

Who Cares? project

Transcript of podcast episode 10: SUSAN

[Music plays]

Narrator: Welcome to the Who Cares? Project podcast. Who Cares? is an intergenerational oral history project, generously supported by the National Heritage Lottery Fund.

In the spring of 2023, 40 A level drama and acting diploma students, interviewed 12 people, living in six care homes, in South London. What you're listening to here is an edited version of one of those original interviews. This one is with Susan. Additional interviews, with families, friends and carers were recorded by the project producers. The Who Cares? Project was created to give a voice to people whose stories might otherwise go untold. For more information, please go to www.whocaresproject.co.uk.

Susan: When I was younger, you had Elvis Presley or Cliff Richard. I didn't like Elvis Presley. Mine was Cliff Richard, and when I had my bedroom, when we moved, you could buy life size posters and I had one of him on my wall. When I used to sleep like this, he was on the wall facing me and yeah, that was the guy I liked.

[Music plays]

Susan: Then the Beatles came around. I like the Beatles. They were good.

[Music plays]

Susan: My name's Susan, Susan Vickers and I live in a care home. I was born in Chelsea in London. 1951.

Liz: Sue is very sociable. Very sociable, loves company. She participates in everything and loves everything, or she says she does. She does have a go – we do sporting games such as bowls, skittles, target practice. We do arts. We do gardening club. We do karaoke. Again, karaoke, give her a microphone and put Queen on and she's singing. There hasn't been one activity that she says I don't want to come to. But although she likes them, for Susan, I believe it's the social interaction. It's having that company. That's what's the important part for her, so we just have fun with it all. We just have fun.

[Music plays]

Susan: There's quite a few activities that we can take part in here.

Magician: Okay, let's try this now. We have two poker chips here. A black one and a white one. What I can do, I can turn the black on one white. I can turn the white one black.

Susan: Oh, wow [laughs].

Magician: I can do it again. I can turn the black one white, and the white one black. I'm sure you know how that's done.

Susan: Haven't a clue.

Magician: If one side's black.

Susan: And one side's white.

Rachel: Do you think you could pull that one off Sue?

Susan: I could yeah..

Magician: Let's try something else...

Susan: Yeah we used to like a game of cards and we used to play. My mum had a big penny jar so to make it interesting we used to play with money but it was money from out the penny jar so we used to put a different amount of money on it. At the end of it, just used to go back in the penny jar but it just used to make it more interesting I think.

Liz: My name is Liz and I'm the activities co-ordinator at Westwood House. Although I work here, I do actually think Sue and I have more of a friendship. She trusts me. She will open up to me about Tim, her husband and she'll trust me if she's got a problem. She'll always call me and sit and tell me. So yeah, we have a really good relationship.

Susan: It's good to have somebody like that actually. It really is. Yeah. I think it's great having Liz here. If I died tomorrow, I could turn around and say I've had a brilliant life. I had a good mother and father and when I got older, I had a brilliant husband, who gave me two brilliant children and between them I've got five lovely grandchildren, so yes, I am very positive. I'm lucky, I love my family and hopefully they love me. Which I think they do [laughs].

[Music plays]

Susan: My parents, my mum, she was a cleaner, mainly and my dad, he was a London black cab taxi driver. They got married in 1950 and they had me in 1951 but they were great together. I loved my mum and dad. My dad spoilt me sometimes. Not overly spoilt, and my nan lived with us as well. My nan taught me all the cooking skills I got now. I mean I'm not saying I'm a good cook. I can cook. I loved that actually. I did love that. It was a very close family. Although I was an only child, I was never left out of anything and I wasn't spoilt.

When I was living on Edith Grove, it might have been two or three Rolling Stones moved in, just near enough opposite me. There was Mick Jagger and oh the drummer, what was his name? I can't remember his name and they moved in and when people got to find out, they were saying, this is going to be hell. They're going to be out on – because the middle part of the house had outside, big balconies. They're going to be out on that balcony, making a noise all night but they didn't. They played during the day and sang during the day but they never done it at night.

