



Care Leavers' Stories project

Lily Farmer

Interviewed by Khatija Hafesji

C1597/13

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Social Care Institute for Excellence

Interview Summary Sheet

Title Page

Ref no: C1597/13

Collection title: Care Leavers' Stories

Interviewee's surname: Farmer

Title: Mrs

**Interviewee's
forename:** Lily

Sex: Female

Occupation: Retired housewife

Date of birth: 1921

Dates of recording: 26.06.13

Location of interview: Interviewees own home

Name of interviewer: Khatija Hafesji

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**Interviewer's
comments:** Interview discusses Amy, another resident/ neighbour at Lily's housing association who also took part in the project interviews.

Track 1

Okay, thank you. Can you tell me your name and when I was born?

When I was born? 1921 in April, April 30th.

And what's your name?

Pardon?

What's your name?

My name?

Yeah.

Lily Farmer.

And where were you born, Lily?

Well, I was born in Chislehurst. And I had about six – seven other children, my mother had, and she was all on her own and I was the last one born. And my father died when I was about three months or six months.

So you don't remember your dad at all?

No, so I didn't know my father, no. But she always had a little cottage. Then all I knew I went into Mitcham, to the Mitcham home.

What happened to your mum?

Well, I don't know. I never saw them, not till I come out when I was – when I was in another home. I was in about four homes. I don't know why. So I went to Mitcham,

then I went to near Canterbury, Charing. Then I went to Shirley. Do you know where Shirley is? Oh, you don't. So they kept changing me from one place to another and I didn't know why.

So how old were you when you went to Mitcham?

Well, that's what I said, I must have been about five or six.

And do you remember anything before that?

No.

Nothing at all?

Nothing at all, no.

Do you remember your brothers and sisters?

I was a baby, yeah, that's right, yeah.

And what was Mitcham like?

It was alright. It wasn't too bad. But I was never a happy child. I was always miserable, you know, always unhappy. I don't know why.

Was it a big place, Mitcham?

Oh, it was big, yeah. We had big dormitories and all that, you know. They fed us well, kept us clean, you know, had baths and all that in a big bathroom, whatever they had. But I can't remember it very well.

Did you have a routine? Did you wake up at the same time every day or ...?

Oh yes, yeah. It was rules, they had rules. Never play on a Sunday, you always had to sit quiet and be quiet, you know. They had good days and bad days.

Did you go to church on Sundays?

Pardon?

Did you go to church on Sundays?

Yes, I think we did. I don't know [laughs]. I really don't know, you know. I think my mind has just blanked everything out. That's what it was.

And how long did you stay at Mitcham for?

I don't know. It was funny, really. I don't know what age they took me away, but I don't know if I went to Shirley first or went to somewhere else or somewhere else.

When did you leave care?

Pardon?

When did you leave care and go home?

I didn't go home. I was sent out to service when I was fourteen.

For the war?

Yeah.

[03:15]

Okay. So can you – can you remember what school was like when you were growing up?

Yeah, some – well, I think it was Mitcham School I remember, yeah, but not the others.

Okay. So what was that like?

It was alright, alright. But I think I was a bit of a backward child. I don't know.

What subjects did they teach you?

Sorry, I can't hear your voice.

What subjects did they teach you?

Oh, you know, geography and arithmetic and all that. Of course you have it all different now, innit, it's all different.

But tell me about it then.

That's right.

What were the subjects that you did then?

Well, I didn't do arithmetic. I was very bad. In geography, I was not good at all.

What about history? Did you study history?

Oh no, no, no history, no.

No?

No. I couldn't concentrate. I don't know why. I could never concentrate. I'm a funny person [laughs].

Did you study poetry?

Poetry?

Or Shakespeare?

No, I didn't like poetry, no.

None of that?

No. I'll tell you what I did like, netball.

Oh okay.

Yeah, I used to love netball, yeah.

And did you have friends at Mitcham? Do you remember your friends?

Hm?

Do you remember your friends at Mitcham?

