



social care  
institute for excellence



## Care Leavers' Stories project

Byron Baker

Interviewed by Khatija Hafesji

C1597/09

In 2013 this Project was carried out by the Social Care Institute for Excellence. The British Library acted as archive partner. The Project was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

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# Social Care Institute for Excellence

## Interview Summary Sheet

## Title Page

**Ref no:** C1597/09

**Collection title:** Care Leavers' Stories

**Interviewee's surname:** Baker

**Title:** Mr

**Interviewee's  
forename:** Byron

**Sex:** Male

**Occupation:** Part-time student/ sales  
consultant

**Date of birth:** 1982

**Dates of recording:** 20.05.13

**Location of interview:** Social Care Institute for Excellence, 2-4 Cockspur Street, London, SW1Y  
5BH

**Name of interviewer:** Khatija Hafesji

**Type of recorder:** Canon XF 305

**Recording format :** .mxf

**Total no. of tracks:** 1

**Mono or stereo:** Stereo

**Total Duration:**  
3:04:44

**Additional material:**

**Copyright/Clearance:** The following sections are closed for thirty years until October 2043  
[00:56:50-01:02:14]; [02:20:00-02:33:47]

**Interviewer's  
comments:**



## Track 1

*Okay, hello. Do you mind telling me your name and a little bit about yourself, please?*

Okay. My name's Byron. I'm 31 years old. I've lived in North London my entire life, mostly in the Islington and Camden areas. I currently reside in Barnet, which is a little bit nicer than where I grew up in Finsbury Park. I'm studying but also working part time as well, trying to be a social worker, trying to sort of help other people who are in my situation and see if I can make a change, be there for people who – just be a – I don't know, what's the word I'm looking for? Someone that they can look up to and say that you can – that there is possible things to do when you go in care.

[0:00:52]

*And what was your situation growing up?*

Growing up, I was a single parent family. I spent most of my time in and out of care. There was long periods of time with my mum but every now and then something would happen and I'd end up in care, until I was about ten when we went into care for the final time. We started with foster parents and then me and my brother and my baby brother went to another foster parent. Me and my middle brother were a little bit angry about where we were so we sort of played up, but it was also not helped by the foster parents where we were at. They treated us quite badly. We were treated like second class citizens in that house, like quite – really harshly, you know. We weren't allowed to use normal plates, we had to have like paper plates. We weren't even allowed to eat at the dining table with the rest of the family, we had our own little table in the kitchen. There was lots of things. I mean, even – I even look back and I remember them putting, like, bleach and Dettol in the bath, when we were going into the bath, and I was smart enough to – and old enough to realise that that's what was going on, 'cause I could tell the smell. My mum trained me well to clean up so I could – I knew the smell of bleach and I just – I refused to go in because I thought it

was just ridiculous. And eventually we kept running away – well, not really running away, we'd sort of go off and not go to school and bunk off and go down the West End. And we used to – it's quite embarrassing. We used to go into water fountains and take out all the pound coins and then go and a good day out in the Trocadero. We were quite industrious [laughs]. That's a way to say it. But then on the last one that – we ended up getting caught in King's Cross station, graffiting the posters, and we got pulled up by the police and we refused to give them our details 'cause we didn't really want to go back, so we didn't really care where we went. And then eventually they sent us back to the foster parents about one o'clock, who then dropped us with our social worker and said, 'We've had enough of them.' And we were kind of happy about that because we just would like to get away from them. We actually nicknamed the woman who – foster parent, Mrs Grotbags after the TV series that we watched as a kid about a witch. Yeah, that's how bad it was for us. But then we stayed at temporary accommodation for a couple of – for a night or two and then ended up back – being placed at a children's home in Highgate called Millfield. Unfortunately the place has closed down now. And we stayed there until – well, until I left and then I – that was probably some of the best times of my life. I mean, when I tell people I grew up in care, everyone goes, 'Ooh, I'm so sorry for you.' But I look at them and I think, ah, you don't know what it was like for me. I had a great time. You know, if I'd stayed in the area that I grew up, Finsbury Park, I don't know where I would have ended up. I don't know what could have happened to me. I look at the people I used to hang round with and they're all – they've all got loads of kids with different people and I just look at that and I think, that's not who I would have wanted to be. Maybe I would have got out of it, but the chances are more likely I'd have stayed around there. You know, you're influenced by who you hang around with. And Millfield always gave me this sense that I could do whatever I wanted and be who I wanted and be better than anyone expected me to do, even though some of them lacked a bit of faith 'cause they thought I was lazy. But it was a really nice place to live. It was really big. We had up to thirteen children there sometimes. Sometimes it was only four or five of us. But it was a charity one, it wasn't a government one, and I think that made a major difference because a lot of the staff members worked there, even though they're getting paid less, because they wanted to help out and they wanted to give the

kids a good chance. Then I really – I felt – I felt supported very well by this place. And they did a lot for me and it helped – them and the basics that my mum had given me has helped me, I would say, grow up to be a good person and with a right mentality.

*Thank you very much for that introduction.*

[04:44]

*I was wondering about this children's home, because usually they get a lot of bad press. What did it look like?*

I remember the first day we actually pulled up when – in the car. It was a – it was just that sort of dusk, and it was this huge house. It was actually previously owned in – back a long time ago by the Spencer family and it was a – they donated it to an orphanage and it eventually evolved into the children's home we went to. It was huge. It was the biggest house I'd ever seen, really. And it had, like – it had two big windows on each side and the main entrance, but then you had the kitchen on the one end and then you had the library on the other end. The driveway could fit, like, four or five cars. And it was just exciting to see this huge house and it had a big door. I'd never seen – even the door was bigger than most doors I'd ever seen. And I remember being really excited. And we went in and it was this hallway. It was huge, like I'd had bedrooms smaller than this hallway was. And then we sort of went around. There was, like, loads of places for us to hang out with. We had the small meeting room, the small front room, the library, the dining room, which was bigger than some of the houses than me and my mum and brothers had lived in. The kitchen, which was definitely bigger than my first flat that I ever stayed in [laughs]. And it was just all really exciting. And then at the back there was a huge garden, where we would regularly play football, and that was an area where we'd play football. Then there was like an art room and a pool room where we'd play pool. And there was a little patch where we used to grow vegetables and stuff like that. And there was all – like a climbing frame and trees, like pear trees and apple trees, all over the place. It

was – it was a big house but it was – I don't know, it was quite – it was almost – we always said it was a mansion, Millfield Mansion, 'cause it was just – it was on Highgate West Hill, which is quite a posh area. And it was the – one of the biggest houses on it. The only house that I think was – we knew that was bigger than it was the one that they did Fame Academy in. So you can imagine the size of this house. And it was – I always – whenever I think of it, I always see this big red door. And it had, like, three floors, so we had the children's rooms – well, it had a basement and plus two more floors above the ground floor. All the children were on one floor and there was an extra flat there for the principal, when she stayed in London. And then there was the staff office, which had – the whole office had two rooms, one for the principal, one for the staff. Then it had two meeting rooms where we could go and talk about things and stuff like that. Showers and everything. It was – it was a really big house.

*How many bedrooms did it have?*

How many bedrooms? When we first moved there, it had ... eight bedrooms, maybe nine bedrooms, but by the time I left, they converted the basement into – which was just like a storage area for bikes and stuff. They converted it into a two bedroom sort of self contained flat for care leavers, or people who were leaving, to train us to be independent and stuff like that. So when I was about fifteen I moved down there. It was actually three bedrooms down there as well, and including a staff room, an extra bedroom for the staff. And that was kind of cool, being – when you got to fifteen, that was your place to go down and learn how to cook for yourself. You had your own kitchen, your own front room. So yeah, it was quite good.

*And how old were you when you first moved into this?*

It was actually three weeks before my eleventh birthday. I always remember. It's something that's always stuck in my head. It was – I had my brother with me as well, which was cool. He was three years younger than me. But yeah, it was a – it's a good

memory. So every time I think about it, it's just – it's fun memories of excitement of first being there.

*And were you one of the youngest in the house or ...?*

When I – when I moved in, yeah, I was one of the youngest, but that didn't last for long. A few of the older ones left. They got older and they moved in – they moved out. We were there quite – me and my brother were the permanent residents there for the longest period of time while we were there. And eventually I became the oldest quite quickly, which was kind of cool, until someone came along who was actually from my school who joined the children's home, he was only – he was three weeks older than me. So he then took over a little bit as the oldest, which I didn't like [laughs].

*There was a hierarchy.*

Yeah, it wasn't – when I was – when I was the oldest, it wasn't really – there wasn't no hierarchy. We always got on. It was like we were all sort of one big family. You know, all the kids who I lived there with at the time, I still think of them. Even the ones I didn't get on with, I still think where they are, I wonder what they're up to, and stuff like that. But when he moved in, he kind of tried to dominate everything and control a lot of things, and at the time I had a very passive personality so I sort of just sat back and relaxed. And we were – we were friends while I was there, but as we got older things changed. I sort of got my own personality and my own strength and I decided that I wasn't going to take his rubbish anymore and stood up for myself. And we don't – we don't talk anymore. We actually even ignore each other when we see each other on the street because of issues that have occurred since we left.

*What were the personalities of the other kids in the house like?*

It was very mixed. We had two young brothers who were actually – they were older than me. I'm forgetting about them. But they had learning difficulties so in my mind

I was always older than them. They were – they were funny. I was actually thinking about them the other day. They've got – they had learning difficulties, different levels as well. One was more – less developed than the other. But they were a tight bond. And it was cool 'cause it was like me and my brother, we could see the same things in them. And they used to always fight and like really – when they fought each other it was really violent, but they loved each other more than I'd seen in most people. But they were really happy. When they were happy they were, like, excited and running around and always making noises. You know, the house was always full of fun and enjoyable times. Even when someone was angry, there was enough people in the house generally to sort of keep everyone happy. Then there was sort of me and my brother. We sort of – we kind of ruled for a very long time. It's the easiest way to put it. It's – I'm not going to lie. But we – not like we were, like, controlling people. We just – you know, we were just the ones everyone looked up to 'cause we'd been there the longest. And we were again quite happy and bubbly and having a good time. Then we had a few other kids who sort of came along. I kind of always tried to help out the younger ones and show them – you know, just give them advice and help them out. And kind of, if they needed someone else to talk to other than the staff member, they could always come talk to me, which I – I'm quite proud of that I did that when I was younger. I've never really thought about it till today. [Vibrating noise] Sorry, my phone.

*It's alright.*

And yeah, there was – there was loads of people. A lot of people came and went. Some people were there for a couple of months. Some people were there for years. We had some families who – like, families of kids who'd turn up who just didn't fit in. And, you know, I think that was one of the good things, if it was unsettling for the children who were there, it was very quickly sorted out, sort of, okay, these people – these kids aren't fitting in, they're causing too much trouble, let's move them out. We had some kids who were really violent. Like one guy who I knew from when I was younger, he – he came to the children's home and he had a really bad temper. And we went on holiday to Pontins in Camber Sands one time and he just decided to – he

flipped out at one of the staff members and started throwing huge pebbles at him to then – like I was – I was actually scared for the staff member because these pebbles were smashing against the wall ‘cause of how much force he was putting in. The senior – one of the senior staff members drove down from the children’s home, picked him up and when we went back, he was gone. You know, and I thought that was always quite good, you know. The longer you were there, the more chance you’d got obviously because, you know, every – when you’re young and you’re in care, every now and then something’s going to happen that could trigger an angry moment. But generally speaking, most of the kids who – who disrupted the place were quite quickly – sort of, it’s not working for us to have them there, which I think gave the rest of us a feeling of safety and we knew that it was going to be okay and that we weren’t in danger. [pauses for a drink] But we had lots of kids come and go. We actually had one guy who was there when I first moved in and he – he left ‘cause he was – he was there for years but he kept causing a lot of trouble continuously. And even when we got in trouble, it was usually because he riled something up and everyone sort of started misbehaving. And then he returned later on and – kind of when I saw him return I was kind of glad that I was where I was because he wasn’t the same person. It was something that happened to him or he’d gone through some stuff and he went from this bubbly little boy who was bouncing and everything to – to someone quite dark and who had some real deep seated issues that we never would have seen before. And it was quite sad. I’ve seen him recently. He’s been in and out of prison, addicted to crack and stuff like that, and I just – last time I saw him he was living with a lot – a gentleman who was a lot older than him and it just was a very weird relationship. The guy actually tried it on with me at a party. I just thought – I couldn’t understand what had happened and I just thought something happened while he was away that changed him, which always gave me more faith in where I was living when I saw that change because I just thought – you see so many people who’ve been through care and I’ve met other people who’ve been in care and they just look so messed up. And I just thought, well, I was really lucky. That’s why, when people do go, ‘Ah’, I go ‘Ssh, don’t be silly. Do I look like I have an issue? Don’t – don’t ah me. You know, there’s other people out there who’s had it a lot worse.’

[14:17]

*What was – what was the daily routine in that home like? What did you get up to on the – kind of on the weekends when you weren't at school? Was there a routine or a structure?*

Erm, I don't think there was so much structure. We just had a lot of things to do. We had loads of books to read if we wanted to read. There was an actual library. We called it the library but it was the front room, but there were bookshelves all over the place filled with – filled with books. We had – when you got to fourteen you were allowed a TV in your own bedroom. We had a huge garden that we could play in any time. And it was on the back of the Hampstead Heath, so we used to go off and cycle around Hampstead Heath for hours and hours and hours, go up the hill, come down hill, up the hill, down the hill. Or play pool or ping-pong, whatever was – we wanted to do. We watched a lot of – I watched a lot of TV. I like my TV so that was my thing. But we had lots of – even – we used to fix the bikes when we'd break them and, you know, learn little things like that. There wasn't any real direct structure of, this is what we're going to do and this is what you're going to have to do, you have to do this, but, you know, there was an underlying structure, you know, where we – we earned pocket money. We'd get a very small basic pocket money but then we'd do chores to earn more money. So we'd sort of – it was called rec money. So we'd get money for tidying up our room, having a tidy room, doing the dishes or stuff like that, and it would be this rota that we'd constantly work on. And that was probably the major structure that we had as well. For me it installed a discipline of – you can earn money by working and doing things. Didn't mean I always did it but [laughs], you know, it got – it gave me some – a good mindset. I wouldn't say there was – that was pretty much the only structure there. We obviously – we knew the staff rotas were three members of staff generally and the senior member and they would swap over and stuff like that. But there wasn't anything that we were ever forced to do. During the summer holidays they would have things that we could do if we wanted. We could have an arts and crafts day or we'd have – we had our own caravan, so we'd go down the caravan all the time, or we'd have other things to do, you know. Friday

night was movie night though. We used to go shopping 'cause there was no chef during the week – during the weekend, so we'd go shopping on the Friday. Whoever went shopping got to pick the video, so you'd pick the video and come back, watch a film and stuff like that. But generally I'd say there was probably very little structure. We were just allowed to be kids, to be honest.

*What were the staff like?*

Erm, to be honest, I don't think there was – I don't remember really having one bad member of staff. There was no one there that I hated or I wished wasn't there. There were some obviously who were much more stricter than others. There's – there's many people who I still continuously think about, I wish I could get in contact with them. There are some that I still talk to every now and then. I've got their number and we chat every now and then, catch up. I had a lot of good people there who gave me good role models, you know. The last big one was a gentleman called Ken. He – I was about fifteen, sixteen when he came to Millfield. But he didn't treat me like some little kid, you know. He sort of treated – taught me – treated me like the young adult that I was becoming. And the funny story is we went off to France on a little daytrip and I was very shy. There wasn't really much interaction with girls 'cause I was at an all boys' school and the only girls I really met were at Millfield, which obviously is a bit different than ... and then we were, like, going back on the ferry and there were these girls and he was sort of going, 'Talk to them.' And he sort of encouraged me to talk. I remember making an idiot of myself. But, you know, he did that for me. He pushed me, you know, he gave me sort of the advice that a dad would give to their son. And I've always sort of been very grateful to him for doing that because – some of it I've taken on board and some of it has literally stuck in my head, that I will never forget and I will always remember.

