

Who Cares? project

Transcript of podcast episode 11: JO

[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 Jo. 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.

[Music plays]

Jo: Everything I did was music. It was amazing really how many things all linked up. I mean everything I did, was unplanned and unbelievable [laughs].

[Music plays]

Jo: My grandmother was European. She came over on the onion boat, as we called it. I had a very good childhood. It was East London. Whitechapel. It was colourful. It was just lovely. It had everything, everything you could wish for. Amusements. Lovely people. Very mixed people, they were from all different places. When they came over from various other countries, they all seemed to settle in East London for some reason. My birth father died when I was – just before my sixth birthday. He had a fruit and vegetable business down Petticoat Lane with his two sisters.

He used to go to a theatre in Shoreditch, called the London Music Hall and he used to meet a lot of his mates in the theatre bar. My mum used to go there, she loved the theatre and when he died, they all said to her, you know, there, there never mind, come and have a drink with us. So, she used to sit me in a stool in front of a stage, you know, front row centre, watching the show, whilst she was having a drink with me father's mates. And she was lovely.

[Music plays]

Jo: And she married a second time, when I was eight years old to a very nice man with no children and he treated me like he'd given birth to me. I had a very good friend that I grew up with, Eileen. We were neighbours. We grew up together in a tenement building. Her father left home, her mother died, she was on her own, so my mum took her in as a sister for me. We got on really well. Every time I had a friend actually, my mum used to say it was her other daughter, because they were always fluffy compared to me. She used to comb my

hair and she used to give me a fringe, and I used to go, don't want that. Didn't want it and she always wanted a fluffy child and I think because of that, I went the other way.

[Music plays]

Jo: My primary school was very, very good. You know if I talk to you, and I tell you something, and you say, that's clever, it's from my primary school. Music and geography was about all I was interested in, and having a good time. Because I went to school in the '30s and everybody was very, very anti-Hitler, all us kids were communists and we wore little red bits of ribbon that said Unity, and we'd meet each other in the street and go all red front. I mean the boys I went to school with were all down the street fighting the people who were fighting us and they hated Jews because Jews made too much money and Jews didn't belong here. It wasn't their country.

[Air raid sirens]

Jo: I was 16 when war broke out and then when I was 18, I joined the forces. Loved it. I mean, when you're that young, you don't care about bombs dropping of anything, you just have a good time and when you heard the sirens going, you ran to the air raid shelter and you just stayed there until the next morning, and the all-clear would go and you'd look around and you'd say, 'oh look that house isn't here anymore'. If it wasn't personal, it didn't affect me. I knew a lot of black people because the Windrush crowd, a lot of them came to the East End and so some of the girls I knew, they'd been my school mates and that, suddenly had black boyfriends, and the black boyfriends became our friends. We talked about different songs, blue beat and whatever.

[Music plays]

Jo: When I was very young and I used to go to clubs I used to go to Soho and most of my school mates would go to some sort of sleazy pub in Aldgate, you know, East End, and they'd never go that far but I used to, even as a kid, I used to go, and it was sleazy. I used to think I've seen so much more than they have. I mean funnily enough, as I got older, I saw a couple of school mates doing their business down there. But there you go. It takes all sorts. I've got no scruples about doing wrong and I don't think people's private goings on should be made public.

[Music plays]

Jo: All my generation were the same. If they didn't do, they didn't get it. So, our jobs when we left school, was attached to our brain. Either we became doctors and accountants or we became scrubbers. I wasn't clever at all. Most of the time I spent in travel business.

[Music plays]

Jo: I worked for British Railways, British Airways, and French Railways. I worked in travel agencies, taking groups of tourists to various places. Used to take the people, meet them at Victoria, put them on the train, take the boat across to Calais. Put them on the train. Take them to Paris. Stay in Paris overnight, and then on the train the next day to the South of France.

[Music plays]

Jo: Paris is my spiritual home. I love it. When I first went there, I just fell in love with it. I like the food. I like the music. One buttered bun, is more exciting there, than a trifle would be here, yeah. It's the way they turn out things. A rum baba, beautiful. I just got to know all the clubs and theatres. Went to the Folies Bergère, Sacré Coeur, Notre Dame. I did it all you know; I loved every minute of it.

