

Who Cares? project

Transcript of podcast episode 2: John

[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 John. 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.

John: My name is Dr John Parker, and I am a doctor of architecture. I was born in 1933 and I am 89 years old. I have a daughter Joanna, who I call Jo and my son Jonathan who lives in Brussels.

Jo: I think I'm incredibly lucky. I have a really close relationship with my dad. Quite open as well. My dad's very curious about life and he's totally self-motivated. It's all about self-improvement for my dad and that has been really big for him through his whole life.

[Music plays]

John: When I worked with the water board, that was next door to Sadler's Wells and I went to Sadler's Wells once a week. I got very keen on opera. La Boheme, 'your tiny hand is frozen, let me warm it into life'. I learned the words so I could sing it.

[Music plays]

I was born in Sydenham, London. My father was a milkman. Then he worked for the Metropolitan Water Board. My mother was a chef. It was a working-class family. I had a sister who was older than me, Jean, and a brother, Brian, who was born three years after me. We moved to Catford at the beginning of the Second World War.

[Music plays]

We witnessed the war as children. I mean we were bombed. We were in air-raid shelters when we were in London. An air-raid shelter in the garden. Inside it was horrible. Damp. Oil lit lamp. Wet mattresses on the floor. We had to get up in the middle of the night. We had air-raid warnings, 'darr-urhh' and we had black outs on all the windows. Search lights going everywhere. Barrage balloons floating in the sky. Cars would go past with dipped headlights and we witnessed dog fights between British spit-fires and German bombers. I was then evacuated at the age of six, I suppose. Five or six, to Thurlestone in Devonshire,

for perhaps a couple of years, until '41, when there was something called the phoney peace. I was with my mother and my grandparents. We were all in the same beautiful, eight room villa on the cliff tops of Thurlestone. Beach at the bottom of the cliffs. For children it was quite an adventure. You could see Plymouth being bombed across the sea on the horizon and in the morning, on the beach, there might be mines and there'd be airman's uniforms and all kinds of things washed up on the beach.

My father was in London. My mother was down in Devonshire. My mother then, unfortunately, had an affair with a Canadian soldier because we had all these American soldiers over and all these Canadians over and they dated all the girls and married them, and took them back over to America. This was very common and my parents separated.

[Music plays]

We returned to London because it ended, until the Germans then sent over what were called buzz bombs, and of course, we were then evacuated again, out of London to Bradford in Yorkshire. Bradford was terrible. Back-to-back housing. Toilets at the bottom of the garden. Very poor area. We went to this Catholic school, St Peters, which was all nuns. I was a very clever boy. I learned very quickly that teachers didn't know everything and so I always looked up at the library, all the lessons I was going to have so I was ahead of the teachers, who hated me. Really did and you know, I would correct them [laughs] because I knew what they were going to be saying and they weren't as up to date as I was.

Jo: He's driven. He's really driven and he was really I think aware of how bright he was. He was always top of the class. Yeah, just spending most of his time in Sydenham library, educating himself. I would say, he's sort of a bit of a perfectionist as a consequence and always has to be the best and a bit of a know it all. My dad would say all these things about himself, so I'm not talking out of turn [laughs].

John: When the war ended in 1945, I was 11. We returned to London. My brother and I went to live with my father and my sister went to live with my mother. She never got married to this Canadian soldier but she had four girls, four children from him and one of them died. I still keep in touch with three of them. So, no girls in my life until my sister came and lived with us when she was 16. That's why I didn't trust women. We were a family where my father was working all the time. Going out at six in the morning. I had no supervision. I was looking after my brother. Cooking breakfast. Making sure he was properly dressed for school and so on.

Jo: Brian and John were incredibly close. They had adventures. Whether it was looking for shrapnel around London or kind of getting up to mischief. Get home there'd be no food. What's in the cupboard? Oh, there's a bit of dripping, some bread, you know, so incredibly tough poverty in Catford. You know, really cold, fending for themselves. You know totally they'd be in care now. My dad was really smart and very sporty and those things carried him and I think he's always been about self-improvement to get himself out of that kind of, you know, cycle of life.

John: I grew up very quickly and I knew I had to be in charge. You know, just to survive. I'm a survivor.

[Music plays]

John: Unfortunately, when I was in Bradford, I was 11, there was something called the 11 plus, which decided whether you went to grammar school or not. I got a form, which was given to me, and said would I fill that in. I thought it was a form for a prize, because a boy in the class had got 12 Mars bars for answering questions and I thought I was going to get Mars bars. Anyway half way through this period, it's a normal classroom and I was doing this and that. The class was going, I went to play so I now had half an hour of a one-hour exam, so it was all a bit daft. When I came back to London, my headmaster was there, called me in one day and said, 'John', he said, 'I'm amazed', he said, 'you failed your 11 plus'. I said, what's that? Which was a total blessing because if you went to a grammar school, if you were to go to university, you would become an accountant or solicitor or something like that.

I went to a technical school, in the building division where my art master was a retired architect. I was very, very good at drawing and he told me I should be an architect and I wouldn't have been an architect, except for having failed the 11 plus.