No, no, don't remember that lady, no ... That's what I said, I can't really tell you what time – when I went or whatever, but I was sent out when I was fourteen to go out in private service. But I think that was at Maidstone. I don't know.

[05:02]

Do you remember Christmas?

Pardon?

Do you remember any Christmases that you had, or birthdays?

Well, we never had special days really, no. But I remember – I think it was Mitcham, I did get a little doll. You know, so many got little things and I had a little doll, and somebody took it away from me.

Oh, did they?

Another little girl, of course, yeah. But I think what it is, I wanted to, you know, get everything.

Do you remember dinnertime or lunchtime?

Pardon?

Do you remember dinnertime? Do you remember what you were eating?

I don't know, no. I can't remember that. All I know is that on the weekend we either had seedcake or we had currant cake for tea. And obviously I didn't like the seedcake but I did like the currant cake [laughs], you know. But what we had for dinners, I couldn't tell you, my love. I couldn't tell you.

Did you like the food?

Pardon?

Did you like the food that you had? Did you feel – was there enough food? Did you feel hungry?

Well, I think there was just enough food. You know, just what we had, we ate, that was it.

And did they make you do any work? Did you have any chores?

Oh yes, work. We had to do – I used to polish a floor. And once – sometimes I used to get a bit of a stain in it, you know. But she showed me, she said, ‘Don’t put so much polish on it but put more elbow grease,’ so it should shine up nice. ‘Cause she used to tell me, she said, ‘Put too much polish on the floor.’ I remember that bit.

And who was that that was saying that to you?

That wasn’t at Mitcham, somewhere else.

Who said you put too much polish on the floor?

Mother, whatever we called her. I think it was the mother. We used to call them mothers.

Do you remember her?

No.

No?

No, no.

Did you like her?

[Laughs] I didn’t like any of them. I don’t know why. I seemed to get in trouble [laughs]. I think that’s what it was. I don’t know. But as I said, they weren’t cruel to us. They were very good. You know, and we was fed well and everything. But I can’t really – I think I tried to blank it out of my mind, you know.

[07:24]

But I think my mother, she used to drink a lot. She was an alcoholic, I think, 'cause my big sister used to say, 'Get the children out the home,' but of course she wouldn't. So my three – it was three brothers in the other place, exactly opposite, and I was all on my own. Where my other sister went, I don't know. We was all parted. It wasn't very nice.

And nobody told you where they had gone?

No, I didn't know till I'd gone – I went to private – I'm nearly crying now [laughs]. I didn't know till I went to private service, and then I went to my mum and my brothers' weddings. And I said to my older sister, 'I don't want to go back to this ...' Where I was working. She said, 'Oh, you don't have to. I'll look after you.' Then a policeman come after me and she said, 'She's not going back there. She's going to stay with me and my husband.' And my mum was there then, you know. She was living with my sister.

And how old were you? Were you fifteen or ...?

Pardon?

How old were you when this happened?

I was just fourteen.

Just fourteen?

Fourteen, yeah. I ran away and I wouldn't go back to this private place. I was a maid there, made a maid, and he was only a – I don't know if he was a bus inspector or just a bus driver. I used to have to sleep in their front room. And I said to my sister I didn't want to go back and she said, 'You don't have to. You can stay with me.' And that's the first time I met my family.

[09:10]

What was it like?

Hm?

What was it like, meeting your family?

Oh, it was lovely. I didn't want to go back, see, to a lonely – I was living a lonely life.

Do you remember meeting your mum again? Do you remember what that was like?

My mum?

Yeah.

Well, she never – she never had much to do with me. I don't know why.

What was she like? What did she look like?

Oh, she was – she was a nice old lady. She was nice. I've got tears in my eyes [laughs]. It don't pay to go all back, does it, really? You'll have to excuse me. It'll be alright. Wipe my eyes.

That's okay.

I was a very unhappy child, I'm afraid. I don't know why did they – why did they separate us all, you know? And why was I left on my own? That's what I couldn't make out. Anyway, I'm sitting here and I'm ninety-two, so I can't be too bad, can I?

So did you stay with your sister and her husband?

Pardon?

Did you stay with your sister and her husband?