*Like what?*

It's more about sexual situations [laughs]. But, you know, he treated me like a – even on the – even on the ferry, he gave me a little bit of rum, because he was like, 'Oh,

you're sixteen now, you know.' Most kids my age had tried some sort of alcohol. I mean, I had when I was at home because my mum would leave alcohol around and we'd taste a bit, but he was sort of like – he didn't treat me like a child. He didn't get me drunk, but he just said, 'Have a little taste of that.' And that was – that was quite fun. It was quite exciting for me. Oh wow, I'm actually – you know. And he was really good. He was really fun. We had other staff members who were really great. My key worker, Darnell – well, she's my co-key worker. She was there for most of my time there. She was a Jamaican woman so I think they put us together because I was – my dad's Jamaican. And so she was there to help me, teach me about my culture and – you know, but she really cared about me. And when – when I left, or she left, I can't remember now, I could see that she – she loved me like her own child. And I think that was really important. You know, I used to go around to her house for dinner, she used to cook Caribbean food for me, she would – whenever I had an issue, she was always there to listen. You know, she tried to – like she tried to set me up with an independent visitor and they were at her church and when she realised that they'd only really wanted me so they could try and get me to join their church, she actually got really angry with them and stopped talking to them, was no longer friends with them. And even actually was telling me that she was tempted not to go back to the church 'cause she thought, if that's the kind of people at her church then was that – was kind of Christians are they. And just by having a sort of conversation like that for her – from her, I just thought, wow, like this woman actually cares about me. I mean, all my key workers and co-key workers showed a lot of care for me. And it was really important – I mean, my first one was Adam. He sort of – he was there for years. He is – he's quite a nerdy guy. Used to do train spotting and stuff like that. He introduced me to my first computer game I loved, which was Football Manager, which was called Championship Manager back then, and he used to bring his laptop with it on there 'cause it was the only computer that was allowed to have it on. And then we got it onto the computer at Millfield. And we used to go to the caravan a lot together and I got loads of pictures of us doing some weird quirky poses on the beach and stuff like that. He was a – he was a really – he really cared about all the kids there, so much so that when my mum accused him of being a pervert, I actually felt really bad and ashamed of my mum's behaviour when she said that to him, 'cause I

thought, no, if he was he's had plenty of opportunity to do that, but he hasn't. He's just shown nothing but care. My mum was just angry because he told her to leave when she wasn't supposed to be there any more. Then I had Jaz Jaz was a temporary part time member of staff who used to come and go. He lived in Derby, which was weird, but he used to come down to London and work in children's homes in London, but mostly at Millfield. And he – he used to challenge me a lot, like, intellectually and have, like, arguments with me about religion and stuff. I was, like, thirteen and fourteen and we used to discuss about – 'cause he was a Sikh but I was a Christian and we used to argue about it and stuff like that. That was quite cool, you know. Again, I wasn't treated like a child, I was treated at the correct age that I was and allowed to explore things and learn. I learnt a lot of knowledge through the staff members. I used to sit down and do crosswords with some of them or just debate stuff. And they never sort of go, oh, you don't know 'cause you're a child, they just – you know, they let me speak my point and then would give me a counterargument, which – I would sometimes be able to argue back or be sitting there going, ah crap, I'm a bit young for this conversation [laughs]. But there was loads. I mean, my first – second key worker was Lisa Watson, Lisa. She was there for a long time and looked after me really well. She looked after both me and my brother, so she was like the one who watched over our case. And then we had our co-key workers. Sandy was the principal. She was – she was very strict. We were all quite scared of Sandy. It was like the head teacher, you know. You get sent to Sandy's office, you know you've done something wrong. And she'd sit you down and she'd have a conversation with you and you'd be like, ergh, I don't like being here, this is – oh, I'm not going to do it again. And you probably wouldn't misbehave for about six or seven months again. But there was loads of staff. I mean, if I sat here and listed them all off it would take too much time. And they were all really good positive people. You know, I still – I still bump into some of them 'cause we all live in North – a lot of them live in North London, so I bump into them. They don't just go, oh, and walk off. We sit and chat and have a good conversation and we exchange numbers. We intend to meet up. Sometimes it doesn't happen, sometimes it does. But in general, I just – I actually really can't think of any single person there that I would say that I

didn't like or I hated or I felt uncomfortable with. It was just – they were there because they cared about us, I felt, and that was a really important thing for me.

[23:12]

*And when did you leave? How did that come about? How did you feel, having been at this kind of wonderfully supportive place and then having to leave?*

Well, when I turned sixteen Islington Council said that they wanted me to move out and go to the leaving care team, which was Focus at the time. Luckily again, Millfield were quite supportive and we – me and the gentleman that I mentioned earlier were the same age, so they were like, you both – like we're both from Islington as well. They both wanted us to get out there 'cause it was too expensive for them to have us there, apparently. But Millfield got us in contact with the NSPCC and this woman there, she helped us out a lot. She fought our case and kept on telling them, no, they're just finishing – they're doing their GCSEs, moving them out now would be horrendous. Then when we finished our GCSEs, I went off to do a GNVQ business studies course, which I didn't enjoy 'cause it just felt very monotonous and repetitive, so as soon as I sort of dropped out of that they swooped down and said, 'Well, you're not doing a level three course. We're going to move you out.' Erm, I was never happy about that. I never wanted to leave. Probably, if I had a choice, I'd probably still be there now [laughs]. But at the time I wasn't ready to go out. I wasn't ready for it. I was learning to be independent but I was doing it in the house and it was much more easier for me to handle because I always knew that – not just that there was support upstairs, but they would teach me stuff. They were giving me lessons. They were – the chef – we would get cooking lessons from the chef, so we could learn to cook food ourselves, you know. And then it was like I was seventeen and a half and they moved me into this shared house, where there was three other – two other people living there, people I'd never met. You know, I came there with a lot of extra stuff, like woks and pans and stuff, 'cause when I left they had a big party, all the staff bought me presents and stuff like that to leave. And I moved into this place and it was a bit hard because they were sort of – when I moved in I was – I met

the Focus team and stuff like that, but when it just came to moving in, I'd already had my key so they sort of took me into this – Adam was – it wasn't Adam, it was someone else. Someone took me into the – to my room and we dropped my bags off and all my stuff. And they sort of just hung around for, like, five minutes and then they left and then it was just me, my TV [laughs] and this room. And it was – it was quite exciting but at the same time really sad because I knew that I wasn't at Millfield no more. And I was told obviously, to help me settle down, that they didn't really want me to come back for a few more weeks, just so that I can get used to being alone. And I didn't like it at all. I was forced into doing something I didn't want to do, I wasn't ready for. I mean, it worked. I mean, I – you know, I'm not dead [laughs]. I survived and everything. It's not like it destroyed me or anything, but I – many things that went on afterwards, I had been – if I had been at Millfield, I would have had the support a little bit better, or, you know, I ended up going back to this college that year, doing my GCSE re-sits and then doing my A levels the year after. So if I was there doing my A levels – I would have probably moved out after my A levels, or the first year, but when my mum passed away when I was eighteen, when I would have preferred – you know, I could have still been at Millfield, I had no one to support me really. I had my aunt but I didn't have people – like I didn't really know my aunt that well. I didn't know my family that well. I'd only really been in contact with them for, like, four years. And whereas Millfield, I had people there who were – who knew me for years, not just staff but other kids and other residents, people who'd gone through similar things as me. And I didn't – I spent a lot of time talking to my aunts. I stayed up in Scotland 'cause that's where we buried my mum and ended up dropping out of college that year and never went back until this year. Erm, I always wonder what would have happened if I hadn't – if I had the right support me at the time, if I'd have been able to – I mean, even the leaving care team weren't allowed then. You know, they didn't come and sort of try and help me. They didn't – there was no – there was nothing there for me. I had a few meals with my family but I didn't really know – I could talk to them but – you know, my brother was too young and he was dealing with his own thing. I didn't want to talk to him about his – you know, I didn't want to put the pressure on him. And I always wonder where I would have been had I finished my A levels, had I had the support there that would have

pushed me to finish my A levels, I'd have gone to university. You know, I never dreamed – I always dreamed of going to university. I never – at the time it was just – it was a shock for people in care to even do their A levels. You know, I remember my first – one of my first days with the leaving care team. They were like, 'Oh my god, you're the first person that we've got doing A levels.' And I was like, 'What?' To me it was a shock. I thought, that's a ridiculous statement, everyone should be doing A levels. Isn't that what you do, you finish GCSEs, do your A levels. They were like, 'No, no one – none of the young people here do that.' And I was just like – that really shocked me. It actually goes back to another moment, where we were – we did the first sort of participation workshop ever in Islington Council, where they got us to meet all the councillors and discuss about where – our experiences and stuff like that. And I remember turning round and going, 'Oh, I've got four GCSEs, one B and three Cs.' I was disgusted with myself that I had only got those GCSEs, but the whole room got up and applauded me and celebrated like I'd won the World Cup or something. I was just like, this doesn't make sense, like – and I actually said to them, 'Why – why are you clapping me? I didn't do well. You should get a minimum of five. I got four and you're telling me ...' And, you know, that was the expectation. And I always wish that maybe I had gone to university and then, you know, maybe my life would have been better. Maybe I wouldn't have gone – I went a bit off the – not off the rails but I went a bit wild for a little while and enjoyed life, because I never really got to enjoy life properly when I was a kid. I did – I had a lovely time, but there was no independence for me in many ways. So when I did get free and open, you know, I partied a lot and enjoyed myself, which I – at the same time I don't regret because it's allowed me to get to who I am and where I am now. And now that I'm settled down, I'm happy to be settled down. I don't look back and go, ooh, I missed out on that.

[29:50]

*What was your relationship with school like? Where did you get that kind of motivation to want to do GCSEs and A levels?*

It was always – it was always in me, to be honest. I remember telling my mum when I was, like, eight or nine, seven, eight, nine, that I wanted to be a lawyer and those motivations – ‘cause I always thought being a lawyer would be cool. But I also, I remember telling her that I wanted to be a lawyer so that, if she ever got in trouble, I could get her out of it [laughs], which would have been a good business for me, just having my own client, to be honest. But to me, I knew – you know, when someone told me, when I said that, that I had to go to college and I’d have – they didn’t quite explain it correctly, but they said I had to go to college and university and all of this, and I was just like, fine, I’ll do what I have to do. And it was always there in my head from a young age. But Millfield I do believe sort of encouraged it. You know, when I wasn’t – when I was struggling with my GCSEs, they forced Islington Council to get me a tutor. So I had a tutor for history, maths and English, and those tutors helped because they gave me belief in myself and they pushed me. My history teacher told me that if I get anything less than a B she’d be disappointed in me. Unfortunately I got an E. That’s probably ‘cause she came to me late and I hadn’t done any coursework and she didn’t know this. I was so ashamed that I didn’t even hand her back her book. I slipped it through her letterbox ‘cause I didn’t want to meet her. But I did go back to them – when I did a GCSE in history the next time, I cruised to a B without any effort, which was quite cool. My maths teacher – tutor used to tell me, ‘You should be in the top group. Why are you in intermediate? This is ridiculous that you’re in there. Your ability in maths is fantastic.’ I’d go to school and no one would ever say anything like that to me. So these people who – at the same time, I was a little bit, like – I was having to have, were the ones who pushed me that little bit over the line and to continue. My school, they just expected – they just – their expectation of me was that I was a troubled kid. I was in care. They knew it wasn’t because of behaviour of mine, but when I used to act out because of issues at home or because of issues that I – someone intruded – you know, someone would say something that would just make me flip, they just said, oh, you know, oh, don’t worry about him. They never really got to the root of the reason why. They sort of just punished me like they would normally and then just sort of brushed it under the table. And they never really expected much from me. Even when I was in lessons and I knew more than other people – you know, the biggest example – they let me down, you know, at

school. The biggest example was, I went to France with Millfield for a holiday for two weeks and had a French girlfriend while I was over there. I was like twelve, thirteen years old. And she didn't speak any English. I didn't speak any French, which was a bit weird. But I had a – we had this guy who was a fan and he supported Paris St Germain who Arsenal had beaten that year in Europe, and he translated. So we were friends – so he translated between the two of us and kept sort of the relationship going. And I learnt so much French because of listening to him speak, translating what she was saying and would then translate to her, and I'd learn. I went back to school and I was hitting, like, ninety-eight percent on every test, like ninety-eight, ninety-six. I think the lowest I got was a ninety-three percent test. And then we did our SATs, or mock SATs, I did ninety-eight percent, which was meant to push me into the group for the rest of my next three years – two years, and they only pushed me up one group, you know, instead of – and that group was the worst group. You know, 'cause the group I was in before were underachievers who wanted to – who loved the excitement of learning French. They loved French. They were never going to be fluent in it but they enjoyed it. The group in the middle were the ones who just – were just lazy, you know. They were disruptive and it caused problems. But because no one had much expectation for me, they didn't think I could handle being in the top group, which was ridiculous as I could – I was speaking fluent French, you know, almost – well, for my age. I was far superior to everyone else. When I went into the top group, that second group, I was even better than the kid who got the best test mark in that group. And by not putting me in a top group, I always felt that it – if they had put me in that top group, I would have got a C, a B easily. I ended up with an E again. I got lots of Es. I got my three Cs and a B but lots of Es [laughs]. And they just – they let me down because I was in care and they felt he's – you know, he's only going to be able to do so much, or whatever. And they always kind of – it always annoys me that I was never really seen as someone who was intellectual, yet after leaving school all the people who – who taught me or were in my class were like, why are you doing this, you should be far, like, past this. You know, I had a tutor when I was doing my GCSE re-sits. She used to turn round and say, 'We're getting complaints about your attendance.' And I was like, 'I'm bored. I don't want to be here, 'cause I'm – it's so easy.' She goes, 'I know. I've seen you in my lessons

when you do turn up and you probably won't get challenged until you get to university.' And I was like, 'What?' You know, that was the first time anyone had – another person other than those tutors had said something really good about my academic. And I was really shocked by that 'cause I thought, everyone gets challenged my A levels, you know. And she said that. But she was like, 'No, you're very smart. You know what you're doing. The way you explain things and learn about things is a lot better than most people that we deal with in ... You've just got to keep in attendance or you won't get entered for the exams.' And whereas my school never ever sort of gave me that support, never ever gave me that push, never – again, it's pretty much like Islington, never expected any much more than, lucky we get a GCSE out of him. And I think that was a major, major mistake they made. I mean, they've corrected it now. I work – I do some voluntary work with Islington Council now and children's services and they do expect much more, but I don't think they do – they expect much more but I don't know how much they push for a lot of the younger people. From what I've – what I've seen, a lot of the British born children seem to be in the same cycle that I was, whereas a lot of the asylum seeking children or sanctuary seeking children, who push themselves more – they have the support if they get there, but I don't – I haven't – when I look at the two groups of people, you can see there's a major difference between them. There's a lot – I think it's more about what they do for themselves than what Islington Council does for them. Yeah, they give them the money that they need, but I just don't think people push kids who grew up in care enough.

[36:06]

*So at the time of really – these really important educational times in your life, GCSEs, A levels, your mum passed away.*

Mm-hmm.

*And she seems like she was coming in and out of your life a lot while you were at Millfield.*

Yeah.

*What are your earliest memories of your mum? What was she like as a person?*

Erm, there's many different sides to – there was many different sides to my mum. My early – my strongest memory is always – it's sitting in the – probably the strongest memory I have is sitting in the front room while she was hoovering up and I'm watching football, Arsenal, on the TV and she's playing her music full blast, like, reggae music. And that's always a memory I get from her. Whenever I listen to a lot of old school reggae, I get that image of her in the front room, dancing away, hoovering up. My mum had a lot of problems. Unfortunately she was abused as a child which caused her to – I don't know. I don't think she ever truly grew up, you know. She always had this clinging on to her childhood. You know, she used to – whenever we used to get teddy bears, she would keep them for herself and stuff like that, you know. Not in a mean way but it was just – I – I don't know why but I kind of understood it, I never resented her for it, you know. But I wish I had a teddy bear, but they were all hers. But she – she cared about me, you know. She instilled a lot of strong manners. She instilled my – I even to this day – I can't stand it when someone eats with their mouth open because she would tell me every time I did it to stop do it, you know, a little clip round the head, stop that, you know. And it got to the point where it actually sometimes physically hurts if someone does it too loudly near me and I'm just like, 'Will you stop eating with your mouth open?' And they're like, 'What?' And I'm like, 'You don't understand how disgusting that is.' And a lot of people do it, but because of what she instilled in me, I know it's wrong to do that, you know. I'm polite. A lot of the reason is because of her. I respected my – I respect my elders, even sometimes when they don't deserve it, because of what she did. And some of my family, I show them respect, even though a lot of them don't deserve it, and it's because my mum always said, you know, your family are who matters, 'cause you can't choose them but most of them will be there when you need them. She was a really friendly person, you know. She used to take people off the street all the time. I mean, literally, there was like – she'd meet a girl on a night out and that girl was, like,