[Music plays]

Susan: They lived there, or I lived there, until they made their first record. I'll always remember what it was called. It was called 'Come On' and they kept singing that over and over and over again. You know, when I tell that to people, you know, when I was a bit younger, they used to look at me and thought, no, that's not true but it was. Was true.

[Music plays]

Susan: Yeah, I mean I think the '60s was great. There was so much that happened in the '60s. Like I say, in the late '60s it was the mini skirt and everybody, all the girls at school were rolling their skirts up, so that their skirts were above, well, wherever and always being told by the teachers to pull them down. But, I don't know, there was a lot that happened in the '60s, which is hard to pinpoint now.

[School playground noise]

Susan: I never liked school but I mean I left when I was 15. I didn't stay on at school to do anything else but I knew that I just wanted to be a hairdresser. I had a Saturday job in the hairdressers and that's where I done my apprenticeship as a hairdresser. In the days that I was a hairdresser, an apprenticeship was for five years. My best experience was doing a cutting school with Vidal Sassoon and that was absolutely great. He cut somebody's hair and from long hair to short hair and I was watching him, and all of a sudden he says, 'see that lady over there'. I said, 'yeah', and she had long hair. He said, 'now I want you to do that'. That was frightening to have him, and you know, I can remember saying, 'but are you going to watch me', 'yes'.

And I said to myself, I'm going to mess this up. Then I thought, no I'm not, I'm going to do it. That was my most memorable job in hairdressing, was meeting him and being taught as well by him, hairdressing. Course I remember where it was. It was up in Regent Street. I will never, ever forget that. Never. I did have a picture of me taken with him and it always used to be up on the wall in the hairdressers I worked in but I don't know what happened to that.

With hairdressing you meet a lot of people. You get to know a lot of people and a lot of people come in to have their hair done, and they talk about a lot of things in their life that they wouldn't talk to other people about. I don't know why but I think you'll find a lot of hairdressers will tell you that. I mean I used to have this one lady and she used to tell me everything that had happened to her and it was always – she always used to take my hand and she said, 'you'd never tell anybody else will you?'. I said, 'no, course I won't' and you didn't. You know you never. Even when all the girls got together. You knew what to say and what not to say. You have to keep that a secret.

You don't let it out to anybody, not even the girls that you're working with. But no, I was sad leaving that job. The person who owned that hairdressers, she had two, but unfortunately the shop that I worked in, she closed down because she couldn't afford to keep two shops open and I wanted another job but I couldn't find any shops that were looking for hairdressers. The only people's hair I done then, was my mum's and my nan.

And if my mum never had her hair done weekly, then all hell used to break loose. So, I changed professions altogether. I went into an office. I worked, it was called then the LEB, which is the electric company and I stayed there for a little while until I had my first child.

[Music plays]

Susan: I met my husband while I was on holiday in Majorca and he was with a friend. It's quite funny actually. He was with a friend and I was with a friend and my friend said that she was going back to the room and I said, yeah okay and I stayed downstairs talking to Tim. That's his name, for, you know, quite a little while. Then he seen me back to my room and he said, 'I'll see you in the morning'. I said, 'okay'. So, the next morning, I went downstairs to breakfast, and I looked at Tim and I thought, you've got the same top, you know, as what you had on yesterday and last night.

It wasn't until later on, when he went back to his room, his friend wouldn't let him in the room, because it was his friend that wanted to chat to me. And, but things have developed. He said, 'I'll ring you when we get home'. I thought, well you hear this when you're on holiday. It never turns out but he did ring me and he asked me if I could go – he lived in Cobham in Surrey. And we both – I used to drive then as well. So, he said, 'could you come down to Cobham next Saturday'. I said, 'yes okay'.

