station in 2008. She is a political activist on the issues of mental health and policing in the UK.

I am Marcia Rigg, I'm the sister of Sean Rigg.

My brother Sean lived in Brixton.

I am the oldest of five and Sean was the middle brother. And he was handsome, he was artistic as a musician, he wrote his own lyrics and was a rap artist.

Sean was a Wing Chung expert. He was well disciplined and that's how he kept fit and healthy. You know, he cared about his diet and his appearance, you know as an artist, and he was young he was only 40 on this day. So, he just turned 40 in the February.

In the late 80s he experimented on one occasion with drugs, which I think was acid. And that was the only time he'd taken that. And he had what they call a bad trip, so he was hallucinating and psychotic because of the drugs. And so, he entered the mental health revolving door system, where he was diagnosed with acute paranoid schizophrenia.

Sean never suffered with mental health before, but he never recovered from that illness. And so, he was in and out of mental health hospitals in the Brixton area. He was known to the community and loved by the community as well.

But he was also known to the police because sometimes he wouldn't take his medication.

He always carried his passport. So, I would receive a phone call at some point to say that he was in hospital or he'd been arrested. And I would go and find him and bring him back. And he always came back alive.

But one day in 2008, he hadn't taken his medication for a period of two months.

Sean was living in Brixton at a half-way house where he wasn't under any sections under the mental health system and, you know, he could come and go as he wanted. But it was like a safe haven.

He had a close relationship with the staff who loved him very much. But they recognised that Sean was becoming extremely unwell and behaving bizarrely.

And so, there was a series of emergency 999 calls made to the local station, which was Brixton police station, by the staff to take Sean to a Place of Safety, which is a hospital, because there were no beds available on that day. And so, the staff resorted to call the police.

But Sean was already at a Place of Safety, and he needed urgent medical assistance. So, the police could have attended the premises and taken Sean to a hospital where he would have received the help that he needed, which had happened, you know, numerous occasions over the previous 20 years.

But the police refused to come and said that he hadn't done anything criminal. And after about three hours Sean left and went on to Brixton Hill actively psychotic, naked from the waist up. He was just wearing white trousers and shoes, his Gucci shoes, and carried his passport.

So on the 21st of August, when he was actively psychotic on the street, members of the public could also see that Sean was unwell, and they called the police. Four Brixton Police officers arrived.

Now you must bear in mind that during the initial phone calls from the hostel staff, the halfway house, the first CAD record to the police, they knew his name, they knew he had mental health issues, they knew that he was actively psychotic.

But the police officers that attended claimed that he was being violent, and they did not know who he was. They didn't know his name. And so, he was apprehended in the Weir Estate where there were witnesses. And Sean was, as usual, carrying his passport in his pocket. That's all he had. He did not have his keys; he did not have his phone. We do not know where he was going that day. But he never returned home.

Because the police officers restrained Sean in the prone position, which is face down in grass. He was handcuffed to the rear. And a jury found in 2012 that he was in that position for up to eight minutes face down, very similar to the way that George Floyd died in 2020. He was then put in the back of a police vehicle.

They sped back on their blues and twos to Brixton Police Station, not the hospital that was up the road, King's College Hospital. Where he was kept at the back of the van in the yard for up to almost eleven minutes.

He was heavily assisted by officers to the entrance of the custody suite in the yard, and Sean, um... collapsed on the entrance to the cage where the officers claimed that he just wanted to sleep. But anyway, it's caught on camera that he is clearly unwell.

Eventually a doctor came and says that he's having a heart attack. The police did not call an ambulance. In fact, they sent two police officers to the hostel, where the emergency calls were being made by the staff to attend to those 999 calls for Sean Rigg.

But Sean Rigg, my dear brother was already at Brixton Police station. If not dead, he was dying. I believe that he was dead.

And eventually the officers on camera say that he was not breathing and called for defib.

He was taken to King's College Hospital and was pronounced dead at 9.24 p.m.

Four years later an inquest jury found that Sean was dead at 8.24pm, an hour before.

It took four years for an inquest into how Sean died, where we had legal challenges with the IPCC (Independent Police Complaints Commission) in terms of disclosure and receiving the documentation. The IPCC in the first 18 months found in 2010 that they did absolutely nothing wrong and that there was insufficient evidence for a successful prosecution.

On the 1st of August 2012, a coroner's inquest jury found that the officers more than minimally contributed to Sean's death.

On the 1st of March 2019, a police tribunal found that there was insufficient evidence to sack any of the officers and that they did absolutely nothing wrong.

And so, the officers walked away unpunished in 2019.

But my brother died… Why?

At the outset of Sean's death, I realised that Sean's case was not an isolated one. And there were many unnecessary deaths that had happened in the United Kingdom over decades, following contact with police officers.

And so, I found it necessary to become an activist and campaigner on the issues of mental health and policing. Because there were so many other families that were affected and impacted in the way my family was.

And so, I joined a campaign called the United Families and Friends campaign. It's a coalition of families whose loved ones have died at the hands of the state, be it in mental health institutions or prisons or at the hands of the police or immigration.

No family should have to go through what my family's been through. And I do this work to save lives not to destroy lives. And to stop deaths in state custody. To stop institutional racism across the country, because this has to stop.

And so yeah, that's why I do the work that I do. Thank you for listening.

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