[Music plays]

Jo: I travelled around quite a bit. Emigrated to Canada. I mean one of my best experiences, is I drove all the way down from Toronto, along the Mississippi to New Orleans, to the carnival. I went with a friend, Eileen, the friend I lived with, because we did everything together. It was lovely. All along the street, all jazz music.

[Music plays]

Jo: Ahh. Great.

Judith: Jo will be 101 in October this year. She's very hard to describe. She's clever. She's very funny. She doesn't suffer fools gladly but she is very loyal. She's very kind. She listens to people, but she goes her own way, and actually what she did is quite extraordinary.

[Music plays]

Jo: I don't know to this day why I started doing one nighters. All the people that I worked with, used to go to different places and they said, 'why don't we have somewhere we can all go', you know. Everybody was still frightened to do anything. So, I went to the nearest pub with an upstairs room, 'can I hire the room for the night' and they charged, maybe in those days, £10 and then one of the people I worked with, one of the girls, her and her brother had a three-piece band, so I employed them for £1 each and then I sold 50 tickets. Yeah, because it's amazing how many gay people there are, plus the fact that their friends, if they didn't work at BA, they worked in Oxford Street or Regent Street in department stores, so I had all the staff from Selfridges, which pleased my mum because one of the blokes that came in used to do the curtain department, and she was crazy for curtains, and she used to go in there, and he used to give her cut price curtains, you know [laughs].

So, everybody was happy and that's how I started doing one-night stands. I didn't know what I was doing, it just happened.

[Music plays]

Judith: My name's Judith Edwards and I'm a volunteer at Nightingale House. I think her first club was the Rehearsal, which was in Archer Street and it was a club that catered for the gay community, which was years and years before its time. It was quite extraordinary.

Jo: My mum had died the year before. I'd sort of gone into mourning for the year for her and when it was up, somebody I knew said to me, 'I've got a mate, who's got a club in Soho, and he's not doing very well in the week. Could you come and sort of help him out' and I got introduced to this Yiddisher man, Harry Jacobs, who was down at the Rehearsal. He'd got a wife, Betty. They lived in Hampstead Garden Suburb and I was quite friendly with Betty because she had a little club in Carnaby Street and we used to pop in there for a social drink and sort of chat to all the Golders Green people, you know, grew up with me in the East End, they'd go off and got married. I went off and didn't get married, but you know we stayed friends.

And Harry said, 'oh I'm told you can bring me some customers' and I said, 'yeah'. He says, 'I don't want any of these queer people. I don't want them coming in here. People talking about the pub' and this whole rant. I said, 'well it's up to you. I tell you what I'll do. I'll invite some of the people here. If you don't like them, tell me and that's - boom boom'. So of course, I went around BA and my friend Eileen was at Fortnum and Mason, so she got all the queers from Fortnum and Mason, and I got them all from British Airways. Sorry - gay people. You've got to say gay. I used to say, 'but I'm not, I'm miserable.' [laughs] And I did a flyer and told them all to come to this one night we're having on the Sunday, which is when Harry was closed. A lot of the clubs and pubs used to close on Sundays because they were early closing, they didn't do good business and, being Jewish, he didn't like being closed. They started coming in, he stood there watching. A couple of girls came in and he said, 'they look like my daughters. They look exactly the same as my daughter'. I said, 'what did you expect them to have, horns?'

What we used to do, because it was mixed and because a lot of the girls used to look quite butch, the lights were dark, and I used to say, if men want to dance together nobody will know the difference and so when it started, I started getting a lot of gay men down there, because they could get away with dancing together in a place where nobody noticed what they were doing and nobody particularly came in or made a big thing out of it. I did the first legal sort of session.