I asked my dad, because my dad used to be a black cab taxi driver. He said it's a straight route all the way down the A3. Nothing's a straight route to me. I got lost. I got lost. So, I phoned up home, my mum answered, I said, 'has Tim been on the phone?'. She said, 'no'. I said, 'well I got lost, but I know where I'm going now. I said, 'if he does ring, can you tell him I am on my way' and I finally got into Cobham and he was where he was going to be and then we went back to his house and I met his mum and dad. But he was the youngest of three brothers and I was an only child.

When he said, 'we'll go to meet my brothers'. I didn't panic, but you know, I thought, you know when I went home and told my mum and she said, 'well you're all right about it, ain't you?', I said, 'yeah it was a bit daunting but yeah'. I said, 'but I've still got one to meet, that's next weekend' and I said, 'I've got nobody. I'm just me' [laughs]. But it was good because all through life we always got on well. His brothers and wives, and me and Tim, for all brothers to get on like they did and their wives just hit it off.

[Music plays]

Susan: He sort of proposed to me on holiday. He said to me, he said, 'I want to marry you Sue'. I said, 'yeah, I wanted to marry you too'. He said, but he said, 'after this holiday' he said, 'when we get home', he said, 'I wanted to talk with your dad'. I said, 'okay, you can do that'. So, it was one Saturday evening. We'd been out just to the local pub where my mum and dad lived, or where I used to live then and he came in and my mum always used to say to him, 'Tim do you want a sandwich, like with your coffee'. He always used to say yes and then I went outside with my mum and I said, 'Tim's got something to say'. So, she said, 'why'.

I said, 'I'm not pregnant or anything mum, nothing like that'. So, she said, shall I just leave? I said, 'yeah, just leave them'. And I've never known a man to be so nervous about asking. Anyway, he asked my dad and my dad came out and he looked at me and then he just put his arms around me and hugged me and he said, 'you've made a good choice Sue'. He said, 'that is a brilliant man. I know he's going to be a brilliant husband. When the time comes, he'll be a brilliant father' and he said, 'I've got nothing to say that this can't happen'.

So, my mum said, 'when's all this going to happen'. She said, 'please give us time to save up for the wedding'. I said, 'September'. She said, 'not this September'. I said, 'no, September next year'. And that's what happened and we had a brilliant, brilliant wedding. Brilliant. Brilliant wedding. He was, he was a romantic man. He was lovely.

[Music plays]

Susan: My son was born on April the 22nd. Yeah my daughter was born also in April so they were both born in April, just two years apart. Yeah, I was over the moon when Paul was born and we named him – I picked the name Robert. But my husband persuaded me, to say, no we'll have Paul. So, I said, 'all right we'll have Paul Robert then'. But yeah, he was a good baby. He was, he was good. He never liked sleeping. He did not like to go to bed. I mean my husband if he was alive now, he would tell you, and we'd laugh about it. He used to lay on the floor in their bedroom, until he went off to sleep and if he moved, 'where you going Dad?', 'I'm still here, you just go to sleep'.

And he used to try and creep out. If he used to wake up, he used to shout out, 'where did you go to Dad?' and sometimes I used to go into him, and I used to say, 'your dad has just gone to have a cup of tea, cup of coffee'. And I said, 'but you go back to sleep. He'll be up again soon, but you just lay there and go back to sleep'. Nine times out of 10 he did. He did. He was a good boy. He was a good baby. He turned into a very good boy. Mind you, I enjoyed it all. I really did enjoy it all. No, I didn't find it hard. No, I enjoyed every part of it.

[Care home noise]

Susan: Coming into this care home, we liked it. You know, this is my home. I still miss my house, but here everybody, even other residents, you know some of the residents will talk. I've got a few that I talk to every day and the carers. I think the carers are lovely here, I really do.

Sheila: Sue, she's a lovely lady. She's been with us for, oh God, time goes – I don't know if it's 18 months or two years. Her husband was with her when she come in so both of them come. Husband and wife. They were next door to each other anyway. He passed and that was quite an emotion for her.

Liz: When she reminisces, when she goes back on her life, it's always positive and the relationship she had with Tim, she only ever expresses a real love.