Oh yes, yes. I went and worked in a laundry.

So you didn't go back to private service?

No.

No.

But I did go back to Farnborough Hospital. I worked there as a maid, again. I was always the under one [laughs], mm.

And was this during the war or was this before?

No, no, no, this was before the war, mm. But I must admit, I was – at Farnborough Hospital, I was very happy, yeah, with other girls. That was quite nice ... [Pause]

[11:15]

And it's funny how you forget – you want to forget things, don't you? I was quite – I had a happy marriage. I had two children, a girl and a boy.

When did you get married?

Er ... I can't – it's in my mind – brain's gone [laughs].

Do you remember meeting your husband?

I lost my husband about, ooh, sixteen years ago. I got married in April. Both our birthdays were in April. Good husband, he was – he was in the army and then when he come out, he come out as a – he was a postman.

Where was he in the army?

Where?

Where?

He went abroad. He went to France and all that, you know. Went – Egypt. I think they – he was with Montgomery, yeah. That was a bit hard, that was. And then I lost my brother. When my brother – my brother got blew up. But you never talk about it. No, he was a good man. And in the end I did work out as the best, you know.

Did you meet him before the war or after the war?

Pardon?

Did you meet him before the war or after the war?

No, it was just after the war. I met him 'cause he was with my brother. They were friends. And then we got married in April. But he was good to the children. Ask my daughter, she always says, 'He was a good old dad,' she used to say. Now she's sixty-five and her brother's sixty ... sixty-four. There was only thirteen months between them.

What was it like for you to have children?

It was lovely.

Yeah?

It was lovely, yeah. Yeah, he was a good husband, yeah. Didn't earn much money then, did they?

And were you working?

Yeah, yeah.

What did you do?

Oh no, I stayed at home and I looked after them. No, I never went to work, not until – I used to do evening, you know, evening cleaning. He used to look after the children and I used to go out in the evening and do a bit of cleaning.

[14:17]

And what did you do during the war?

Me?

Mm.

I was a maid, weren't I, in Farnborough Hospital?

The whole time.

The whole time, yeah, during the war, yeah.

And did you stay at the hospital as well or did you stay at home with your sister?

I stayed at home. No I didn't, I lived in. I beg your pardon. You said did I live in the hospital? Yeah, I lived in the hospital, in the annex, yeah. Yeah, we used to have good laughs. No, I never stayed with my mother. She didn't have much money, love her. She was very poor.

[15:12]

Did you ever ask her why you left home?

Pardon?

Did you ever ask her why you left home?

No, no. No, I never knew why or what for or anything, you know. But I think she was – she was a bit of an alcoholic. That's what she was.

Did you ever ask her about your dad?

Yeah, 'cause that was the trouble – they used to live at Chislehurst in this little cottage and opposite used to be the pub, and they used to be always in there and back again, I suppose. That's what it was, you know. Still there, actually, the little pub there where they used to go in, but the cottages have gone. Used to have to go out the back to go to the toilet and go to get the water and everything. It was really bad. But see, I mean, I was only a baby then and they used to – my big sisters used to look after me.
[pause]

[16:25]

But why I kept moving to them homes, I shall never know, why. I still ask now, why, why did they do it? Why did they keep moving me from one place to another? You can't – I mean, nobody can tell you now, can they?

Did you move to different towns as well?

Pardon?

Did you move to different towns as well?

Yeah, different homes, yeah, that's what I mean. Mitcham wasn't all that long.

Do you remember the names of the other ones?

Well, that's what I said. One was at Shirley. One was at Charing , I think it was near Canterbury. And then I think there was another one but I can't remember where it was. But they seemed to keep moving me from one place to another, you know, and I couldn't make out why.

Did you ask why?

No. Well, you don't, do you, when you're a child? You don't ask these things, do you? I mean, you're talking out of turn if you ask questions. You never looked into it.

[17:50]

And what were you like?

What was I like?

Yeah.