[Music plays]

Jo: Eventually I got the jukebox going properly and then somebody used to deliver four records a week, four pop records a week, Top 20 to go on the jukebox. Some of the top stuff were not quite danceable. I said, 'I'm going to pick my own'. He said, 'you'll still have to pay'. I said, 'I don't care' and maybe what I wanted was at the bottom but I did. I filled it up with

stuff like the Supremes and Diana Ross and Carpenters and all those and it was beautiful mellow music. Really lovely.

[Music plays]

Jo: Of course, it made a fortune for Harry. When he saw how well it was doing on a Sunday. He said, 'do you reckon you could do another night', and also my customers were saying to me, 'haven't you got another night'? Started doing Wednesdays because that was his NAFF night and then it got so busy and so sort of trendy, I gave up my day job. Well, I loved it but then I've always loved Soho.

[Music plays]

Jo: Nobody was doing drag anywhere, can you believe? Regina Fong, who was actually bigger than Lily Savage, all these people, I hate to say it, but they all started at the Rehearsal. That's why they came to the Rehearsal. I mean the way I started drag was stupid because it was a boy that I was at BA with and he was 6" 3', he played the organ at church and he was gay but it was all hush hush because of his background. And we got on quite well together and we went to Paris on a weekend, and we went to the gay places there and one of them had tables and drinks, and drag queens serving the tables and I said, what a lovely idea. I could do that at the Rehearsal and he says, 'can I be one of the drag queens?'. I mean 6" 3', never done anything like it in his life and, 'yeah, all right'. Okay.

So, we got back to London and of course Eileen says, 'I've got a few old frocks you can have' and so Eileen made his face up and she dressed him. He came hobbling onto the stage, in Eileen's stiletto heels. He couldn't walk. He looked like nothing on earth. He got this wig again, another friend of mine who was also a customer, who was a hairdresser. Said, 'give him a wig, I'll do it and he can have it', which he did. So, she did the top, Eileen did the bottom and various people did the middle of him. They'd never seen a drag act other than pantomime. So, they didn't know any better.

I used to write parodies for him, and they were all based on the current West End shows that were on at the time. There was one, 'The Music Man', and one of the big numbers was '76 Trombones'.

[Music plays]

Jo: And in Polari, the gay language Polari, palone's a women and omi's a man, so an omi-palone is a gay man, and so I wrote this song '76 Omi-palones' and he just sang it and because nobody had heard the words, and they were quite funny and he was doing it as funny, because he couldn't do it straight. And there's your act. I couldn't believe that people would want to see this 6" 3, organist dressed up in somebody's clothes, singing a sappy song.

[Music plays]

Judith: She was friends with Danny La Rue, she was friends with Paul O'Grady. She's got photographs of great parties and people laughing and dancing and yeah, yeah she had fun. But she was a pioneer.

Carer: Hi, how are you?

Jo: Hello. I'm better now I've seen you.

Carer: [Laughs]. I've come for my tea cloths.

Jo: Oh okay, you can take your cake back thank you. It's too sweet. [Door closes.] Oh gawd, it gets on my bloody nerves.

Rafi: My name is Rafi Fuchs and I'm the religious co-ordinator at Nightingale House. Josephine she's a character that when you walk into the room, you know that you are dealing with someone that's been on the stage for many years because she looks at you, in the way that yes, what is your problem, what do you want? And then I look at her, and I says, 'I'm the Rabbi, I've just come to introduce myself to you'. She says, 'I'm not religious and I'm not interested'. And I said to her, 'can I be your friend?', she said, 'yes, you can schmooze with me if you want'. I said, 'oh, so you know the business', 'I know the business, what do you think I am? I've been there. I done that'.

Jo: I owned a club. The Vortex in Victoria. Towards the end of the Rehearsal, for some reason the lease was up or something or other, and what was I going to do? A couple of old queens came into me, used to come regularly and I happened to mention to them and they said, 'oh well we're trying to get rid of our place in Victoria so if you're interested come and have a look at it'. It had two rooms. One had a bar in it, and people sat and drank, and the other one had seats around it but you could dance. It was a shuffle scene; it wasn't a real dance scene. Nobody dared dance properly. So, I took it over when the Rehearsal go.