Susan: Sadly, my husband developed dementia, as time went by. He always had a bad memory. You know, my son and daughter, they used to laugh at him sometimes. They'd tell him something one day and they'd mention it a couple of days later and he said, 'you never told me about that', and I said, 'we did', but he'd forgotten it. We never thought anything about

it. You know just someone that just got a bad memory but as time got on, it got worse. He never forgot me. He always remembered his son and daughter and he knew he had grandchildren and he always used to say, 'how's my Lacey' and that's the youngest granddaughter, 'she's fine Tim. They're all fine'. But then it got to the point where I was in his room and I used to hold his hand, but he was just laying there with his eyes shut all the time.

Then he just got hold of my hand and took it out of his hand and put it on the bed, but when I tried to get my hand back into his, he wouldn't let me and so I just held his arm. He even tried to shake that off, but I wouldn't let go. It was very hard to be told that that was it – yeah he just never opened his eyes again. He died in this home. He was in the next room to me. He's only been gone a couple of years, which must have been 2020 he died. I still get upset over it sometimes. Thinking why, why did he have to go like that. I should have just kept talking to him and – which I did in many ways but it was a very upsetting way for him to have actually gone.

[Music plays]

Liz: Every single day, she would mention Tim. We might be doing an activity and it'll be, 'oh Tim likes this song'. She actually talks about him quite a lot in the present as well, you know, 'he likes this song'. So, I think by how Sue - what she tells us, she has had a very positive life. There's a woman there with a very sharp brain and unfortunately, you know, her body lets her down with her MS. I know that it gets her down but especially around people she doesn't show it. She tries to be positive. She tries to stay positive, so yeah, she's a great lady. Yeah.

Susan: I've had MS for quite a few years but then they took a few scans or x-rays and they said, 'oh you got a little blockage on the base of your spine, but that's all right we can free that' and I just said, 'okay'. They just said, 'it's a very small incision' and when they've took it out, they said, 'oh there was a lot of blood but they took all that away', and I never walked again. So, it was opening up my spine that took my walking away. I'll never, ever get over that. I've had to, and probably I have in many ways, but that's the way it happened, yeah. I'm just thankful that I've got a chair like this. It's an electric wheelchair yeah. It's charged up overnight. When I get out of it at night and go into my bed and this goes on charge and it gives it a good charge then.

I make sure that the carers don't forget to plug it in, I just watch until it is done. But yes, it is, yes. That's how I describe this wheelchair. My legs on wheels [laughs] and yeah, I'm happy. I'm happy.

[Music plays]

Susan: If I can say anything, I had a brilliant marriage. A brilliant life with my husband. I really can. He was a good dad. He was a brilliant husband, yeah, and he was a good grandad. But I don't know, I just think, you've got to give and take. Listen to each other. You can't want all the time. You've got to listen to that other person, what they want and then come, you know, put the two answers together and the two of you decide what you want, but you

know to listen to each other and talk to each other and sort out any problems that you might have, you know, together. But yeah, yeah, I did have a brilliant life. I loved him to the end of the earth and back and I've got a picture of him, on my wall in my bedroom, where my bed head is, I face him and I talk to that picture every night.

People think I may be crazy but, ha, one of the carers, she could – sometimes I don't talk aloud, I talk just in my mind. But sometimes I will say something and this carer will come in, she'll say, 'who you talking to Susan', 'that picture there' or 'that person in that picture'. And she looks at me, she said, 'that's good'. I said, 'I know it's good. He can't answer me back' [laughs], but yeah. I loved my husband very, very much. I still love him, even though he's not with me, he's up there and he's in my heart and no one can ever take that away. I'm just one of the lucky ones.

[Music plays]

Narrator: The Who Cares? Interviews were recorded by students from Burntwood School, the Norwood School, Rachel Edwards and Sasha Neal, with additional material recorded by Rachel Edwards, Sasha Neal and Nic Wassell. This episode was edited by Pete Roch and directed by Rachel Edwards and Sasha Neal.

[Music plays]



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