homeless or something, or nearly going to be homeless, and ended up living with us for a little while. My mum would get them on their feet, you know, get them a council house, you know, and help them. The amount – there was quite a few people that my mum had helped, you know. They turned out to be my auntie this or auntie that, but they weren't really, it was just some woman that my mum knew. But she helped out a lot of people. Unfortunately no one really helped her, you know. A lot of people took from her. And then unfortunately she ended up – she dabbled in sort of, you know – I always knew weed – about cannabis around my life, all my life. I grew up with quite a lot of Rastafarians in my life. In actual fact I was a Rastafarian for a little while. And she started off with that a little bit and probably was dabbling in other things that I didn't really know about, 'cause she never really promoted other drugs. And that sort of just carried on leading on to more and more and more until she was no longer able to look after us. And I don't blame her because I know it was caused because of what had happened to her as a child, you know. She was one of, like, five or six siblings in the house. Most of them were abused by the older brother and it affected them, and you can see it affected them in different ways. And my mum was a quite strong rebel and she fought against her – my granddad and she got moved from – it's a funny story, I overheard this. She got moved to this secure unit for young children in Glasgow and no one ever escaped this place, never. This is why they put her there, 'cause she had escaped from every one else they put her in. Within twenty-four hours of being in the place, she was at home with three friends from the place. She'd made three friends, got them out of the place and took them back to Dundee, which is not exactly next door, you know. They had to hitchhike and stuff like that. And that sort of – I think that sort of epitomised my mum perfectly. She – you know, she didn't just escape herself, you know, she took people with her. And that's who she was, she was a caring person who unfortunately had a bad start and that escalated. In the – the last year or so before she passed away, she was living with my aunt, who was quite conveniently living near where I lived, so I spent a lot of time with her. And she said to me that probably the best thing she ever did was let me stay in care. And I told her straight, 'Yeah, I do think that it was, you know.' She did tell me sometimes that she wished that – if I – if we hadn't gone into care, maybe she wouldn't have spiralled as far as she had, but that was selfish of her, she said, and that

it was best that we went into care because we were able to give – we were given something more than we would have been by her because of what she had gone through. And truthfully, I'm grateful that she made that sacrifice, that choice to do that. Okay, obviously it wasn't her first choice, 'cause social services took us away from her, but in the end, you know, she knew that she couldn't do what she needed to do. And she – and I respected her for being able to say that and admit that, 'cause a lot of parents wouldn't do that, you know. A lot of parents sit there and tell social workers, 'You can't take my child away from me. I'm the best thing for them.' And the fact of it is, they're not always. I mean, we can see that in so many cases that's happened recently. And I mean, I may have a slightly blinkered image of my mum, but I have a massive, massive amount of love for her. She's ... was the most important woman in my life. You know, without her I wouldn't have been born. Without her I wouldn't have my brothers, even though sometimes I'd like to kick their heads in [laughs], but that's what siblings are like. But she did – she instilled so much in me before I went into Millfield that – you know, she instilled a fighting spirit. You know, she always told me to stand up for myself, be – and stand up for my rights. You know, she may have used Bob Marley to do it, but, you know, she did it. She always gave me that mentality, that I shouldn't accept if I don't agree with something, you know. It comes a bit of a problem every now and again. I can be quite argumentative, especially at work. I get into trouble for not bowing down to the bosses and listening to what they say, even when I think they're wrong. But I think that's a good thing, you know. I think too many people are quite easily led and my mum never ever allowed that to happen to me, you know, just from what she instilled. And that was continued on by Millfield, you know. They helped us with – giving us meetings, weekly meetings, where we would tell them what we weren't happy about, whatever we wanted to change. Or if there was a conflict between two children and stuff like that, and, you know, I think the two of them coming together was what made me so strong then the final time.

*And she grew up in Scotland, did she, your mum? Were you born in Scotland or ...?*

No. I was born in London. I'm a true blooded Londoner. I never admit to being English, which annoys a lot of people, because I always say I've got no English blood in me, but I'm definitely a Londoner. I love London. I think it's – I've been in a couple of other countries over time and I just think London's so great, you know. Even coming here today, I'm sitting in Central London, it's like, wow, so – you know, you still get shocked at – man, having seen this place, where's the – you know. But yeah, I'm definitely a Londoner. My mum grew up in Dundee, which is quite a small town in Scotland. It's one of the bigger ones but it's – in comparison to London, it's tiny. I think that was the major thing, when she moved there where the police all knew her and – they were actually scared of her, you know. The funniest – another funny story that I overheard is that my aunt was at a pub, underage drinking, and the police raided. And in Scotland they're very strict about underage drinking. And the police officer goes to her, 'What's your name?' She went, 'Sylvia Thompson.' And the police officer looked and went, 'One second.' Called over his sergeant, 'Sarge, come listen to this.' And he went, 'What's your name?' And she went, 'Sylvia Thompson.' He actually laughed in her face and went, 'Do you think there isn't a single police officer in this town who doesn't know your sister?' You know, and that was kind of – you know, that's how she was in there. But she came to London and it was very different, you know. In – up in Dundee there wasn't the same drug scene. London was only just starting getting involved – like, crack started coming in slowly, slowly and then it exploded. The government wasn't aware of the dangers on how strong and how bad or potent a drug it was, I think. When my mum was looking after us and it was – there wasn't the education about it that there is now and she just fell into that trap and it's hard to get out of that trap. You know, many people die or continue living just stuck on that.

[45:17]

*And where does your dad come into your life?*

Erm, my dad – yeah. It's hard about my dad. Erm, I don't know how to – he wasn't around. He was definitely never around, as a child. He said it was – I met up with

him recently. I was always around his family, you know, so I always knew that I was a Baker. I always knew that my cousins were my cousins, you know. Every now and then I'd get in contact – somehow I'd get in contact with them. And then there was Facebook. I got really reconnected to some of my cousins. It was actually quite funny how I got in contact with my dad – 'cause I first started working at my company I work now and the assistant manager there, me and him were talking about where we grew up and where he lived and stuff like that, and I mentioned the name of my – my dad. And he was like, 'Oh, him.' And he started asking me questions about who his brothers were and stuff. And it turned out that he was the father of one of my cousin's children. And so he ended up getting my dad's number and stuff like that. But my dad – my dad was never around for me as a child, you know, something I kind of really resent. And I've never really told him that, but it was something that I was never happy about and I always wonder what – I mean, he had his own – he had another family by the time I went into care, but – you know, I've been told he denied that he was his own – his son. Even though everyone had seen us, he'd always say, pff, you know. And then when I met him, I was like, 'There is no way we ain't related. It's ridiculous.' 'Cause he's sort of tall and built and – you know, and his facial features are very similar. Like my cousin, like, from my mum's side who's seen him was like, 'I can see he's your dad,' you know. And I think that always hurt me a bit. And even – even today, like, we don't get in contact with each other and he doesn't really talk to me that much. I try to talk to him but, you know, it's just not there. But his family are always – were always there for me when I needed them, generally speaking, you know. I chat to them every now and then on Facebook. And I've got two – three siblings from him and his other family, who I talk to every now and then. It's hard though because it's weird having siblings that you've not grown up with, especially how tight me and my brothers were because we were the only ones there for each other. So then we had three other siblings that I didn't really know anything about and I don't have that same connection to them as I do to my others, and it's hard to continue to try and build a relationship with them. But, you know, I chat to them when I can. But my dad, I – to be honest, I don't really care about him. I don't – yeah, I hate to say it, but I do want a relationship with him because – it's not just, like, for me. It's, like, when I have kids, you know, my kids aren't going to have

a grandmother – well, a grandfather. They'll have a grandmother hopefully out there somewhere. But I wouldn't want them to miss out on that 'cause, you know, I think grandparents are – are very important, you know, no matter what you say. Even today, they weren't great parents, they're still an important factor when it comes to being a grandparent. Obviously my wife – well, my girlfriend, she would – her parents would be around but, you know, I'd like them to know where they came from. Especially with my dad being Jamaican, it's more important that they know that they've got that roots in them for me. But I just – I just don't – I – I just don't think I should be the one chasing, you know. I think he should have – he should be constantly chasing, constantly badgering me. And he wasn't in my life for, like, twenty-seven years, or twenty years plus, you know, why am I the one who should be chasing after him? You know, I'm his oldest son as well, you know. Like to me, you know, the hierarchy of family has always been quite strong because I was the one who had to look after my brothers because I was the oldest, you know. I always felt like being the oldest was the most important – was important. And yet he seems to not really show as much care for me and it – it hurts, but I've got to where I am now without him, so I'll still continue without him. It's his loss. That's how I've always looked at it, you know. He can – he can do what he wants, like, he's losing out. He's not going to – you know, I'm proud of who I am and that makes – that's all that matters to me.

[49:40]

*Is your mum's Jamaican as well?*

No, my mum's Scottish. So it's just my dad's Jamaican, black Jamaican. My mum, white Scottish.

*And she listened to reggae music.*

Yeah, she – she came to London, but I don't – I don't really know. Some aunts have told me that she listened to black music before she moved to London. Some aunts

have said it wasn't her, it was that she was the one who did it. Look, my mum didn't come to London looking for a black man [laughs]. It wasn't like that, you know. She just moved to London and wanted the big city. Dundee was too small for her. And she just found black music, I guess, and black culture. You know, she instilled a lot of Caribbean culture in me, you know. I used to – used to always – I grew up eating Caribbean food, living with my mum, you know, curried goat, oxtail, all of that stuff. I remember saying to people when I moved to Millfield, like, 'This is the first time someone's ever served me egg and chips for dinner, you know. Eggs are for breakfast. You don't have it at dinner. You don't ever have eggs. Why would you fry eggs for dinner?' And people were like, 'This is how we do it all the time.' And I was like, 'It's weird, you know. I want some rice and peas. I want ...' You know, I didn't get that enough at Millfield because there wasn't enough Caribbean people to cook it. But when it was cooked, we all enjoyed it a lot. But it was always quite a mild version of it, whereas I grew up with a hot version. So when I came out of Millfield, it was a bit weird, the change, when I went back to eating curried goat and stuff and – ooh [laughs]. And now I've kind of got my tolerance up a lot higher. But yeah, she gave me a lot of my Caribbean culture, also because she – although my dad wasn't around, my gran loved my mum, from my dad's side, and she took her under her wing and helped her out. I think she showed her how to cook. I'm not too sure about that 'cause no one's ever – no one knows where my mum exactly definitely learnt it from, but she is definitely – she was one of the best cooks I ever tasted. Whenever I go to Caribbean food, I compare it to my mum's. And there's this thing I always say, that you can always tell when someone's good at Caribbean food 'cause they put love into the food, and my mum loved to cook and when she cooked you could taste it. Sometimes you go for Caribbean food and it's just generic Caribbean food and then another time you'll go and you go to another place and you can just tell. And I was actually introducing my girlfriend to Caribbean food recently and I was saying to her about – telling her the story about how you put love in the food and you could taste the love, and she was like – looked at me like she was a bit weird, like she didn't quite understand it. And then when we went to pay, I was chatting to – to the woman who was cooking and I was like, 'Yeah, it was really good. It reminds me of when my mum cooked.' She goes, 'Yes, 'cause I put love in the food.' And she said

it exactly the same way. And my girlfriend looked at me and she goes, 'Okay, so maybe there is something about it.' [Laughs] You know. But my mum – when I chose to be a Rastafarian, I wanted dreadlocks – I didn't care about Rastafarianism as a child, I just wanted to have dreadlocks 'cause my uncles had them, but she said, 'If you want to have dreadlocks you'll have to be a Rastafarian.' And I was just like, 'Okay.' I wasn't too sure what that meant, but I'll do it. And then she sort of explained, like, the outlines to me and the most important rule she made to me was that I was no longer allowed to have pork, which was quite sad 'cause I like bacon. And when I did cut my dreads off, that was the first thing I had [laughs]. But yeah, she gave – she instilled a lot of it into me. She – you know, she made me know that I was Caribbean as well as English or British. And I – again, that's something more that I'll always be grateful for what she did for me.

[52:55]

*And did the area you grew up in have some kind of resonance with this Caribbean culture?*

Mm, definitely. At the time Finsbury Park was very much – I always – very Celtic and Caribbean, you know, lots of Jamaicans and lots of other Caribbean people. But yeah, like the Scots and the Irish and – people were always descended from those sort of areas as a majority. Like the – the food stalls on – what's it called? Stroud Green Road, all the shops along there were, like, black food shops or black hair shops and stuff like that. They're still there. The people have changed in the area but there's still that same roots, still the same people. You still see them hanging around and the same shops are still there. You can go buy your oxtail from the butcher. He'll prepare it for you. He'll know exactly – when you ask for oxtail, he knows exactly what you – what you're using it for and stuff like that. The area was very – there was a lot of Caribbean people. But not just that. We spent some time in – on the borders of Islington and Hackney where my gran lived and so obviously there was even more Caribbean culture there for me. But yeah, where I grew up, yeah, there definitely was a lot of Caribbean culture. But when we moved to Angel, because of an incident that

happened in my house, it went from being a – an ethnic diverse area to Angel, which was a very white area, where people didn't understand what my – like, they didn't even understand, like, what dreadlocks were about. You know, at this point I was like, eight, seven, eight, and I kind of knew well enough about Rastafarianism and I believed in it and I followed it, you know, and people there just looked at me, why have you got long hair, you know. And it just – and it was very – massive shock for me. It kind of changed me a lot because I became quite reserved and quiet and inward because people just – I got bullied, you know. I mean, even the – even the black kids who were in my school at that time, I would say they were more white than I was, you know, 'cause they – it's not that they chose to be, it's just that the area they lived in, all the friends they had were more likely to be white because there wasn't that many ethnic minorities there. So they – you know, if you just meet people who are the same culture as you, you keep it. If you don't have that around you, you lose it. And it was very hard for me to sort of be comfortable around there. I got bullied. Luckily I had a – an older family friend who came down and dealt with the bullies one day. He didn't hit them but, you know, he was big and mean enough looking that he basically told them, if they ever touch me, that he'll deal with them. Suddenly they became my friends and asked me to play football all the time, which was good that I had him around. But that was hard. It was very hard for me because, you know, even the – getting hold of the food was hard for my mum, you know, 'cause she'd have to go far to go pick up the food, the meat and stuff like that, 'cause you would – you couldn't get oxtail in the local butchers in Angel. You know, you couldn't get goat, you know. And it's not – it's not Angel's fault, it's just that's not the kind of people that were there. But that's when everything sort of went a bit downhill as well with my mum. She was a lot closer to King's Cross, which at the time was a really horrible place to be, you know. It's not great now but in comparison to what it was like then in, like, the early '90s, late '80s, it's – [laughs] it's a paradise now, you know. Then it was horrible. It was full of prostitution and drug addicts and that was all it was, you know. You had the station. People got out of the train and got out of there as quick as possible. And so therefore it was easier for my mum to get hold of the drugs and that sort of just led her down a – a – quicker down the path that she may have – she may have been travelling, but that definitely rushed her onwards, unfortunately.

**The following section is closed for thirty years until October 2043 [00:56:50-01:02:14]**

*Female: I want to let you know that – I said after an hour I'd let you know. It's now an hour and two minutes.*

*Okay.*

*Female: So you could have a break now if you want to?*

Yeah, a little bit of a break.

*Yeah, that's great.*

[Break in filming]

[1:02:27]

*When we left off, we were talking about – you'd just moved to Angel from Finsbury Park and you were finding that difficult. Is that right?*

Yep.

*And I was wondering what it was like for you and your three brothers being at home with your mum when she was going through this kind of difficult period?*

It was – it was – it – it varied a lot. You know, some days there was – you wouldn't even know anything was going on, you know. There was the odd party or whatever. Other days, sort of – my mum would go out at night, leaving me in charge. You know, I was always in charge at that point – not always, but I was in charge a lot of the time, looking after my brothers, making sure they were – sometimes feeding them. Even when she was in the house, she always sort of – she tried to get me to learn to

cook from a young age, which was good 'cause I – it kind of encouraged my enjoyment of cooking. She always said to me that she wanted me to be able to cook so that I didn't rely on any woman when I grew up, which stuck with me for many years. But I don't know. I don't think I was aware fully of what was going on at the time, you know. I just – it just felt normal, 'cause it had always sort of been like that, you know. My mum always had sort of a very wild social life. There was lots of people always coming round. We knew, like, ninety percent of the people, you know. On the odd occasion there might be someone new who'd end up still coming round more often, so eventually we'd know them. But yeah, I – I wouldn't have been able to tell you if something bad was going on, you know. I wouldn't have – I didn't know that my mum was taking hard drugs, you know. There was weed in the house and stuff like that, but I grew up around weed, you know. I always thought weed wasn't a – was an acceptable drug to smoke because it's natural and it's grown in the earth, and I stuck by that for many, many, many years. Still sort of stick by it now. I don't smoke but, you know, I still sort of understand there's a lot of benefits to it. But I didn't know about any other drugs. I was never sort of – I was there one night when my mum had a flashback, an acid flashback, from when she was younger, and even then I didn't really know what that was, you know. She explained it – she told me that she had a flashback and she told me that she'd been chased by pink elephants with Mars Bars. You know, I thought that's what everyone had when they were on acid, they'd be chased by pink elephants with Mars Bars, 'cause I was young, you know. But I didn't understand it was 'cause it was a heavy drug that she'd taken, or anything like that. So, you know – but when I look back, as I've grown older, I look back at the state the house was in at the time, I realise that there was something going on, you know. Obviously there was something going on, but a lot more than I realised, you know. It was actually only me and my two brothers at that point. My other brother's from my dad's side. But me and my two brothers, we were always sleeping on sort of like mattresses on the floor. We never had our own sort of little bed. It was just a mattress, you know. Even my mum slept on a mattress, you know. And it was weird 'cause – I remember our house in Finsbury Park was so well maintained, so steady, you know. We had a lovely front room with sofas and chairs, and a couple of burn marks on the carpet because me and my brother liked fires. My

bedroom had a nice cupboard, wardrobe and its own bed and stuff like that. My brothers had all – you know, we had everything a normal family would have. Then going from there to Angel, which was a quick rush, obviously the government don't give people enough money to just go out and buy a whole flat, so we went from having this nice house to a couple of hostels, which were nice, to suddenly having – sleeping on the floor on a mattress, you know. We didn't even have an alarm clock. I remember my social worker, she – taking us to Argos to buy us an alarm clock. It was a little football one that you used to throw against the wall to stop it from ringing. I think that was more entertaining, to stop it from ringing, than anything else. 'Cause we were always missing school, but we were always late for school. It's funny, at the time I just thought they were – that's what social services were there to do you know, but then when I look back I can – I can see that they were there trying to help my mum improve – make the changes that she needed to continue looking after us. As I said, at the time I didn't realise it was – it was that bad. It was – you know, it was just slightly – slightly worse than where we lived before. But yeah, it was different.