I don't know, I think I was a little bit stubborn. They told me to do something, I don't think I used to do it [laughs]. 'Cause when I was in Farnborough Hospital, you know, and I was making all the girls laugh, and I had to go in matron's office and she said to me – she said, 'Take your hands out of your pockets.' I said, 'No, I won't.' I think I was a bit stubborn. My daughter always says, 'You've got a bad temper, Mum, when you start.' [Laughs] Mm.

Did you get in trouble when you were in the homes?

Now and again, yeah.

What did you get up to?

Well, nothing really, to me it was nothing. But you don't know, do you? [Laughs]
You don't know what you're doing, do you? No. I used to try and be happy, you know. But there was always something at the back of my mind, why. But you never know, do you? Well, I had a happy married life, that's one thing. That's something, isn't it?

That's something some people never have.

Yes, it was really good. He was a good man. Not many of them around, them days.

Did you talk to him about your childhood?

Pardon?

Did you talk to your husband about your childhood?

Oh, he knew, yeah, he knew. Yeah, he knew where I come from and what have you and everything, you know. He was five years older than me. I missed him when he went, 'cause we used to live in Hayes and then they took the flat away and I had to come into a bungalow. Supposed to be knocking 'em down but I don't think they've knocked 'em down yet. I was happy there, them flats. But I think these bungalows are cold [laughs]. Mm. There's not much I can tell you really, dear. I think I blanked it all out, most of it, you know.

[20:37]

Why do you think you did that?

I don't – well, that's how I was always unhappy. I wasn't a happy child.

What kind of things did you like to do in your spare time?

Pardon?

Did you like to go to the cinema or ...?

Oh, I used to love the cinema, yes, yeah. Yeah. My mum did as well. She always used to go to the cinema. When she was ill, she came out the hospital, she said, 'I want to go to the cinema.' I said, 'Well, you can't.' I said, 'You're not well.' She loved going there. 'Cause she was deaf but she still went [laughs]. She used to go in, yeah.

Did you go with your mum?

Oh yeah, I've been – yeah, I went with her. I'd say, 'Ssh.' 'Cause she used to shout 'cause she was deaf. You know when it's all quiet, all watching the film, I'd say, 'Ssh.'

Did you go to dance halls?

Yeah, I loved dancing, yeah.

Did you go every week or did you go every month?

No, we used to go to a little den. We used to have a little den near the bus – where the bus place was, along the common, Bromley Common. We used to go there in our uniforms. We used to put capes on, pretend we were nurses, me and my little friend. Oh, we had some good times together. But I think being in a home, I think it takes all the fight out of you, doesn't it? You know, you feel as if you was unwanted. [Pause] That's about all I can say, my love.

[22:33]

Was there a lot of discipline in the home?

A lot of visitors?

A lot of discipline.

Visiting?

Discipline.

Pardon?

Discipline, like rules, rules and regulations and things that you had to do. Did you have –

Oh yeah, regulations, yeah. Oh yes. That's what I said, Sundays, you couldn't play. You had to sit quiet.

And did you have visitors? Did anyone come to visit you?

No, no. The only time my big sister come with my mum and that was when I was coming up for fourteen. That was the only time I saw them. And I think I was in Maidstone. I can't remember where that was, Maidstone or somewhere.

Did you know them when they came to see you? Did you know who they were?

No, no, I didn't know them. Then my sister come with her young man, the other sister. But I didn't know them.

Did they tell you who they were?

Oh yeah, yeah, they did say who they were, they were my sisters and that, yeah. Very strange, it was strange. Till you work it out, your mum – you think, she was on her own. I mean she had eight children and her husband died early, when she had to look

after us all, she couldn't, could she? But it's funny, I watched that film last night about the workhouse ...

[26:25]

Did it remind you of the home?

Yeah, it did, actually. It did. Yeah, it did, yeah. But they were more talking about it, weren't they? Youngsters and that were talking about it, great grandfather or something was in a – sort of taken in, yeah. 'Cause my mum, when she was ill, she did say, 'I don't want to go to the workhouse.' I remember her saying that. I said, 'But there's no workhouse now. They've all gone.' She thought she was going to go back – I don't know if she'd been to one or what. Might have been, mightn't she? I don't know. So there you go.

