



Councillor



Paul Sathianesan came to the UK from Sri Lanka in 1998. Since his arrival he has worked with a number of refugee community organisations, the Refugee Council, and is now local councillor for Wall End in the London borough of Newham.

What do you do?

In May 2006 I was elected for my third term as local councillor in Newham with the highest number of votes of any councillor in the borough. I'm involved in policy making, improving service delivery and generally serving the local community. I'm also part of the National Association of Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority Councillors. On the community side, I am an advisor to Scotland Yard on Tamil issues and a member of the Home Office's National Refugee Integration Forum and children & young people's sub group. I'm a management committee member of the Evelyn Oldfield Unit and head-up their leadership programme. I also work as a consultant on refugee issues internationally.

How did you get to where you are?

From day one I was involved in refugee community organisations. I assisted in setting up the International Tamil Refugee Network and then worked at the Refugee Council, advising Tamils who fled Sri Lanka at the same time as me. I knew I had to help myself because when I arrived in the UK there were no organisations doing this. I could speak English and used this to help others with asylum applications and accessing education. It has been a challenge; I have achieved what I have through very difficult stages.

What do you enjoy about what you do?

I enjoy giving a voice to the voiceless. If I help someone I hope they will go on to help someone else overcome their barriers. I listen to people and see how best I can support them, prioritise their need and guide them. When I see people smile it makes it all worthwhile.

What political changes would you like to see in relation to refugees?

Firstly, we need to change the initial concept of the Convention [the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees]. The world has changed and the Convention needs to reflect those changes. Secondly, the UK has a moral obligation to recognise the root causes of worldwide problems and thirdly, refugees need to be recognised as humans who have a right to live in dignity.

What are your plans for the future?

I will continue to serve the community and represent refugees on every level and to challenge the negative opinions people have about refugees and asylum seekers. Long-term I would like to become an MP or member of the House of Lords. I would also like to become a UNHCR goodwill ambassador: Celebrities are good but we need people in that role who have personal experience of being a refugee, people who can use that experience to help others.

What is Refugee Week about for you?

Refugee week is a permanent celebration; it's the whole world in one place. It's about celebrating refugee contributions, diversity, dance, music, food, and a chance for local communities to come together. It goes beyond barriers and promotes learning and understanding.