[1:07:00]

*So how old were you when social services first entered into your life?*

I think social services were always flirting with our family, but when they finally came in was when we moved to Angel. I think they were there before we moved to Angel, in the hostels and stuff. Obviously we were a homeless family in their eyes so they got involved. But when we moved to Angel, that's when we first met my social worker, who – we were quite lucky enough to have the same social worker until I left social services. She's even helped me now recently when I needed to get some more voluntary work. I emailed her, 'cause I know she's still at Islington, emailed her, she set me up with the people I'm working with at the moment. She was – she's another very important person in my life, in actual fact probably one of the most important people, because even when Islington were telling her one thing, she – I knew she fought against them and did things that they probably didn't want her to do because she knew what was best for us or she wanted what was best for us. And I would say I

was maybe [sighs] ... eight – seven, eight, nine, in those – I don't really know how long I was in Angel for. I think I may have only been there a year. It could have been two years. That time was a very unclear time for me. Maybe it's because I blanked stuff out or – or just erased it from my memory because I don't really want to remember what happened. But I don't know for sure when – or how old we were when she – when they fully came into our lives.

*Did you understand who they were?*

Not really. To be honest, they were just ... no, they were just someone who sort of came round and helped us out, you know, someone who was trying to make things better for us. I knew that, you know. I knew that they were there because they wanted us to have better things. That was how it always seemed to me, they wanted us to be better. They wanted us to go to school every day. They wanted us to, you know, live like a normal TV sort of family. Which is quite hilarious to me 'cause I never saw my family as a TV sort of family 'cause we were never going to be, single mother with three kids who – even – especially then, like, mixed race people weren't that – well, it wasn't a big thing, you know. We weren't, like, everywhere like we are now [laughs]. So I don't know, I just – I didn't understand what they were trying to do because I just – I think they didn't understand who we were. But yeah, I don't really know. I don't fully – didn't know exactly who they were. I just knew that they were there trying to help and change things for us.

*What was your social worker like?*

Erm, Julie was really, really cool. I actually find out recently, through my brother's adoptive mother, that we were her first proper case as a social worker, which – I said to her – when my brother's adopted mother said that, I said to her, 'Wow. She hit the ground running, didn't she?' [Laughs] But she wasn't – she – again, I think she was definitely someone who cared about what she was doing. She wasn't in it for the money at all, you know. She did it truly because she wanted to help kids out and she enjoyed doing that. Erm, the easiest way to explain it is, she wasn't like most social

workers. You know, like the senior social workers around her, like her senior – her manager was a woman called Gloria, I still remember her as well because she sort of covered for her when Julie was on holiday or had to spend some time away. But I remember, like, every Christmas Julie would get us kids presents, you know, toys and – like stuff that kids would enjoy, whereas when Gloria came along she gave us educational presents and educational toys. And it always sort of made me understand that Julia, Julie knew who we were and knew what we'd enjoy and she cared about us. Gloria, we were just some kids that she had to, you know, support or help out. It wasn't – she didn't have the same care for us. Obviously she wasn't – she was only our social worker's manager, but she wasn't – I don't know. It was always – oh, what's the word I'm looking for? It struck a chord with me that we got the fun presents from Julie and the boring presents from Gloria. I still – the fact that she's still helping me up to today – you know, we're going for – we went for coffee and I sort of asked her for some advice on how I could become a social worker and what she thinks I could do improve and stuff like that, or what I would need to sort of go forward, and we sat down and, you know, she took the time out of her own life, 'cause she wasn't getting paid for her time. You know, it was her own lunch break and she took that time to spend it with me, and I told her I'm very grateful for her doing that. You know, I even bought the coffees, even though she refused – she tried to refuse. I was like, 'No, you bought me a lot of dinners and coffees and teas over the years. Let me buy you one.' And I work in the same building – I volunteer in the same building as she works and I always kind of hope that one day I'll bump into her. It would be quite cool to bump into her in a work environment together. And when I hear her name being spoken by other social workers in the building, I kind of just get a little smile on my face 'cause she – she cared a lot. She fought me for me a lot of the time. Like when they wanted to move us out, she fought for me. When – every time that we got a foster placement for myself or my brother or something like that – back then we weren't allowed to be fostered by white people 'cause apparently they wouldn't understand our culture, which I understand – after sort of growing up and meeting other people who were older than me in care, I see the reasons why that idea came about, but to me it didn't make sense at the time. And, you know, she – she said that she really hated the rule because she'd found this lovely family who would look after

us and she really knew that they would be good for us and they really wanted to look after me, and she wasn't allowed to – they weren't allowed to work with us because they were white. And I was – I couldn't understand it 'cause my mum was white. I was like, 'This is stupid, like, my mum's white.' And she was like, 'I know, it's not my choice.' And the fact that she spoke – again, she was another one who spoke to me like I'm an adult, not like a child. Even though I wasn't an adult, but she spoke to me correctly. She didn't just sort of talk down to me. She spoke to me on the level, which again I think is probably why I've got so respect because she gave me that time, sure. But it's not her choice, she wishes she could change it, but it's just the rules of Islington Council, you know. It's not even Islington Council, it's the government that there was at the time, you know. And even though they're ridiculous – and things have changed now to a point. There's still some sort of rules and legislation behind why they shouldn't – who they should be and who they shouldn't go to. Would it have been better – would I have had a better life? I don't know, you know. I'm happy. I had a great time at Millfield. I always wonder if I had moved to a foster parent, I might have had that support when things went bad later on, that I don't have now, you know. But then not having that support has made me as strong as I am now, you know. I've had to fight for myself. I've had to work. There's no one else going to pay my bills – well, my girlfriend does now a bit but that's 'cause I'm a student. But, you know, up until I met my girlfriend, there was no one there to pay my bills. I had to. If I didn't I had to live on benefits. I tried that for a little while. It's not fun. You can't do anything, like – it always makes me laugh when I hear about people who live on benefits and I think, you don't live on benefits, you don't even survive. You get by, you know. And I – I just got pushed to go forward by everybody, all of those people, because of what happened. But yeah, as you can tell, I really care about Julie. She was a major influence and someone who's done a lot for me.

*Do you remember how your mum felt about having Julie coming into your home?*

Erm, I don't remember how she felt about her coming into my home, but I know my mum loved Julie. My mum – and I think Julie cared a lot about my mum, you know.

And I know my mum never had a bad thing to say about Julie. She always thought that – you know, and even when she took us away, she never said, ‘Oh, blah, blah, blah,’ you know. She – I think Julie dealt with it in the right way, you know. She built up a rapport with my mum, explained the situations correctly. My mum had an understanding of the system, so she knew – she had a very good understanding of the system, so she knew what was happening, why it was happening. There was – there was always some days where she would – they would argue about certain things, but that’s going to happen. If you’re threatening to take someone’s child away, they’re not going to stand by it every time and go, ‘No, okay, let’s just have that happen. I’m happy to ...’ but as far as I remember, she never really – she never hated her. But maybe there was times when I never saw that they had massive arguments or my mum – I don’t think Julie really argued. It would probably just be my mum shouting at her. But yeah, as far as I knew, from what I could see, there wasn’t an issue between the two of them. [Crashing noise]

*Female: Oh, don’t worry.*

*That’s alright, that’s fine.*

Sorry.

*We can get you some more water in a bit.*

*Female: Is it okay if we stop for a second?*

Mm-hmm.

[1:16:30]

*So we were talking about your mum’s relationship with Julie and you were saying that they seemed to get on, from what you – from what you remembered. And your*

*mum had a very good understanding of the system, you said as an aside, and I wondered where she got that from.*

Well, you know, she was a very naughty little girl, you know, in and out of homes and security units and secure units and stuff like that. I think that instilled a – my mum was an intelligent woman. She made mistakes, she did stupid – she did stupid things, but she was smart and she knew the systems. She knew how to play the systems, sort of taught me and showed me how to do it. Even as a young kid, I sort of picked up a lot of things, watching her. But she understood, like – especially, like, the housing system. That's why, when she helped people off – who were homeless, were in a horrible place, she'd end up getting them a nice flat and, you know, they would end up being in a better place than they were before my mum had met them. So she spent a lot of time paying attention to what was going on around her, so she knew how to play the game and made sure that, you know, she got what was best for her or her family out of it.

[1:17:35]

*And in the first part of the interview you mentioned that your mum talked to you about her life before you were born and her life growing up, and then you talked about how your mum explained what she'd been seeing when she was on acid and having drugs. And it seems, for someone who was seven, eight, nine, a very kind of open relationship, a very frank relationship. Is that – is that how you would ...?*

Yeah, definitely. I've always – not in a vain way, but I've always been quite an intelligent person. I think I was always quite advanced for my years, many – from a young age. If I'd been born into a more conventional family, I think I would have – it would have been seen or something. But, you know, my mum tried to hide at first, you know, by spelling words that – you know, even complicated words so that I wouldn't understand, but she then found out that didn't work 'cause I would then just go through my head and then read it myself and then say, 'What?' [Laughs] We used to get – she used to tell me to stop learning to spell that word and stop listening, you

know. And then I think she just gave up in the end 'cause she knew that, no matter what she said, I had good hearing, I'd hear her and I would be able to understand it quite quickly. And there was no way that I was going to – there was no way she was going to stop me from being that person, you know, 'cause that's who I was. You know, I understood things a lot better than people of my own age, and sometimes older than me, because I just paid attention, you know. And if – she knew that I was going to learn it, I was going to figure it out, I think she felt she might as well just be honest about things and, you know, tell me. I mean, she covered things up. She didn't always be completely frank, but she sort of – she would use different terminology to hide something so that I wouldn't quite know. But by the time we'd been – we lived in Angel, she was very open and honest about things. She told me a lot of truths and she didn't hide it. I mean, she didn't really tell me about her childhood until – actually I don't think it was really her. She sort of – I kind of learnt about it as I got older. It was when I moved – when I got in contact with her family, went up to Scotland and there were all these fractions and issues that were in the family that I didn't know about. I thought everything was wonderful when I was on holiday with them, before I went into care, but when I went there when I was fifteen years old people started telling me stuff about this uncle or this cousin or this person or that person, and therefore it kind of went, ah, okay. And then I kind of started questioning stuff, like, what about my mum. And people told me that my mum had been molested and stuff like that. And then I sort of spoke to – we ended up having a conversation about it with her. It came up when my uncle who molested her came to London and – to see my aunt, who was the youngest. He – she was one of the few that hadn't been molested by him, and my mum – my aunt obviously was asking my mum whether it was fine because she was living her there and they came through, and my mum said she accepted what had happened and she'd forgiven him because there was other reasons, 'cause he'd been abused and that created a cycle that he'd continued. My mum sort of was quite open about it then. At this point I was, like, sixteen, seventeen. So that's when I learnt about it. But she – I don't think she bothered hiding. She tried to hide and knew that she was never going to be able to hide things – be able to hide things from me, because I was smart enough to pick up on what was going on around me, even if I weren't looking to – looking like I was

paying attention. I actually pissed off a lot of my teachers 'cause they would think I'm just messing about and then I learnt everything they were saying and then regurgitated back at them at secondary school and they'd be like, oh, argh. So yeah, it was – but I'm grateful for that in many ways, that she was that open with me, because it's allowed me to understand what went on and what was going on around me at the time. And now that I'm older, it may be what's helped me come to terms with where I was and what happened to me and how I ended up being in that situation. It's ... it could have been bad. It could have gone the wrong way, you know. And in some ways it may have, you know. 'Cause she did tell me when I was younger than she'd rather I smoke weed than smoke cigarettes, so when I first got offered a spliff after I went into care, I kind of went, 'Ah, my mum said it's okay,' you know. I still probably agree with her, you know. I'm sure I'd say – I'd rather someone smoked pure cannabis than nicotine cigarettes because there – there has been a lot of studies to prove that there is the benefits towards the negatives of cigarettes. But anyway, that's another situation [laughs]. But yeah, it – she was definitely very frank and very open about everything.

*And did this openness translate into independence for you? Did you live in a strict house or were you allowed to come and go as you pleased?*

Erm ... it was strict when it was needed to be, you know. I was – I used to play out in the park, you know, I'd go to the local council estate that I used to have friends on and we could play in the park there, you know, but I had to be in at a certain time, you know, so I had to know when I was going to be in. This was all in Finsbury Park mostly. You know, all – but it was a safer time then, you know. Kids would just go out and have fun and do what they wanted and have a laugh. It did create too much independence, I think, sometimes. We were – I was a bit of an artful dodger as a kid in Finsbury Park. I used to shoplift at the local Tesco's, so much that I got banned, and then even when I moved back to Finsbury Park I was a little bit paranoid about going in there in case the security guards still worked there and recognised me. I used to do this little old ring pull trick, where – the old can ring pulls were slightly – were the same shape as a one pound coin, or the same size, and so you could put it into a –

a trolley and push it in and it would accept it and release the trolley. And then someone would go, 'Oh, I wanted that,' and you'd take their pound and the trolley and give them the trolley with the ring pull. And me and my brothers used to make a lot of money on the days, just doing stuff like that. My mum even knew that we were shoplifting. She tried to stop us but in the end I think she gave up. And when times were really hard, she actually once did send me off to steal some bread, because we didn't have any food in the house. Erm, maybe not the best most responsible thing to do, but I was less likely to get caught than she was, so in my mind it was, okay, I'm the man of the house, I'm going to go get the bread, and I had to do what I had to do. Erm ... I'm not proud of being a shoplifter as a child, but as a child it didn't – I always had one rule, no matter what criminal thing I did, it would be never done to normal people, you know. It was always big companies. I never shoplifted from the small shops. The corner shop on the corner, never touched his shop, 'cause he was our – we knew him, you know, whereas Tesco's was a company that just – even then I had an understanding that they probably covered themselves somehow for theft and stuff like that and it never really – I wasn't – to me, I wasn't hurting individuals, therefore they can take the blow. And most of the time it was just a couple of bags of sweets anyway or, you know, a loaf of bread if we needed it in the family. But yeah.

[1:25:15]

*And were times hard? Was it often that you didn't have food at home?*

No, not really, I'll be honest. That was probably the only time that I can really remember that I – and I really – I think it was probably the next day that we were going to have money, but just that night we just didn't have anything to have for dinner and my mum had miscalculated or something, or misbudgeted, I don't know, if she did budget, I'm sure she probably didn't, but, you know ... to be honest, we ate quite well. I mean, I'm six foot six and I'm quite a big guy. I can't imagine that we couldn't have – you know, we weren't denied food. There was always something in the house, whether she'd cooked something and eat it one day, freeze half of it, cook it and eat it the next day or something like that – but she loved to cook, so – you

know, food was her – her thing. She was never happier, I think, than when she was cooking, you know. I used to watch her cook and it's why I love cooking now. I always say that whenever – even when I'm cooking, I cook like my mum, music on, no measurements, I just sort of go with it. And people go to me, 'How do you know how to do this?' It's what I do, you know. My brother's a chef in Scotland. He – he gets really annoyed because I'm more of a natural cook. You know, he's been trained to do all of this stuff. And I made a curry for him a couple of months back and he just sat there and was just, like, 'This is like the best curry I've ever tasted. How did you make it? Where did you come about it?' I just went, 'Well, you know, friends cooked this and I took something from that and I took some of that, put it all together.' And he's like, 'I hate you,' [laughs] you know. Yeah, so we – food was never a real issue, I'd say, so much at Finsbury Park. Angel, things went a bit bad, you know. Food wasn't as good. We didn't have as much food. It wasn't – it wasn't the same kind of food as well. We didn't have as much Caribbean food. As I said earlier, it was harder for her to get hold of the right meat. But it wasn't until Angel that actually there was – maybe we struggled more than I realised, again, in Angel, but then there was still – I would never say I was hungry. I never went hungry, so maybe not as good quality of food. Erm ... yeah, I – most times there was definitely something to eat in the house.