People said to me, there's nowhere else to go. So, some of them left me. Some of them kept coming and again, I got one of these bright ideas. If you have a food licence, you could stay open a bit later. I got a food licence and I think, what was it, a pie – one of those whatsit pies, you buy a ready made pie, stuck it on a plate on a table, and then when people would bring visitors in, you know, that had never been before, and we'd go around with these pies, 10 o'clock at night, put them on the table, this visitor leaps forward to have a bit, 'don't touch it, you're not allowed to eat it, it's a stale one' [laughs].

We did very well there and I had rooms upstairs, rented rooms. One or two of them were a bit dodgy and they'd run away without paying or moonlighting or whatever you call it. One person had a beautiful cat and when she did a runner, she left the cat behind and from then on I became a cat person. Eileen, she was the same. Yeah, we became cat ladies. We got on very well because we just agreed on a lot of things. When we both got good jobs and got good money, we bought a holiday flat in Brighton. And she liked the sun so she went down in the summer, I went down in the winter. No problem.

Carer: We are serving supper now. So I will serve it for you.

Jo: Is that the sandwiches?

Carer: The sandwiches are ready, yeah.

Jo: Oh, thank you. You can get me some bread-and-butter pudding then, yeah.

Carer: All right.

Jo: Thank you.

Carer: No worries.

Jo: People pretended to be my friend because I always had drinks to give away because everyone used to come up and buy me a drink and I didn't want to drink that much, so I'd have them all lined up. I mean I had a hell of a lot of back stabbers. Yeah, especially when I started DJing. I would start buying the records, that were on the jukebox and I'd sort of start playing them in my home. Put on one and I'd put on another one. I thought, I could this, it's easy. My favourite is, I like country and western. I like 1930s and '40s ballroom.

[Music plays]

Jo: And Motown. I like Dolly Parton. I like Nat King Cole, Ella Fitzgerald. She's one of my favourites.

[Music plays]

Jo: I like all the Jazz singers. The classical Jazz singers and I do like light music like Strauss and stuff like that and I do like it. I like light opera like the Merry Widow and stuff like that and then the odd single number maybe. A pop number or something. I like Madonna. I like Kylie.

[Music plays]

Jo: I mean disco, but pleasant disco, not drum and bass, not all that.

[Music plays]

Jo: When I was working at Stallions, again it was a place I took in a load of customers to them I suppose in the '70s, '80s. It was another place that wasn't doing all that well but it was underneath Foyles bookshop and I'd come from the Rehearsal and the Vortex and all these different places and I was talking to the bloke that owned it or he ran it, I think he leased it, Jack, and while I was doing the door, I went up and said something to him and he said, 'oh I'm glad you're here, you can look after this while I go and get changed'. I think the DJ was off sick or something or other and he never came back and I say to him, to this day, 'it's your bloody fault I'm a DJ. You should suffer'. Well, I knew how to work it, it was easy enough.

Just to sit and sort of push slides up and down. Yeah. You don't even have to look good; you're just sitting behind a stage. I got a whole new profession by mistake. I covered quite a lot of stuff I suppose from the turn of the century onto whatever was the present day. I mean that's the sort of thing I used to deal with. I play disco music, everybody jumping

around. Suddenly I'd put on a Strauss waltz or something and in time, they got to know my sense of humour. I mean quite a lot of them did understand me because they were my generation, but some of them were, 'what's she bloody doing?'

There was always older people standing at the bar and so I would play older music and they'd get on the floor and in the end I'd have a very mixed crowd, very mixed music. I got to the stage when I had more or less a second sense about looking at people and seeing what they want. You know, I do it here actually. I mean once a week I go downstairs and do what I call a wheelchair disco and I realise I've got quite a good knowledge of people's fancies.

I didn't realise it until I came here. I look at some of the old men sitting in the wheelchairs. They're wartime generation, I bet when they were in the army, they'd go to the Astoria and they'd pick up birds. So, what would they like? They'd like the music they used to pick up birds during the war, Anne Shelton and Alma Cogan.