[25:13]

Sounds like you had a good relationship with your mum when she got older.

Yeah, oh yes. Oh, she was good to me, love her little heart. She tried. I mean, she was so poor, she couldn't afford a lot of food. So she was very good to me. I couldn't say she was, you know, not nice. She was nice. Kids used to love her, you know, their nan. I think she died when she was sixty. Oh no, she was a good old lady. I mean, she couldn't cope with all them children, could she? [Pause]

Do you remember her funeral? Do you remember her funeral?

Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

What was that like?

Yeah, it was a cremation. It was at Beck – Beckenham. I think all my family have gone there, cremated. My husband was there as well. Even got mine ready [laughs].

[Pause]

[26:41]

But one sister used to live at Seaford. We used to go there for a holiday with the children. They used to love it.

Is that a beach?

Pardon?

Is that the seaside? Is Seaford the seaside or ...?

Yeah, I went with the children and I used to go before I had the children. I used to go to stay with them for a week, or something like that, you know, the older sister.

And what did you do?

Me?

What did you do?

Well, not a lot. Used to walk to the sea and what have you, you know. Never – well, I couldn't swim. I never – I wouldn't be able to swim, 'cause I still don't know how to. Tried to but I couldn't. I used to love going there with my sister. [Pause] I think my eyes are getting a bit – a bit tired.

Would you like to stop?

Pardon?

Would you like to stop?

Yeah, I think I'd better, yeah [laughs]. I can't say much about the – I couldn't say – Mitcham – I couldn't run 'em down, 'cause they kept us well, you know. But ... I don't think anybody's been cruel to me. They were very good.

[28:20]

How did you meet Amy?

Pardon?

When did you meet, Amy?

What, dear?

When did you meet Amy, your friend, Amy?

Amy? Only here.

Only here?

When I moved here, two years ago. And she was – you know when you're talking and she said she'd been to a Mitcham home. I said, 'Oh, I was there.' But I couldn't tell – I can't remember her at all. I mean, there were so many children there then. I mean, you're one among many, aren't you, really?

And do you both talk about it?

Oh yeah, she did, yeah. She used to say she used to make eyes at my brother or something. I don't know. I don't know about that [laughs]. 'Cause she's a bit older, isn't she? They all died now anyway. I've only got my big sister and she's in the – in the home at Mottingham. She'll be 100 next birthday.

Wow.

Marvellous, isn't it, 100? We have been – my daughter has taken me to see her a couple of times, you know, but she was going down. You know when you go down, down, down as you're getting older, mm. Yeah. Still, she might make 100. She might get the Queen's, what's it, telegram or whatever.

Yeah, letter.

Yeah, that's right, yeah.

Do you want one of those?

Me, I don't want one. No, I want to go before then [laughs]. I don't want to live till that long, oh no. No.

Okay.

Yeah. I think that will be it, my love, won't it?

[30:27]

What has it been like, telling me about your – your childhood?

My childhood?

What has it been like, telling me now about your childhood?

My kids, you mean?

No, no, about growing up in the homes.

Oh me? Oh, I don't really know. I was never happy. I told you, I was never happy. There was something missing. But as I say, you never get the love or anything, do you, 'cause there's so many of you. They've got to look after you, haven't they? So you're one of a few, you've got to queue up for whatever. But I was – as I say, I was never happy there. You feel as though you've got something missing. [Pause] But surely they must have kept us well to live longer. I mean, we have lived longer, haven't we? [Pause]

[31:45]

Okay. Thank you very much, Lily.

You what, dear?

Thank you very much. I think we'll stop.

Sorry to ask you to keep repeating, 'cause my ears – I think they're –

That's alright. It's a very hard thing –

I am going a bit deaf. You've got a very soft little voice.

I know [both laugh]. Okay, thank you.

Oh, it's alright, dear. I've not – have I been any good?

You've been excellent. You've been excellent.

Oh thank you. I mean, I'm trying but –

It's a very tiring thing to do.

I know, dear, I know. And I've been waiting all day. I thought you were going to come earlier, you know.

[End of Transcript]