[1:27:40]

*And what was your relationship like with your brothers, growing up?*

Erm, in my eyes, I'm the boss. It's still that way now, especially – not so much with the middle child 'cause he's a typical middle child, but it's a lot more – especially with the baby brother. I think we're a lot more alike as well than my middle brother. Like the other day we were actually talking about Game of Thrones, 'cause we were both watching it, and he's like, 'Ah, I'm reading the books and I'm going to ruin it for other people when they talk about it, but I won't do it to you.' And I was like, 'Why?' 'Cause you'll beat my arse.' And, you know, he knows – you know, he's not as tall as me. He's only a couple of – he's a few inches shorter, but he's still over

six foot, but he's skinnier. But he's always sort of – we always had sort of like – I am the king, you know, I'm the heir, you're just sort of – it was quite old school mentality, but you listen to what I say, I know more than you because I'm older than you. My middle brother rebelled against that. My little brother gets it mainly at times, much to his demise. He's still not learning, I don't think, that I know more than he does. But I think that's just down to the stubbornness that he has. He's extremely stubborn. But our bond is unbreakable. It's – it's always – especially me and the middle one, there's been a different bond than there is with the baby one, 'cause he got fostered and adopted separately, but – whereas me and my – one second [takes drink of water]... Me and the middle brother, it's always been us against the world, definitely, that mentality. We looked out for each other. We always fought together. One of the – when we moved to Angel, there were these two twin brothers in the year below me in school and one of them called me a black bastard and I wasn't used to racism, you know, 'cause you wouldn't be racist to a black person in Finsbury Park 'cause you're probably more likely to be outnumbered [laughs] than you would be – you know. And I just flipped and I remember punching this guy and then sitting on his chest, just punching him. But while I was beating him up, his brother came along and pulled my hair, 'cause I had my dreadlocks, and he pulled me back so that I couldn't actually fight 'cause I was – I was just holding his brother down. And someone had somehow got the message to my little brother and he was in the junior section of the playground and he came flying round. I just remember seeing him flying round. And he really – he's actually quite short, which is a bit unfortunate for him. He jumped up and leapt in the air and punched the other guy. And it just turned into a melee, me and my brother just basically beat these two brothers up. My brother's three years younger than me, so he was two years younger than these two guys. And even when we were outside the principal's office afterwards, he still sat there, looked at them and went, 'What?' And they – they were scared 'cause they knew that, you know, they couldn't come between us, that they couldn't handle us two 'cause we were always – we'd learnt to fight together, you know. Because of our height, we'd fight differently together in the same way – we used to fight each other all the time, but you turn on any one of us two and we're likely to – we could be in the middle of the biggest argument we ever had, but you get involved and start on one of

us, we'd both turn round and end up battering that person. You know, we weren't – no one – no one was going to defeat us. That was our mentality. Things have changed. We're still – we still fight for each other. We still argue a lot. I think he's made a few mistakes in his life. He – he knows this, I've never been shy to tell him that he needs to sort himself out in certain ways. But we're still – we still talk regularly, you know. I try and keep in contact with him as much as I can. Erm, we're all very tight, 'cause it is – there is no one. He's got his dad but his dad's now senile and – but even then it was still always me and him. You know, even though he had his dad to support him, I always had – he was there to help me. My baby brother, he had a foster family who would eventually adopt him, but he always knew that he was one of us, you know. Even down to when he was living with them, they were Man United fans, he started telling me he supported Man United, that wasn't being allowed. We actually beat him a bit till he understood that he was never allowed to support Man United, he was an Arsenal fan 'cause he was a Baker. Even though he didn't have the surname, he was one of us. And there's a strong bond, you know. We're very similar, me and the baby brother, in many ways, you know. I think he looks up to me a lot, which I'm quite happy – well, another reason why I push myself, because I want to show them, you know, you can be something. We listen to the same music. We read comics. We used to have a tradition to go to all the comic book movies together and basically point out all the errors in the plotlines and stuff like that. There is a lot of love between us. My middle brother does have another sibling from his dad – well, his dad has lots, but one that we know of [laughs]. And he sort of – he's part of the family. We've looked after him as well. He's seen – even though we've got no blood – I've got no blood relation to him, he's still one of my brothers in my mind, maybe not as tight as the other ones for me but he's definitely – you know, it's – but again it goes back down to what my mum taught us, you respect and look after your family, and I try to do that as best I can, you know. Even now when my brother tells me he can't pay his phone bill, I get tempted to pay it. The only reason I won't is 'cause it's not going to teach him the right lesson. But yeah, we're – we're a very strong and tight knit group. It's hard for people to come against us.

[1:33:21]

*And your mum seems to be at the centre of this kind of family unit. She was always instilling this idea of family ethos. And I was wondering when you were speaking, whether this came across at birthdays, at Christmas, other times of the year when she got the family together?*

What, our family in Scotland?

*Yeah.*

We didn't really spend much time with them. We might have done up there every now and then. And we did have a family reunion one time, which was, as I grew up, one strong memory of my Scottish family that I always had. And even the friendships that I built then, somehow, when I went back, I ended up connecting with the same people automatically. And so that was quite cool. But my mum – my mum made her own family, you know. She – she believed in her own family but she also had her friends who were part of her family as well, something that I continue with. You know, good people who treat me right and who are good friends, they're family to me, no matter whether they're completely unrelated or not, they're family. And we always had lots of people around us, you know, auntie this and auntie that, who were no way – no way were they family, but we had to treat them like they were aunties because my mum called them our auntie. So they were around. And we always had big parties. In Finsbury Park my dad's family was around a lot, you know. Cousins used to come down from Scotland and spend time. When my aunt moved to – one of my aunts moved to London, she stayed with us. She was around for a very long time. And I've – she's probably the one I've got the tightest bond with out of all my aunts. My mum did push our family mindset. She kept it – you know, even though we were a single parent mother, I think she also instilled the idea of having a nuclear family, you know, the perfect family. The TV family is what I kind of strive for now because of the understanding of how important family is, you know. I can't wait to have children. I haven't had any, which is a good thing because I've never been ready for it, but I will be having some soon, hopefully.

[1:35:32]

*And what was it like from this life and then going into care? Do you remember when it happened and how it happened?*

Yeah. It's all sort of – there was a spiral that started off when my mum went out one night, left me in charge and someone had called the police and they came and picked us up from the house. And we ended up going to a foster carer, the three of us, who actually were caretakers at the St Aloysius College, which is the school I went to eventually. I had – they were a really loving family, so we had a loving family around us. You know, they treated us correctly and they were alright and nice. My mum got us back. We ended up at a family centre in – oh, where is it? Sort of St Pauls Road up in Angel, sort of the Highbury Corner area and Essex Road. And they put too much rules on my mum, you know. I say that but, you know, she probably needed them. But – so when that happened, she tried and tried and tried and she just couldn't – she couldn't get used to having to be in by eleven o'clock every night. You know, she was someone who enjoyed a party. She couldn't even have her friends round because it was a family centre. There were other families in there. There was a children's home in there as well. She actually used to smoke weed with one of the staff members in the office after eleven o'clock, a Rastafarian guy. I remember this 'cause I remember going downstairs and going [sniffs], what? But we then – so we ended up at the foster parents, Mrs Grotbags, as we called her. And we – I think we may have known that that was it, you know, subconsciously. I think we were aware that this was where – this was separation. This was the final – this was the final straw. We probably – I kind of think I accepted quite before that – I never really fully accepted it until it was told to me that we weren't going back when we were at Millfield eventually, after about two or three years. I think when we went into Mrs Grotbags, we knew – sorry, I shouldn't call her that but it's the – it's the name I know them by and it's what – how I connected with them. I think we kind of understood. And that's when we started fighting the foster family that we were with as well. Obviously they didn't treat us correct, but we didn't respect them in any way because

– not just because they didn't treat us correct but because we knew that they were denying us – they were going to stop us from going to our mum, not them directly but in our minds that was who they were. They were the last people to take us away. Then at Millfield, we did have – it was a bit like a family, you know. There were lots of brothers and sisters there. And they – they kept – the kids accepted us quite quickly and they were really friendly and they made us feel like we belonged there. You know, we weren't like – oh, who are these weird kids, go away, we don't want you. Even the staff, you know, they read a – they read a story to me and my brother on our first night, a bedtime story. Me and my brother, when they left, looked at each other, what's that all about? Who reads bedtime stories? I thought that only happens in the movies. Like oh my god, this is excellent, they're going to read us bedtime stories every night. It didn't happen [laughs] but, you know, it was the – I think the transition was quite quick at Millfield 'cause of the way they – they dealt with us properly, you know. They gave us a tour of the house, showed us the kitchen, you know, gave us dinner, showed us every room that we were allowed to see or a room – the room that we were going to move into. And it was really – it felt quite like a family. Millfield in my mind has always been a family for me, you know. Even the kids who came and went, you know, I still – I've tried searching for some of them on Facebook. It's hard because unfortunately some of the people share the same names as friends of mine and a lot of these people have grown up and you will never see what the – you don't know what they will look like now as they did then. And I've actually thought about making trips to where some of them have been fostered that I know would definitely – would most likely still be there. Because, you know, they were – they felt like family. There was even a – there was a girl who actually – I still – we're friends on Facebook. She came to Millfield and she was the spitting image of my baby brother. She had the same shaped face, mixed race girl. She was even born on the same day, which was unbelievable. We were so shocked. And I – I took her under my wing. I told her – called her my little sister, you know, 'cause I – I wanted her to know that, if she needed to help – you know, I could see she needed help and I wanted her to know that I was there for her. There was so much that – I didn't realise how much that – what I did, how good it was, because her social worker came up to me when I'd left. I came up for a Christmas party. She said to me, 'Thank you so

much for being there for Cherelle, for her.’ And I was like, ‘What do you mean?’ She was like, ‘You were the one that got her through everything through here. Whenever she had a problem, she knew she could go talk to you.’ And I didn’t even – I just thought it was just the normal sort of thing, ‘cause we’re a family, that’s what we do, we help each other out. And she said, ‘No, you’ve – I’ve never seen that happen and she’s really grateful for you and I’m grateful for your help for her.’ And yeah, I see her on Facebook. She’s now – she’s got – she’s all married. She’s got a kid with one on the way. We don’t talk but she’s on my Facebook and I like the fact that I can see that she’s progressing quite well, that she seems to be doing really well for herself. It makes me really happy for her, ‘cause to me she’s still like my little sister, you know. I’ve got more of a sisterly contact with – connection with her than I do with my own sisters. And I think that’s why Millfield – it didn’t – it wasn’t like a rip or anything, it just sort of progressed, you know. Even when they told us we weren’t going to be with my mum, we cried and we were upset, but I think the next day we were out playing football and arguing over who’s going to ride what bike on the heath the next day, you know. We just – Millfield just – Millfield was a fantastic place and it really, really made me feel welcome. And I think that was a major thing. I felt – the staff felt – they treated us like we were their kids, you know, but they didn’t treat us like little kids. They treated us appropriately at the right age of who we were, you know. I had to earn going out on my own, you know. At first I was allowed to go to the library. Then I came back and then it was like, okay, you can go to Camden, and I came back. And, you know, and then it slowly progressed as I got older, that I could go and do more things and I could be more independent, as much as I wanted to, or how much they thought I should be at that age. And that’s sort of the thing that parents do, you know. A lot of kids who go into care, children’s homes or care homes will be afraid to say that to a child because the child goes, ‘Well, fuck you, I’ll go and do what I want.’ And then there’s no punishment because obviously there’s – there can only be restrictions. Whereas I did that, I knew that – I thought we weren’t getting any money that – I wouldn’t get as much money that week, I wouldn’t be able to go on the next trip or something like that, and they did all these fun things that I wouldn’t have been able to have benefited from if I did the wrong thing. And that’s very much like how a family is, you know. If a child plays up, you don’t let

them go to Alton Towers the next day. One parent will stay at home, make that kid stay at home. And that's how I thought families should be and that's how Millfield treated us.

[1:42:47]

*And how much contact did you have with your mum whilst you were at Millfield?*

That varied. Sometimes my mum was in prison. Sometimes she wasn't. Sometimes no one knew where she was. It was quite funny though, whenever no one knew where she was, it was usually me who went and found her. I don't know how, I always ended up – I knew people who knew her and I knew how to get in contact with them and I knew where they lived, so I'd knock on their doors and they'd go, 'Oh, last time I heard she was living here,' or, 'Last time I heard she was living there.' And then, 'cause I knew North London quite well, I knew how to – I was quite mobile and ready to go and find her, I went and found her. It would go on and off. Sometimes we'd see her every week. Sometimes it'd be once a month. Sometimes we wouldn't see her for, like, six months, four months, five months, you know. Sometimes it was – most of the time at the end, when she was around it was restricted to, like, once a month or a few hours at a mutual venue, 'cause obviously she got into a few arguments with the staff at Millfield, where she – where they told her it was time for her to leave and she shouted and screamed. And that's not – it wasn't right for her to do that because obviously there's other people there and the effect that it might have on the young people there, so she would sort of end up getting slightly banned from Millfield. They never sort of said she could never turn up, but they just preferred that she wasn't coming there. At the time I couldn't quite understand it, but obviously now I've learnt and understood about things and I'm kind of glad – and again, it proves what Millfield was like, you know. They didn't just bow down to pressure. They stood by their guns and they supported the children. The children were first in their eyes. It didn't matter who – what else was going on.

*In the early years of Millfield, where did you see your mum? What was contact? Did she take you out or did she come and see you?*

Well, Millfield was kind of a cool place, so you could have contact and you wouldn't be interrupted by anybody else. You know, there was enough rooms and places. So we'd sometimes be at Millfield. Sometimes we were at a family centre in Highbury Corner. Other times we'd go out and do stuff, you know, or I'd go to – we'd go to her house and she would spend the day – especially when we were seen as – there was a possibility that we would go back. We'd spend the day at her house. Maybe a member of staff would drop us off and then pick us up and we'd sort of hang out at her house, or go off to the market or do stuff like that together. But yeah, it varied. It depended on what the situation was with my mum.

*What was it like to see your mum?*

I always looked forward to it. As you may have noticed, I have a massive love for my mum. No matter what happened, I always cared about her so much. And I cared about her and seeing her meant that I knew she was okay, you know. If I saw her, she wasn't off doing something wrong or she wasn't in danger. While I was with her, she was safe in my mind. And that was what mattered to me the most, that I wanted to make sure that she was happy and she was safe, which was probably not the right mentality a child my age should have needed to have, but it was the right mentality for me to have, 'cause I – I didn't want her to be in danger. I didn't care – I wanted to be a lawyer to make sure she was safe, you know. She – I liked it most of the time. There was the odd occasion when we were at the family centre and it felt a bit false. I could feel, it wasn't – it wasn't time with my mum, it was just sort of time where my mum was watching us, you know. I think she was doing – she was on something or she was – not on something, but she wasn't herself. And that's why we were there obviously, for our safety, so – you know. But I never – I was always excited about seeing my mum, you know, even if I ended up missing something at Millfield. Sometimes I felt [sighs], but then I'd be like, no, I'm going to see my mum, I'm going to see my mum, you know. There's a massive connection generally with boys and

their mothers and, yeah, I was always quite happy to see her and excited and enjoyed it all, counting down the days. When she didn't turn up or she missed her appointment or she wasn't there, it was very sad though. That hurt a lot, you know, 'cause it was obviously – doesn't she care enough to be here to – you know, shouldn't she be here for us? That hurt a lot. Nothing I could do about it, you know. I was quite a resilient child at this point so I sort of just got on with it, but it was – that was probably the hardest – some of the hardest times at Millfield, when we were supposed to see my mum and we didn't see her. And then we didn't see her the next time and then it was just like, when will we see her. We'd never know, you know. When I was too young to go find her, you know, we had till social services – she'd turn up at social services again. And she did that every now and then and then we'd see her for a little while and then she'd disappear. And then she'd be back in our lives and – but when she was in our lives, it was like nothing changed, you know. We were still her children. She still loved us, you know. She just had things to get on and deal with.

*Did you ask her why she wasn't there the last time?*

No. I wouldn't. It'd be disrespectful to her, you know. She was an adult, you know, that was the mindset. She – she did what she had to do and if she wasn't there, there must have been a reason and it's none of my business, you know. Yeah.

*Did you ever see your mum when you were in your foster placement, the one you didn't like?*

Yeah. That was part of the reason – that was another – that was one of the straws of why they kicked us out, or they dropped us off. We'd see her a lot and she – we weren't far from where she lived, so she would pop up and turn up randomly and stuff like that. One day we were spending the day with her and she dropped us off and they took us in without letting us say goodbye to her properly. And at that point it kind of went a bit crazy. We lost our temper. We got very angry. My little brother ended up punching the foster father quite strongly for a little boy. And that was sort of why social services had just put us in the children's home, another reason why they put us

in the children's home, because they thought we weren't suited to be with a family because they thought we were – because we didn't want to be a family. The only family we wanted was my mum, 'cause we were of an age to understand that we wanted to be with our mum. And so they assumed that that's why we played up, that was one of the only reasons we played up. We never told them what was going on. So that's why they put us in the children's – part of the reason they thought that they would put us in a children's home, which I can't be – I can't be sad about 'cause Julie made sure we were right – put in the right place. She even told us, when we stayed the night at the emergency family, she said, 'I'm putting you here because I want to get you into somewhere really good, somewhere that's good for you guys. I know where it is but I just need to get it sorted out and I can't do that today. We'll try and get it sorted out for you tomorrow. You might have to spend a day or a night here, or two nights, but we'll get you into this place.' I never knew what she was talking about, but when I look back and I remember those conversations, I understand that she was there, she wanted us to be – she could have put us in any Islington run children's home, but she knew that if we ended up there, it wouldn't be good for us. She knew about Millfield and she knew that it was a good place. And we were lucky that she got us there.