[Music plays]

Jo: And I realised it was working and I thought, yeah I know what people want. You sense it. I packed up BA, in the end, which was the silliest thing I ever did, because I was a year off my pension, but you took liberties like that. These things, you don't think. I went on working right up till I'm 90. I never retired. I came here, I was still working. I was the oldest DJ in London.

[Music plays]

Rafi: Then I looked around her room and I saw a beautiful cabinet that she had, and then I said to her, in the joke way, 'Josephine, this cabinet is beautiful. That can sit beautifully, if you don't want it, in my Synagogue'. 'You got it. Take it now.' And then I said, 'no, I'm just saying that in a nice way'. 'You, look, I'm telling you now. They brought it me here because they didn't want to give it to a charity shop. I don't want it. I want to give something to the Synagogue. I want to give something to you'. The way she's speaking is like, you cannot fall asleep and you can not get your eyes away from her. I didn't talk much and I said, 'No it's yours' and that's it.

As the weeks coming by, I got a phone call from the head of the portering. Says, Raf, we have here a cabinet, they asked to put in your office'. So, I took it, and I tell you what, I took a picture and I went to show it to Josephine. Then she looked at me and she started crying. 'I'm not practising and I've never practised but I'm coming from a Jewish home. I've always been Jewish. I never hide it. You know Rafi I went all over the world travelling and I never married and I did all my life what I want and I have a lot of friends but when people ask me if I'm Jewish, yes I am Jewish'. Lived her life the way she wants but inside herself she still has something that she wants to do.

[Music plays]

Jo: Eileen died about, oh about seven years ago now. She was a couple of years younger than me but she had a brain haemorrhage. Yeah, it made a big hole in my life because I had nobody to sort of lean on. I mean when my mum died, we had each other we could sit and cry. Then when she died I had nobody to cry. Everybody that stayed in my life died.

Carer: Do you want some sugar?

Jo: Thank you. What a nice young man. He's my favourite carer. I'm not just saying, not just saying it. I mean it.

I came here by mistake, again because when I got to this stage that I had to be in a care home and coming to South London, where I don't know anybody. It's a bit difficult. Might as well be Timbuktu.

Judith: When you meet her, you think she's very outgoing and given her background, you would think she would have to have a rather more outgoing personality but she's very, very shy. Since she can't walk, people have to come to her. People have to go out of their way to be nice to her. She can't bear any sort of condescension or any sort of charity.

Jo: It's just unfortunate that I lost the use of my legs because of a hospital error. I had a fall, and I want to make sure I didn't break anything. Instead of sending me home, they left me under observation, a month without any action. I'm like a lump of meat on the butcher's slab. I was getting fed and that was it. Of course, when they got me up, I couldn't walk but now, all my energy's in my mouth.

Judith: What she does talk about is her music and she's got a whole series of stuff. You know from Reggae, to Vera Lynn to standards, to jazz. Everything. She's got hundreds and hundreds of discs.

Rafi: When she was 100, they called me and they tell me, Rafi, we have a problem. We thought maybe you can do something because she likes you'. So, I said, 'what it is, she has a birthday, but she don't want to celebrate'. So, we made a cake for her, and I went with the cake, and I went into the room and I opened the door, and I started singing, 'happy birthday to you' and then she's looking and said, What. The. Hell. You. Doing?' I said, 'I just want to wish you...'. 'All right, okay, thank you. You happy now. Get out'. I said, 'you don't want a piece?'. 'No, give the piece to the residents, not to me. Tell them if they want to be 100 I wish them well'.

Judith: She didn't want anything to do with 100th birthday. She said, 'take that bloody thing away. Fuck off, get out of here'.

Jo: I'm past my sell by date. I shouldn't be here. I believe in voluntary euthanasia and I think when you reach a certain age you should be given an option. After the long life I've led, a very good life. I've got no friends. No relations. They're all dead. Why can't I be dead? I was told because God's got no more room. What can you do? If that's what he says, that's what he says.

[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 Sasha Neal and directed by Rachel Edwards and Sasha Neal.

[Music plays]