[1:50:05]

*Do you remember your first night with those foster parents? Did you know that it wasn't a good place to be from the beginning, or did that kind of develop over time?*

Erm, I can't say I ever remember having a happy time there. Even – never. I don't think I was – I don't think I was ever happy. The only time I was probably happy was when we were bunking off school, 'cause we knew we didn't have to be there. Or even at school – it was better to be at school than it was to be there. Erm, I don't know if we knew from the first night but we knew quite quickly. It was weird, having your food served to you on a paper plate, you know. We're not at a party, you know [laughs]. And I even asked her why we got paper plates and she – I'm not 100 percent clear on this answer, but I remember something along the lines of we're not

good enough to have the plates. Like she – we got treated like second class citizens. And I don't think it was just 'cause we were foster children. I think it was 'cause we were mixed race. I think that was a part of it and that was why she put bleach in the water. And I remember hearing – I don't know, maybe I made it up, but I remember this conversation of – overhearing a conversation where she said that our skin is dirty and that's why we're this colour, sort of thing, you know. We weren't good enough to be in their family. But in obviously the eyes of social services, we were black so we had to stay with a black family. And that was always what I tried to get across and it doesn't always work, but again I didn't – for some reason I didn't want to tell them what happened to us there because – I don't know. I just don't know why I did that. And it was just – I just – we just didn't like them. I knew that, we don't like them. She wasn't a nice looking woman, you know – not in a – I'm not saying she was ugly or anything, but she just – she reminded up – she was a firm looking old lady – woman, and she looked mean, you know. She didn't – we had foster parents who – like the family in Saint Aloysius College, they were friendly, you know. They were smiling and everything. I don't remember ever seeing a smile on this woman's face, you know. I believe that she did it for the wrong reasons, a lot of it, just for the money. We were – if we were watching TV and her son came in, one of her members of the family, they wanted to watch something else, automatically the TV would turn over. We had no choice. Even if it was three to one – two to one, I mean, we still wouldn't have a choice. They – they treated us really badly, you know, and it was – I think – I think the biggest mistake I ever made was not telling social services what they were like, but I wasn't sure fully on how to do it or what to do or if it was going to – if anyone was going to listen to me. I was a child, no one listened to me for any other reason. They may have spoken to me like I was an adult, but they didn't – they wouldn't listen to me – they wouldn't – I – well, because that's my mentality that I had. I always hope that, after us, other children went there and maybe they had it better, you know. Maybe they didn't, maybe the – I don't know. Or maybe I just made it seem worse in my head because they were the ones that I didn't – they were the ones where I left my mum permanently for – maybe so I've coloured it worse or made it seem like it was a much more horrible place than it was. But I – I know the only time I was happy was when we were getting picked up by the cab to go to

school, or we were bunking off or we were out the house playing football and we were away from them. That is the enduring memory I have of that family. We actually – I actually bumped into their daughter many years later on a bus and she started flirting with me. And I just – I don't blame her 'cause she was a child, but I just looked at her in absolute shock and disgust that she actually thought that she could talk with me and flirt with me, like I was going to be, like, ecstatic to see her, you know. I don't blame her, it's not her fault, but it was a very weird moment for me and I just thought, that's how stupid this world is sometimes.

*How many other children did they have?*

Erm, living with them, there was just one at the time, as far as I remember. She had older ones. She had older ones who did come around and spend time and stuff like that. But we were – we were never part of the family at all. We were definitely very isolated. Again, we could have done that to ourselves, but I don't think so. We were never those kind of kids. We were never those kind of people, you know. We're surrounded now, both of us, by people all the time, because people find themselves attracted to us, you know, they just – not in a sexual way, but they just connect with us. We always make friends wherever we go, you know. I mean, my girlfriend, all of her friends love me. Even her family, my girlfriend swears to god that her family love me more than they love her, you know. And that's just the kind of personalities that we have, that people want to be around us. And even as kids we were that way. We used to have all the – all the friends around, you know. There's people in friends that will come up to me, 'Hey Byron, how you doing?' I'm like ... 'Hi.' 'Oh, you went to school with me.' 'I don't really remember you.' You know, so really when I look at it, I can't imagine us isolating ourselves from them. I just know that we weren't treated correctly. I mean, just the paper plates. That always sticks in my head, that's all you do at parties, that's the only time that paper plates should come out, you know. And we were never – we weren't good enough for the real plates. And that's what I remember, you know, and that's the way I felt.

*Was it a comfort having your brother with you?*

Erm, yeah. I mean, that's where it started to build up that – me and him against the world, you know, 'cause it was just us. We were in one very small little room, you know. There was – it was enough space for two single beds and a little walkway between the two of them and that was it. That's all we had. So we were always tight and we were always close and we always had each other. We were always by each other's side, whether we were watching TV together, eating dinner together, in the bedroom together. We would go to the shops together. We would play football together. At that point we lost contact with all our friends. We'd moved away from Finsbury Park. We were – I didn't really have that great friends with people in – in Angel. They were school friends but they weren't friends I would go and meet up with afterwards or during – outside of school hours. So it was just me and him at that point and that's where it definitely – where I said it built up and became me and him against the world.

[1:56:39]

*Did you see your mum on your birthdays and at Christmas? How did you spend these kind of holidays and important days in the year?*

Sometimes she'd be there. If she was doing one of her disappearing acts then we wouldn't see her. Christmas, Millfield didn't really have parents around for Christmas. It would be a bit chaotic, I think. They had their own traditions, you know. Even that to me is another realisation why – it was traditions. It wasn't rules or regulations. It was just like – you know, we'd all get up, we'd have breakfast on Christmas Day. Then we'd all get presents and we'd have one present at a time and pass round and stuff like that. Even on birthdays, I have a – 'cause of their tradition, I continue it myself in a way – I can't do it the way I used to do it. On your birthday you get breakfast in bed and you'd get a choice of breakfast. You wouldn't just get – 'Here's some eggs and bacon.' You'd be getting, 'What do you want for breakfast?' And you could have whatever you wanted, you know. And I always remember

getting that. And every year now, when it's my birthday, I get up and I make my huge omelette, because breakfast to me is connected to my birthday, so I have to have this huge omelette with, like, sausage and bacon and tomatoes and all of this stuff in it. My girlfriend looks at it and goes, 'Pff, going to kill yourself with those.' But that's – that's my tradition and that's a tradition borne out of being at Millfield, where they created that tradition. And that's how – again, it's another indication of – they raised us like we were part of a family. But my mum, my mum was there sometimes for the birthdays, but a lot of times she wasn't. And then obviously it got a bit more awkward when she kicked off too many times in the children's home in Millfield and they weren't happy about having her around too often. So she – as we got older, she disappeared more. She got deeper into a spiral. She ended up in prison for a lot longer. So obviously she wasn't around for the birthdays as much as she would probably have wanted to be.

[1:58:26]

*Did you notice your mum getting worse, going down this spiral, at the time?*

Yeah, I could see it. The time that she disappeared between visits would go for longer and longer. She changed facially, physically in some ways. She aged quite quickly, which I noticed. There was random conversations or comments that she would make that didn't make sense at the time. Like one time she told me that she had breast cancer and I – as far as I know she never did. And I've never understood why she told me that, you know. I don't know, maybe she was trying to – she – maybe she felt she was going to die soon because of her drug situation, she was worried about it, so she wanted me to, you know, come to terms that she might not be around for long. And even when she did die, it was quite a – it was quite a hard situation, 'cause at the time I was living with my aunt, the one that she was living at. She'd gone to – she basically got a huge back payment on disability benefits and I was supposed to meet up with her that morning but I had a meeting at Focus so I was an hour and a half late, and she wasn't there. And we hadn't seen her for months. And then I got a knock on the door. I – I was off from college or something for the day and the police came to

the door and they asked for my aunt. I was like, 'She's not here.' I was like, 'What's this to do with?' And she said, 'It's concerned with her sister.' Automatically I knew who she was talking about and I just looked and I went, 'Oh, what's she done this time?' And they looked at me and they went, 'Who are you?' And I was like, 'I'm her older son.' And they sort of – they asked us to come inside. And I was like, 'Where is she? What's she done?' Again, even then I refused – all I could think was that she'd done some stupid crime and she'd got herself in prison again. And when they told us, told me, it – I was standing. They took – tried to get me to sit down and I just refused, and I started realising – I kind of knew what was coming and I refused to accept what they were going to say and I didn't want it to happen. And then she – they told me. And I just – I broke down. The police were quite good about it, I will say that. They stayed with me until my aunt finished work – well, she didn't finish work. Basically her boyfriend picked her up and brought her back. But I wouldn't say it was shock that she died. I kind of expected it. I never – I never saw my mum getting old, no matter what happened. Like when I went – when I got into Millfield, a few years in, I never imagined her – imagined her as an old lady. I could never see her as my children's grandparent 'cause I just knew she – deep down I knew she wasn't going to be around, really. And – but even – I kind of came to accept it quite quickly. Even at her funeral I was – I wasn't crying, 'cause I knew that she was in a better place. I mean, I'm not religious. I don't – and she was but she – she made a lot of sins, but I always believe that there is a god and there is some place, heaven or wherever – that if God didn't let her in then I wouldn't want to be there and that is not a place I'd want to go to, 'cause I wouldn't want to be there. That's not the kind of place I want to be. 'Cause she fundamentally was a good person, she just had some bad things happen to her which caused her to do bad things. And even when we were burying her, it's quite funny, she – she was – my brother's stubborn, as I said to you before, and he got it from my mum. And as I was – we were lowering her coffin into the grave, she got stuck. And I just sat there and looked down into the coffin and went, 'Even now you're too stubborn to get into the ground. What's wrong with you?' And I said it to myself and I was trying not to laugh because everyone else – all her family were crying and all my aunts and uncles and my grandparents were crying, and I just couldn't stop – inside I was laughing. I just thought, this is typical of you,

this is exactly what you're like. You're just so stubborn. And I was sitting there trying not to laugh because I knew that they wouldn't understand, 'cause although – although they were – they grew up with her, although they were around her all her life, they didn't know her like I did. I don't think many people did. And that was just – that was perfect – it was almost a perfect end to it, to have her getting stuck in the ground 'cause she didn't want to go down. And it was just – we even – when I even got into the cab – into the limousine afterwards, my aunt cracked a joke, 'Typical Tricia – Sylvia, she won't bloody go down at the last moment. She's so stubborn.' And it was – it kind of made it light but I kind of accepted it. I already knew – I really, really had no idea or belief that she would get to – to sixty, seventy years old. I could never imagine it. Everyone else, other people I've met, I can see it. I can imagine it. Me, I always – I know I will, fortunately. And I used to say I don't want to be old. Obviously when you're young you don't want to get to sixty, seventy years old 'cause it seems so huge and ridiculous, but now I can see – I've always sort of had this image of myself on a rocking chair on a porch somewhere, you know, just being an old man and stuff like that. But my mum, I never saw that happening. And I knew why and I knew it was because of what she went through. You know, they say the good die young and stuff like that. She wasn't that young but she went early and I think it's because she'd suffered enough. You know, she wasn't healthy at the time. She had angina, diabetes, alcohol problems and – you know, she – she'd gone through so much. And she put herself through a lot of stuff obviously, but she wasn't – she didn't need to be continuing suffering through all of that anymore. And I think that's why I still have a slight belief in religion. That's why I still have a slight belief that there is something more out there than just – I don't believe in the mainstream idea of religion, but because of little things like that, I do have a connection to the belief that there is something more after this. And hopefully she's up there. I even – I actually – I've not told many people this but I actually – during that funeral, when I was crying, it was a little bit – a period of time that I was crying, and I – I kind of remember feeling someone stroking my back and saying to me, 'Don't worry, I'm good.' And I turned round and I thought it would be one of my family members, but there was no one there. And that kind of – sort of a strong moment for me and kind of – no matter how sad I was – and even after that, moments when I've been going out with a girl

who was wrong with me, and I knew she was wrong with me, and my mum – something would tell me that it was – you know, there'd be a tingle or a feeling and it'd be like, yeah, this isn't working, this – I shouldn't be doing this. I still feel that she sort of guided me for a long time. She doesn't do it no more because she feels I'm – I'm on the right path. It's weird. I hate talking like this 'cause I don't feel like I should be – I don't believe too strongly in religion, but because of these moments, there is a connection there for me.

[2:05:35]

*You took a lot of responsibility for your mum while you were growing up. Did you take a lot of responsibility in the aftermath, after she passed away? Did you help with the funeral?*

I wanted to. This was – this was the nail in the coffin – sorry for the pun, it wasn't intended – for the relationship ending between me and my granddad. I never really got on with my granddad. Some of my aunts told me that he was racist and I was inclined to believe that. He didn't like me, I'm sure of it, you know. I wouldn't say he didn't like me but he didn't care about me. I don't know. We clashed a lot. There were a lot of things – you know, I'd make a joke and he didn't like it and he'd really get angry and shout at me. And I wasn't used to that because obviously Millfield staff members didn't shout at me. If I made a joke about them, you know, if I called one of them fat, they'd make a joke to me. You know, it would be a little bit of banter. But he didn't have that, 'cause obviously he was – he was quite an authoritarian figure in our family, and I wasn't used to that sort of level. And none of the – and when it came down to, like, her funeral arrangements, I obviously – I was – I was eighteen, going on nineteen. I buried her three days before my nineteenth birthday, in actual fact. But they never – they never – they were paying for the funeral but they never asked me for anything other than the one thing, was what songs should be played at her funeral. And that to me right there epitomised my knowledge, that I knew more than – about her than they would ever know, you know. And it angers me still that I – even to the fact that, when it actually came to the day of the funeral, I should have

been at the front of the church. I should have been on the front and centre, 'cause I was her oldest son and that's the way it should be. I was three rows from the back. No one said, 'Come to the front.' No one pulled me there, you know. That's – that's why I lost any relationship with my granddad, because I knew it was them and they were running with it and they didn't care about what I wanted. The only thing they cared – the only time they asked me for anything, something they couldn't answer, 'cause they had no real knowledge of who she was. They only knew their daughter. They didn't know who the real person was underneath. They didn't know what kind of music she would want to listen to. I mean, to me, music is important, because my mum raised me around music and music was her love, you know, yet they didn't know what song to play at her funeral. They didn't – that said to me – and it still angers me, to the point where it – it – and I'm stuttering, you know, 'cause it just – it frustrated me so badly. And it still – [sighs] it still pisses me off that I wasn't at the front and no one made the effort to bring me to the front. I know people were going through a lot of issues of their own, but why am I – I should never have been allowed to be at the back, you know. I should have – they should – people – they didn't care. They didn't care about – they just wanted to make a big show for their daughter, for their – for their sister. They didn't care about who else there was. And it – it – my family don't even know I feel this way 'cause I've never said it to any of them, except for one aunt who at the time was at odds with the family anyway, you know. The reason they didn't like me is 'cause I – part of the reason they didn't like me is 'cause I chose not to bow down to my granddad, you know. I chose to do what I wanted to. I was eighteen years old. I was living on my own. And he was telling me what to do and I was telling him, 'No, I can do what I want to do. I'm eighteen years old. I look after myself. I come and stay with you because you're my granddad and this is the place to stay when I come to Scotland. But you can't tell me what to do.' Even on my eighteenth birthday, he expected me to stay in. He wanted me to go – stay in and then go off to the countryside to spend the day – the day in the countryside with my gran's aunt's sister, or something like that, who I had no connection to, on my eighteenth birthday. That's what they expected me to do. And because I refused to do that, it – he drove round Dundee searching for me, 'cause I was – I went to a party the night before. My cousin took me to a party to celebrate my birthday. And he got

angry. He actually shouted me in the street and that just angered me. And it was just – it was hard. It was really hard, you know, especially at the funeral. But I really, really do think that – that the connection I had with my mum and that feeling I had that she was there was what got me through all of that, which made me accept and move on, you know. And I still – I still will always be angry at my family because – because of the way my mum raised me about family, I was the next in line. I was the one who looked after my brothers from that point onwards. I was going to – I should have been the one who should have been asked, ‘What do you think about this? What do you think about that?’ Yes, it was in their city. Yes, it was in their hometown. But the only thing they asked me is what music would you – do you think we should play to her going in and what music do you think we should play to her coming out. And in the end I even made a joke out of one of the – one of the songs, because I knew she’d love that sort of – that joke, you know. The first song we played was Bob Marley, a Bob Marley song, ‘cause that was in – a connection that I had with her and I knew she loved Bob Marley, but the second song was – we played Craig David, because I remember, she always said that she was quite hot and she fancied him. And I did it as a joke because I knew that they wouldn’t understand why I did it, but I did it because I want her to know, you know – I still wanted – you know, she had a wicked sense of humour and she would find that – she would be sitting there laughing, going, ‘These people have no idea and they just ...’ you know, but she knew that I had that moment. That was my – that was my piece of the funeral. And that’s when – that was quite important for me to play that, to do that for her. But yeah, I wasn’t – I wasn’t really involved in any of the arrangements and I did – as you can tell, still causes a lot of anger inside of me.

[2:11:28]

*Female: Sorry to interrupt, but just to let you know that you’ve had two hours and eleven minutes so far, so it’s up to you whether you want to carry on.*

*It’s a good time to break.*

Yeah.

*Yeah.*

[Break in filming]

[2:11:37]

*Hello Byron. Last time we were talking, you actually said that you were nineteen, you were living on your own, you'd left care, life was really turbulent. And I just want to go back slightly to when you had left care. What kind of support, financial or otherwise, did you – did you get?*

Erm, I got no – no real support financially, to be honest. I got your basic stuff that anyone of my age would get, you know. I got income support, which I think was £40 a month, and housing benefit, which didn't even cover my rent. I had to pay some of my money towards that, which I didn't even realise I had to pay properly. I didn't know that that was also part of my council tax – was involved in that. I had no real understanding. I think part of it was my own fault because I was like, I know enough, I don't really care, I don't – I didn't – I didn't know who Focus were. I didn't have a connection really with them. I didn't really want to be involved with them, 'cause they were some new people who were just suddenly thrust upon me. They were people who – in my mind, who dragged me away from Millfield, because that was their job to do and I didn't like it. But I had no support, you know. When I was – even though I was supposed to be their star pupil, 'cause I was doing my A levels, no one asked me, 'How's college going,' you know. No one – I just – they just – I was basically left there, learn to live on your own, and then when you're old enough we'll give you your own flat. And then when I got my own flat, they were like, 'Here, sign these forms. This will get you some community care grant. This will sort this out, blah, blah, blah. Go off and do what you need to do.' That community care grant didn't go all on where it should have gone. I got myself a nice Playstation [laughs]. You know, I had a few parties with some friends and stuff like that. There wasn't much guidance to what I should really do. I just – was just – here you go, out the door, you're done, we're over.

*And your main support network was Millfield, so who kind of filled the gap when you – when you left?*

It was supposed to be focused. They were the leaving care team, sort of. They were connected to the National Children's Home charity, as far as I remember. But they just – they – they – if I'd have maybe pushed a little bit more, maybe was more involved with them, they may have given me a bit more support, but not in the same way that Millfield had, you know. I didn't – I had a worker there. She actually did help me also get the work with – the voluntary work I'm doing at the moment, but, you know, it wasn't, like – I think – 'cause I wasn't one of the – the issued children, I was strong enough and independent enough and knew enough, they felt that maybe they didn't need to work with me so much. And when I said I didn't need work or help, they just thought, okay, yeah, he knows what he's talking about. I don't know, maybe they should have been a bit more forceful about making me do some more work, 'cause when I moved into my own house I didn't know about council tax, you know. I saw it on my rent but I thought that it was just part of my rent. So I never paid my council tax for years. I still actually, to be honest, have the debt rolled on since then. I'm going to one day attend to that. But that's how it was, it just – that support has ended up leaving me in a lot of debt today, because –it all started off with little things. Little things that – I thought, oh, I'll ignore that 'cause I can't really afford it 'cause it's – you know, I don't have the money for that or – you know. I –I never got my application for the housing benefit in quick enough, which meant that I was behind on my rent from day one when I moved in. No one told me that I'd have to pay water rates. And that wasn't part of the – that wasn't covered by my housing – housing benefit. I didn't know this. So that brought up – it basically kept me in like a continuous cycle of debt that I'm only now starting to face up with, because I'm with someone who's settled and she's smart and she – we want to buy a house together in the future and we're never going to do that if I've got massive debts in my name. And so it's only now that I'm working hard, harder than I've probably ever worked, even though I'm working part time and I've got – I've started my own business selling furniture and doing the college and everything like that, and I'm pushing it so I can

clear as much money off of my debt and get as much debt free as I can so that when I do finish university, once I get my first proper job, I can actually have a chance of buying a house. To me that would be – the day that I'm able to sign my own mortgage I think will be one of the greatest achievements of my life, you know. Growing up in care and being able to come out of that and buy my own house, it seems like it's a dream, really. It's been a dream of mine – I always wanted to have my own house, you know. I always paid attention and looked after all my houses that I've lived in and designed it and cleaned it up and – not cleaned it up, sort of maybe – I was a young man, it wasn't that clean. But, you know, I made the – I knew what I wanted to have and how it would look, like, sort of furniture wise and decoration wise. And so that's pushing me right now to – to get forward and get rid of those debts so that I can buy my own house. And I'm excited by the prospect. I even look in windows of estate agents now and go, ooh, could we afford that? Ooh, I don't think we can afford round here, you know [laughs]. I kind of – I remember looking at the estate agents in Finsbury Park, like, Islington area, thinking it would be nice to come back to Islington because this is, like, it's home, maybe not Finsbury Park but parts of Islington, and looking at the price, and then looking at the price and going, wow, that's – wow, rent's not that high. Oh wait, I was in a council house so it's a completely different matter [laughs]. But yeah, the support structure – I don't think – I know it's changed and I know it's a lot better, because of the work I do with Islington now, but that's with Islington and Islington are a great local authority when it comes to looking after their looked after children and children in need. And even that, there's still people falling through the cracks. And I just think, imagine what it's like being in a borough where they're horrible and they don't look after the kids as well. And you – I don't think there's much – there's many of them out there like Islington, but even they're not perfect. There are still kids who are part of the in care council who are having problems with their – their future plans that were set up by the council and stuff like that. But, you know, in my day – in my day there wasn't that much. There wasn't that [inaud]. Not that they didn't care, they just were limited, you know. They were just – they just had to make sure that we didn't die. I think that was the limit to their ideas, as long as they're not dead, we're good. They get to eighteen and they've survived, we've done our job, let's get to that point.

[2:18:20]

*Did you have personal support networks around you, friends?*

Erm, I thought I did. When I left Millfield I didn't really have many friends. I didn't have friends with kids at school 'cause I didn't like the kids at school. I didn't – no, that's not correct, just in case any of you watch this [both laugh]. The kids at school weren't – I was sort of thrust upon them as a friend because I – there was a major issue in my school about race and stuff like that, and I refused to accept that I was either black or white, 'cause I was neither. In my eyes I was both and I was proud of that. And so I hung round with a different group of people – of kids, and I look back now and I think I probably wouldn't have hung round with them maybe if – now, if I met them, they probably wouldn't be people that I would hang round with. Could be wrong, I don't know. So when I left Millfield, there was only person who was the same age as me there and he was still at Millfield so I couldn't really spend much time with him. And I fell into – in with a crowd in the local area, who – who knew my cousin who was staying with my aunt at the time, who lived at the end of my road pretty much. We used to sit around and smoke weed together. And I thought that was friendship, you know. But I let it come to realise, after some issues, that they were only really mostly using me because I had a place for them to smoke their weed and keep out of the cold or the rain. Some of them had maybe built up a friendship with me, but in the gang mentality that they had, they turned on me quite quickly. So other than my aunt, who was a bit around but not greatly, I didn't really have much support structure around me.

**The following section is closed for thirty years until October 2043 [02:20:00-02:33:47]**

[2:33:47]

*What did you do after you got back from Thailand?*

Erm, I tried to go into management straight away, retail management, but big companies don't look at independent management as the same as big retail management, so I was stuck without a job for a little while. I worked in the carpet shop that my mate worked in a couple of days a week to get some extra money. And then I ended up working at the pub for a little while. I enjoyed working at the pub. Bar work is fun, it just never pays nowhere near enough and the hours aren't great, but the time when you'd spend behind a bar is probably – it's one that gave me the confidence in myself. I knew I could do stuff but I didn't believe in myself a lot. I knew I could – I could achieve if I wanted to, but I didn't believe in my own person. I didn't think I was – I used to think I was ugly and horrible and no one would want me, sort of thing, or girls weren't attracted to me. But when you work behind a bar and girls come up to the bar and go, 'Oh hello,' you kind of think, hmm, maybe there is – maybe I have got a bit of good looks about me. Oh maybe – you know, and it did help me a lot. It gave me more confidence and I enjoyed it a lot. I still go back to that first bar I worked in and I – the reaction I get – everyone sort of cheers almost that I've walked in, 'Hey, how you doing?' You know, they're really happy to see me, and it was really nice. But that went on for a little while, until I – I got a job offer to help fit granite kitchen surfaces, which is something I really like to do 'cause I like to work with my hands as well, and I really enjoyed that. Me and the guy, who's actually again ended up being a really good friend of mine, we were going round all of the south east of England, putting in people's kitchens, granite surfaces, and cutting it and, like, shaping and stuff like that. And he was really – he told me how good – he was shocked how quickly I picked it all up and he was really excited to work with me, and he offered me a fulltime job. I was earning a lot of money. We partied a lot, you know. We were two young men who had a lot of money in our back pocket. I should have used that money to clear the debts, but I'd never had that much money. I'd never had that experience of – I remember going to – one day, on the Friday after work, we went to Brent Cross to go shopping and we were covered head to toe in

granite dust. We were dirty and filthy, horrible, the kind of people you'd sort of avoid touching just in case you got dirty. I walked into HMV and the security guard – it's always the thing I get anyway, even if I was covered in dirt or not, but the security guard kept following me around. And I smiled and I laughed 'cause I knew right now in my pocket there was over a grand in just pure cash. So I was walking around and I was sort of like, oh, I want to get this film, and he kept watching me. And I was like, 'Alright, how you doing?' Kept winding him up. And then when I went to the counter and put the DVDs down, I went in my pocket and I actually couldn't get my wallet out of my back pocket 'cause it was so thick with money. And I just thought – at that moment I was like, yes. And then to extenuate that I went, boom, and slammed it on the desk and went, 'Sorry about that.' And then the security just went ... But then it was brilliant. We went to Hugo Boss, which was ridiculous, when you think, if anyone's going to follow you, it's going to be in there. A guy came up to us, looked at us, looked and realised that we were trades people who earned good money, and went, 'How can I help you gentlemen?' And he knew that we had money. We didn't buy anything but he treated us better than the security in HMV, which always made me laugh. I enjoyed that for a very long time. If I had a choice, I would have stayed doing that, but unfortunately, outside of London people aren't as educated, especially when you go to a small little village where they've never met a black person, let alone a six foot six black person, and we used to go out in the van – my friend's white but he was huge as well, so we'd get out the van, go into a bakery and it would be like, what the hell? And the company we worked for, subcontracted with, were getting emails complaining about a big black guy walking around their house. People were just not used to it and it scared a lot of people. One woman wrote that she wasn't sure if she was going to get raped or pillaged first. So my mate said to me, 'I have no choice. They've told me basically to drop you or they're going to drop me.' So I said, 'Fine.' I got work in the bar two, three days later and two weeks later after that I started working at the bar, I got a job at a phone shop, selling mobile phones. From there I kind of got in – and it was semi independent. It was a smaller company, not one of the main high street ones. And I got confident. I was good. I'm a – I'm a natural salesperson. So I was making good sales. I was like the top – second top salesman in there. The other guy was awesome. He's an – I can't even touch him. I

knew I wouldn't be able to. And then he was getting promoted to manager to another store and the manager was like, 'Oh, you should be my assistant manager. Be my assistant manager.' But then she put an ultimatum to the bosses to give her a pay rise or she would leave. They told her to leave. So I thought, okay, maybe I should try and get the managers job, push myself. And they were like, oh, er ... They left me understaffed for – many times I was there with me, a part timer and a brand new guy who didn't even know that this was a store that normally had five members of staff in it, two of them being part timers. And I was just like – well, at weekends when we were fully staffed up, or better staffed, we were the best store in the whole company. During the week, when there was only me and the part timer, I'm dealing with five customers and his customers, it didn't work too well. So they brought in a manager from another store, which annoyed me because he – I had to teach him how to do things, even though he'd been a manager for, like, six months. I'm like, it's ridiculous, how do you not know this. And then I just filled the assistant manager's role, and they said I had to prove myself. And I just got really angry with them, put my CV on Monster and got a call from another independent phone shop. They wanted to give me an interview. And I was like, 'You know what, the way they treat me, I'll just leave here,' thinking there was going to be a – the salesperson's position. Went to – they came to interview me, took me to the cafe. We had an interview. They offered me a manager's role. And I was kind of shocked, but I had to sort of play it all cool. I was like, 'Hmm, okay, yeah, yeah. Alright.' I was like – afterwards I was like, I wasn't expecting that [laughs]. But it turned out unfortunately that this shop that I was working in had a really bad reputation with the local people in Finchley, 'cause the previous manager had taken contracts out on other customers' names, like six or seven contracts, and then kept the phones and the sim cards and basically ran up massive bills on these people's phones. So no one wanted to buy a phone from this shop 'cause every – like you'd be outside and they'd be like, 'You stole my money. You stole this.' And it was all like, yeah. So I ended up leaving there, 'cause I was like, I can't do this, I don't want to work here. If I'm not happy working somewhere, I'm not going to be able to sell because I need to be confident in what I'm doing. And they – they also had a really bad mentality. I didn't realise that they didn't understand, like, people in London – 'cause they were from the south

west. They didn't understand that people in London were much more savvy about their mobile phones and their contracts and stuff like that, and they knew that they could go to Carphone Warehouse and get the latest phone for half the price that we were trying to sell it for, or the contract we were trying to give them. And I just thought, this is not working for me, so I left there. I then made a – I'm not too sure. I'm never quite sure if it was a mistake, but I did this sort of weird scheme with a charity, a door to door sales company, where basically you learn how to do it, then you teach other people how to do it, and then you build up a team and then you become a – basically the idea is that you can make lots of money. One of the guys that I trained has actually gone on to earn – make sixty grand profit in his first year with them as a director of his own company, plus the fifty grand that he paid himself for that year. And I was just like, wow. It was – it could have been successful, but I wasn't like the other people. I was connected to London. I was connected to the people. I had friends. A lot of these people would give up their friendships and their family to do this job. I just could never do that, you know. It was a Friday night, my friends were like, 'Let's go out, you know. We'll pay for you.' 'Cause I wasn't earning that money, and I was struggling [ph] I'm going out, whereas the other people would be like, 'No, no, no, I've got to go in tomorrow. I want to be fresh. I've got to do twelve hours just walking on the streets.' On a good – on a good day I was awesome, but on the many days when I was starving and I didn't have enough food, I wasn't that great, you know. I actually lost a lot of weight, to the point where people actually thought I was on crack, 'cause I lost that much weight I actually – there's pictures of me on Facebook, they're like, 'Oh, you need to stop smoking that crap.' [Laughs] I'm like, 'No, no, I've just lost a lot of weight. Trust me, I'm not smoking nothing.' I did that for, like, six months 'cause I really – I thought this was a chance for me to make a really good success. If I could have earned fifty grand a year, and plus make profit, I'm going to be awesome. I can make even more. 'Cause once you've built one, you can then build another and build another and it just – you know, people are making millions out of this industry. And I was thinking, that could be me, that could be me. It wasn't [laughs]. But when I finished that, I went back with the guy who was doing the granite, but no longer was he doing granite. He was building – refurbishing houses and stuff like that. I was doing that two, three days a week with

him, some labour work, and earning a decent wage again. Not as good as I was when I was doing the granite, but I was earning decent money, where I partied a lot. I mean, I was out five nights a week, even when I had work the next day, because it was just labour work and it just – even with the worst hangover ever, do this, do that all day long, I can do that. I had a great time. It was probably one – it was – it was my freedom time. It was like – I just – me and my mates just partied a lot and we got well known in Camden, where people used to come up and treat us like we were celebrities, you know. The owners of bars would come up and shake our hands and, you know, get us free drinks. We'd never have to queue up to some of the clubs we would go to. Like, you know, we still get treated a bit like that sometimes now. I still get people coming up to me in Camden today going, 'Hey, how you doing?' I'm like, 'Er, I don't really remember you, but hey, nice to meet you.' And I had a good time, I really did. But then I woke up one day and I realised that – I carried on partying, but I realised that I don't want to be a labourer. And yeah, I could advance my skills and eventually be a builder, but I want to – I want a less physical job. I want to do something – you know, unless it's granite, I wanted to do something else. So I thought, what have I – what have I really succeeded at. And I remembered that I'd done furniture and I was awesome and I had so much knowledge instilled. People still came to me for advice about what mattress they should buy. So I thought, let me apply to the furniture companies. And I carried on – kept on applying, kept basically harassing them until I got an interview and I got a job in one of the big companies. I don't like them now so I won't mention them. And I worked there for the last four, five years. First year, I was a bit naughty. I was partying the same way I was before, which you can't do when you've got a proper fulltime job. It just doesn't work. I think for the first three months – no, first two months or month and a half, I didn't complete a full week 'cause I was either hungover or I woke up and it was, like, four o'clock in the afternoon and I was just like, I can't go to work now. But somehow the area manager had faith in me, 'cause even when I was there I was still doing enough to beat my target, and he was like, 'Oh, I don't want to lose you but I'm going to punish you.' And he sent me to this small store in the middle of nowhere – well, I say the middle of nowhere, it was Catford, which to me is the middle of nowhere, being a North Londoner. And I sort of got a little bit more responsible there, 'cause I couldn't

– there was nowhere – I had an hour and a half travelling every morning and at night, there was no way I was partying all the time. And slowly but surely I started slowing down my partying. I moved to a newer flat, because they were renovating the house that I was living at, got a nice one bedroom house with a garden. Messed it up a bit because I didn't pay my – my rent when I was partying all the time. But then I started getting sensible about myself. Then I got a transfer up to the local store in Finsbury Park, or Green Lanes, and it kind of went good from there. I kind of started – I had a little wobble, 'cause it was only half an hour to walk to work, so I could party again, but I realised I couldn't do that if I want to succeed. I got to assistant manager, but then realised that retail was boring and customers are annoying and dealing with people who don't – who think they know more than you, even though you've got twelve years' experience and they've never bought a bed in their life, is frustrating for me, so I decided that I want to do something else. And I didn't – I couldn't think. It was weighing up, should I just go get training for granite and do the granite thing or be a social worker. And I spent about a year, a year and a half, weighing it up continuously, not sure which one to do and missing the opportunities to apply for college or training and then kept putting it off. And then I met my current girlfriend and she kind of – I told her my plans and she sort of helped me out. And when I finally decided to be a social worker, she helped me by giving me that one push that I needed. She spent the whole day – she's a teacher herself, so she spent the whole day researching all the possible avenues that I could take for education and basically helped me write the next five year plan. And now I'm on that plan. First year's done and dusted pretty much and I'm succeeding. So it's about going forward.

[2:46:50]

*What was the draw to be a social worker after years of kind of manual work?*

I always – when I was at Millfield I thought about being a social worker. Like that guy I told you, Ken, he gave me a piece of advice and said to me, 'If you do want to be a social worker, go out and live your life first. Don't go from care straight into social work. It won't work. You'll still be jaded so much by what you've

experienced. Even if you have a positive experience, you're still going to have something that that will affect how you act. Don't be – don't stay within the system that you're stuck in because you could become institutionalised.' He gave me some really good advice, because I needed to go out and have a life and enjoy myself. And I did, I had a lot of fun and enjoyed myself, and I pushed myself to – to do that and have that experience, because you can't be a social worker without having experience as well. And after that I also realised that I'm nearly – well, I'm thirty now, but at the time I was nearly thirty and I thought, by the time I'm trained up in manual work, where I'm doing, like, some sort of building or granite, to get a good reputation where I can start earning some good money – 'cause that's the only reason I'd do that, 'cause I could earn some good money from it. By the time I did it in time, it'd be time for me to retire, really. And I was also suffering from back problems – not back problems but aches in my back, and I just thought, do I really want to spend the next thirty years coming home going, urgh, after a day's work, or do I want to come home and – okay, it may have other strains, you know, 'cause obviously being a social worker isn't easy, but I'm mentally strong and I know that I won't lose that, so what issues that will come from being a social worker, I will be able to look into it myself and deal with it myself because I've done that all my life. Whereas it doesn't matter how physically strong you are, once your body gives, your body gives and there's no – there's some fight in it but you're only denying the inevitable. And I just thought, I don't want to be a sixty year old man that needs help getting around, you know. I want to – I want a bit more. I want to be – I don't know. I just didn't want to be an old crippled man. And I know that I can also help out a lot of kids 'cause I've gone through the system. You know, I've always said that I want to work with looked after children more than children in need because, when I've got the looked after children, I always say that the best bit is when they turn round and go, 'You don't know what I'm going through.' And I go, 'Well, actually I did grow up in care myself.' And that might make them think, okay, so maybe his advice is better than any other social workers' I've had, you know. I could be wrong but I think that – that could be a major advantage that I would have.

*Before you –*

*Female: Sorry, can I let you know that you've got another ten minutes now.*

*Oh wow, okay. Well, I was going to ask another question about that, but I'm going to have to move on.*

[2:49:27]

*I was going to ask you about your girlfriend and the enormous presence that she has in your life. Is this the first time that you've found someone who gives you that level of support?*

Erm ... I always had a rule with girls that, if it weren't right, that I ain't hanging round. I'm not wasting time. It's not good for me, it's not good for that girl. And obviously, 'cause of short term relationships I had as a child, it was easy to do that with myself, just cut off an emotion if I felt something. There had been girls that I cared a lot about, but everything with this girl felt right, you know. When I met her, she was able to evade my charms a lot easier than any other girl I'd ever – you know, I got to quite a good status when it comes to meeting girls and being able to charm her into what I wanted to do. She didn't fall for it, you know. But she – we went on dates – you know, we went on a few dates and she carried on and she respected me. She didn't – she also didn't react like normal people do when I told her I grew up in care, and that was a shock, you know. It wasn't like, 'Oh, I'm so sorry for you.' She just sort of went, 'Okay, you know, how was that?' You know, she actually gave me the chance to give her an answer. But since leaving care – no, out of all the girls I've been with, definitely she was the most supportive and she was definitely one that gave me a lot of support. And she still does, you know. When I doubt myself sometimes, she'll stand by me. She's the only person that I reveal a lot of how I feel and my doubts – I don't show people my doubts because that's a weakness and I don't like showing weakness, but I feel comfortable enough to tell her how I feel, show her emotions and show her my doubts. And she's – she always sort of pushes forward and tells me that I can do this and I can do that and I am capable of this, you know.

Sometimes I doubt my own intellect and she says, 'Stop being stupid.' You know, she – she keeps telling me that I'm one of the smartest people she knows. Even that I doubted 'cause I feel she's just saying it just 'cause she's my girlfriend or something. But then she sort of – then she'll go out and get evidence to show, you know – like she – one of her friends is a lecturer at the university that I'm looking to go to and she's chatting to her and she goes, 'Oh, don't worry. He'll easily pass that,' you know, and stuff like that. And it's – it's that – she does a lot of work and she does support me better than I can imagine any girl would have done, and that is one of the strongest things about her.

[2:52:08]

*And over the last ten years, having left care and come to this point, a lot of people that we've interviewed have said their twenties have been a very formative part of their life in terms of processing their feelings of coming through the care system. Has it been the case for you?*

Erm, yes and no. I think I was always quite reflective on what my situation was. I was quite aware. And 'cause of the relationship, where my mum told me quite honestly about a lot of things, I think I – it helped me deal with it as it was happening, some of the stuff. As I got older, my later twenties, I've delved a bit more deeper into it and being my girlfriend has made me do that, because obviously I look at the idea of us having a family in the future and I look at what – all the – not the big things, 'cause obviously I'm not going to take crack, you know, but it's the little things that I'm now looking at that I want to make sure that my kids don't have, you know. And the – like my mum had a very negative relationship with black women and her reaction to black – her issues that she had with black women have passed on to me, where I don't find them – I can say that a black woman is beautiful but I won't find them attractive. And I know that's because of something that my mum said and it was ingrained in me. I don't want to have that in my children. So the little things and stuff like that over the last few years has definitely helped me get to a better understanding of who I am and where I came from.

[1:53:30]

*Have you ever looked at your records?*

No. I will be doing that when I finish working where I am volunteering at the moment. 'Cause I'm volunteering there, we've all agreed that it's probably best for me not to look at my records until afterwards, just in case I have a negative reaction and something happens bad and I end up losing the experience that I have gained by being there. And I don't want to – I'm enjoying what I'm doing there and if it's something that I don't want to – that would make me hate Islington, it's not the best thing to do, 'cause I won't be able to find the sort of experience I'm getting there anywhere else with my qualifications.

*And are you curious about them? Why sort of – why do you even want to look at them now?*

Erm, I don't – I don't really – it's not a – it's not that – I definitely want to see them, but I just think it'd be quite cool – you know, 'cause obviously, no matter how much I saw, there's a hundred more things behind the scenes that I didn't see. There's a hundred conversations they probably had about mum that I have never been witness to, that I may have been at school at the time or stuff like that. Or there may be stuff that I didn't know about my mum, who – 'cause my mum had a good relationship with Julie, where she probably told her a lot more than she told other people. So therefore I think it would be interesting to see – I think it would also allow me to reflect more on who I am by knowing what was in those notes, in those records. And it will also help me be a better social worker again, because then I can see – I'll be able to look at it as well from the other side of the page, not just from the care leaver but from a – say, from a social worker's mentality and understand it better, so therefore process everything more correctly. And I think that's going to be an advantage for me.

[2:55:18]

*We've done this process, this kind of filming you talking about your life, in a way you probably haven't done before for a three hour stretch, and I wonder what that kind of feels like?*

Erm, it's – it does actually feel a bit like a weight's been lifted off, 'cause it's – yeah, I have given people snippets and little bits of information about my life and a little bit of understanding – like my girlfriend knows some stuff, some of my friends know some stuff, but I've never given it all, a lot of it, you know, all at the same time. So it's kind of – it's kind of cool to do it, I'll be honest. I've enjoyed it. Although sometimes it may not look like I was enjoying it [laughs], I have – I'm happy that I've done it 'cause it does feel kind of lifted a little bit, like it's – I can breathe a little bit stronger. And I think it's probably quite therapeutic, to be honest. It also shows that I can still control my tears [laughs], 'cause there was many times that I was trying not to. But yeah, it's – I think it is everything that I thought it would be when I came here, you know. There was like extra bits that I didn't expect, but it's definitely – you know, it's – I've got what I thought I would probably get out of it.

*That's really good to hear. We always end by asking whether there's something that you want to say that I haven't asked you about.*

Erm, the only thing is probably my political issues.

*Go ahead.*

We've – I always think that – although I currently work in the participation part of Islington Council, and yes, Islington Council do it very well, but recent legislation that has changed by a certain Tory MP Michael Gove, deciding that no children should live in children's homes, is ridiculous to me, because his experiences – he was adopted as a baby. He has no understanding of what it's like to actually go through care. He has no clue, you know. I don't care how – how – if you were adopted, it's

not the same. It's not the same as being a thirteen year old boy, ripped from your parent, and that's the mindset you would have at that age, or a ten year old boy and being forced to go somewhere else. He has no idea. Because it was successful for him doesn't mean it's going to be successful for everyone else. He's – participation is not just a – a privilege, it's an actual right that children and young people have. And he's not done that. He hasn't questioned people. He doesn't ask people. I know, with some of the young people I work with now, who've turned round to me and told me it was better that they were in a care home. You know, I know it was better that I was in a care home. I was happy with my care home. He shouldn't have been looking at how to get rid of care homes. He should have been looking at how to improve them. Because a lot of kids have a good experience – you know, if they hadn't shut down Millfield, Millfield would still be going strong and there'd be a lot of kids still coming out of there, doing well with their lives because of the way they did it. And the mentality of that – some one person who's – who's doing it all himself. He's doing it the same with the National Curriculum, making his own mind up to go and – I'm going to decide what's right for – my girlfriend's a teacher. She tells me constantly that this is ridiculous, the whole – she's a maths teacher. The maths curriculum, she says, is crazy. We're going back to using long division and stuff. People don't need that. We're not in the – we're in an age where everyone has a mobile phone and every mobile phone has a calculator. Why do I need to know the – what 4,608 divided by 2.85 is? I've got a calculator, it'll tell me, you know. And the same thing's done with children's homes. And it's a shame because, by doing that, he will inadvertently lose a lot of good staff members who work in children's homes. I actually spoke to a member of staff, Ken, about – seeing if he can give me some work. He goes, 'There's no work out there for people who work in care homes because they've all been closed down.' And I'm like, 'I just want to volunteer.' He goes, 'I can't even get volunteers.' There's such a small, like, number of places that there's just no work for anybody. And this guy has made a decision and he doesn't know – to me it's – he hasn't listened to anybody else. He's just made – he's woke up one morning and went, 'Well, I was adopted, lovely, so I'm going to be wonderful.' My brother's adopted and he's had so many issues because of that. And he doesn't – it frustrates me. It angers me that this guy has no idea about anything, you know.

And not – he was adopted by a lovely family, who obviously were able to educate him very well to the point that he’s a Tory, so obviously he has – [laughs] sorry, that’s a bit too deep. But obviously, you know, he’s – he’s obviously had it really lovely. He doesn’t know about the kids who get adopted or fostered and have it horrible, you know. I went through the horrible foster parents. I’ve seen damage done by a – a person who loved my brother enough to adopt him – she did – she genuinely does love him, but things changed and she – there was no support there – you know, she wasn’t – once she had her own son, he didn’t – he was outcast a little bit, you know, and that affected him and it still affects him. And this guy thinks that he knows all about it and it angers me. If he actually spent some time to ask – like you guys, if he actually came in here and interviewed people and actually found out the truth, he might actually find out that he is completely wrong. And I wish he would, but obviously, you know, he’s not going to do that.

*It’s certainly a very turbulent time for children in care at the moment. And do you think they have enough of a voice in society?*

Erm, you know what, again, ‘cause I work at Islington, I think I thought that – I thought it was all like that, but the more – with some of the work that we do, we go and meet other – some of the kids go to meet the ministers and stuff like that. We don’t know what happens when they’re meeting the minister, it’s separate, so I can’t reflect on what they have a say in. But even the guy who’s in charge, the reason he’s in charge is because his parents were foster parents.

*Edward Timpson.*

Yeah. I’m not saying it’s a bad thing, but again, he – why is there not someone in charge who actually went through care? Shouldn’t that be the people in charge, ‘cause they understand better? Yes, he saw kids who went through foster placements, but again, he’s a very small person – situation. He was on the nice side of the grass, you know, the nice side of the fence. But then when the staff get to sit outside, they talk to each other and it turns out that Islington is, like, maybe the only one that

actually has a proper children's active involvement services. The rest of them, it's all tokenism. They just sit there. They hold an in care council, the kids say something and they go, 'Okay, yeah, yeah, yeah,' and it's done. Whereas Islington actually say, 'This is what we want.' They go to the corporate parenting board and they look at it and they go, 'Okay, this is what we can do and this is what we can do. We maybe can't do that.' But they do – there's a bit of voice. And if every borough and every council, local authority, in this country did that, it would be a lot better for the young people. But there ain't and there ain't money for them. And it's going to get worse. Islington might not be able to continue the system because they're getting their budget cut. They're getting told, you can't have that much money. You can't do that. And then what happens then? Those kids' voices are gone again and it'll disappear. It's a – it all – and it all – things get better, they'll bring it back in, back and forth, back and forth. This is not good. We need – kids – young people who live in care need stability and without the stability, without the ability to have their own voice as well, how are things going to improve? Just from seeing how things have improved while I've been working in Islington Council, I've seen how important it is to have that in every place, every service, because it does make a difference. These young people, some of them are off doing Masters and stuff like that. And I'm sitting there going, 'Masters? In my day they celebrated I was doing A levels, not even that I passed it, that I was just on the course.' You know, and that to me, I think it's brilliant. But there's just – there's no one there to really – they don't care about them. I still think the underlying fact is, as long as we get them to twenty-five now – so it's not eighteen, it's twenty-five now, and they're still alive, we've done our job. I think that's a big mistake, you know. I think – especially after twenty-five, there should be counselling facilities, I think, for a lot of kids who grew up in care, because it's not until – as we were saying earlier, it's not until you're in your twenties and late twenties that you start coming to understand things. And it's one thing to come to understand it on your own, but if you had someone there to help you, I think that would massively improve things, you know. You have someone to talk to, a counsellor, a trained person to talk you through what you're going through, that would help so much. I've said that for years, you know. There was times when I wanted to talk to someone. I can't afford to go and pay for a counsellor. And the NHS aren't

going to go – ‘Well, you’re not crazy so, you know, you don’t need a counsellor.’  
‘But I’ve got some issues I want to ...’ ‘Oh, go and suck it up.’ That’s what they’re  
going to really say, you know. And people don’t understand, especially in  
government, don’t understand the deep underlying issues that a lot of people in care  
have. I have managed to deal with them and got through them myself. I’m a very  
small minority, I believe. And I see it when I look at my little brothers. Out of the  
three of us, I’m the only one who – who doesn’t hold any issues that they – like they  
do, you know. There’s major problems with both of my brothers. And they know –  
they know there is but they don’t know how to properly deal with them. One of  
them’s doing counselling for different reasons, because he’s been forced to do it,  
because of anger issues. The other one, he probably doesn’t even realise some of his  
attitudes and behaviours and where they come from.

*Wow. Thank you very much, Byron.*

[End of Transcript] [3:04:44]