[Music plays]

When it was decided, I went on to university, my house master, at school, thought surveyors and architects were the same. He filled in my forms and he'd put down that I wanted to be a surveyor. So, I went, then, to a place called the Northern Polytechnic and I hated it. Nearly all of them had been soldiers in the war, much older than me. Been demobbed and come back and now were trying to put a life together but I could keep up with them all. I was brighter than most of them. The Festival of Britain came along in '51, which was a fantastic development of the South Bank, which I saw. All the wonderful buildings that were designed there and I decided I would get back into architecture so I decided to leave the Northern Polytechnic.

My father said that he could get me into the architects department at the Water Board but when I got there, I had to go into the civil engineers section, which didn't suit me at all because it was full of mathematics and physics and chemistry, so I decided to leave there. By then I was 18 and I was instantly called up for the army.

Jo: As a working class, young man, in the army, where he was totally unsophisticated. Didn't have the right accent. Didn't have a set of civvy clothes. Didn't know how to use the cutlery, you know, that kind of thing, you know was really out of his depth. But dad is a classic example of social mobility in post-war UK, which, you know, there are many people who went on that journey.

John: I did very well in the army. I first of all went to the Royal Artillery where I trained in land survey. I became an officer. In those days, every officer was from public school. There was no one from the working class who became an officer and I must have been one of the first, except I spoke with a different accent. Everyone spoke with an officer's accent and I acquired a public-school accent, as an officer, you know, 'Jones', go, 'what are you doing like

that on parade? I've told you once, now get on with it'. I came home with that kind of accent and no one understood me [laughs].

In becoming an officer, I decided to go into the Royal Engineers because that is the main survey section division of the army. Anyway, all of this advanced my education quite a bit. You know, I was doing things that no other architect had done, like land survey and designing bridges and all these kinds of things.

[Music plays]

My brother, Brian, he was a very good sportsman. He got taken on by Charlton Athletics football club and he was playing at Charlton's football ground. In those days, we had leather balls. Heavy balls, which when they were wet, they weighed a ton. You know, and he got hit on the head by one of these. He couldn't see. They had to get him off the field. He got home and of course, my father's not home. My mother's not there and he goes into the empty houses. Didn't go to hospital or anything. I saw no one there to take him to hospital and he went blind. I was in Egypt at that time. I was in the canal zone. I came home then to get a commission. It was called a short service commission.

First thing I noticed of course when I came home was that Brian was in the house on his own. I remember so distinctly. He was on his own. He listened to the radio. He couldn't read, because he couldn't see and he'd had to leave school because he couldn't see. I felt very responsible. I was the older brother so I decided to leave the army and get him through college. I got in touch with the Royal National Institute for the blind and he was able to go to the blind school and learned braille and everything else, and eventually became a physiotherapist. Did very well at it.

Jo: I think my dad would spend a lot of time reading to him and I think spent time trying to help him find routes where he could go and do some training and so on, and was quite instrumental in keeping his spirits up.

John: And that's throughout his life, we were very closely connected. We did all kinds of things. I mean, we had a tandem, which Brian and I cycled everywhere. We went on a 1000-mile trip down to Lands End and back to London. He was on the back, and I was the navigator on the front and he was the back. He was the engine. So, we were very, very close together. Our sense of humour. He could cap every joke I made; he would come up instantly with some remark that was far better than my joke.

I knew I had to get a job and I then worked as an architectural assistant in various firms. I went to the polytechnic, Regent Street, to study architecture.

I did the whole of the evening classes there. Shortly after I came out of the army, I went to Goldsmiths College in New Cross. So, I joined this can't sing choir and they taught you how to use your diaphragm and how to breathe, and all that kind of – and as soon as they taught me to sing, I had to leave. I've come here and we sing every week, three times a week, we sing and I'm the best, apart from the man who's taking it, I'm their best singer, 'hey Jude, don't make me sad...'

[Music plays]

John: I never had a girlfriend until I met my wife. Yeah, I was amazingly shy [laughs] and she's my soulmate. I met my wife Valerie, in 1956. I was at a tennis club. I didn't know it then but her brother thought I would be a very good boyfriend for his sister. She was still a schoolgirl of 17. He then brought her up to the tennis club and she came off the course, all pink and was introduced and said, oh and went off and had a cup of tea and I said to her, as she met me, in my officer's accent, you see, I said, 'if you can't play tennis, you can't play with me' and she said 'oh' she said. Off she went and I invited her to an officer's ball. I was in all my regalia and she was a brilliant dancer.

After a few steps she said, 'John, if you can't dance, you can't dance with me'. So, we got married in 1959 and bought a flat, eventually. She took me through college. I was going to college and she was working for a bank.

Jo: I think my dad was pretty inexperienced around women, but at the same time, I think my mum was also very inexperienced, so my dad could see how was sort of looking after somebody. He needed a bit of looking after and maybe bringing on and gaining her confidence and so on, and then my mum, obviously introduced this softness and gentleness. I have found all the love letters to my mum and dad, because I'm clearing out dad's house. I knew they did that sort of thing but my dad, like would leave letters when they were first married. Sorry, it makes me cry a bit actually. My – you know, 'I adore you. My nymph, my angel'. And obviously dad would do beautiful cards and he was so creative.

My mum was really amazing and challenge my dad in getting him to become a softer, gentler person and my dad recognised that about my mum.

[Music plays]

John: I eventually qualified in architecture, at the Regent Street polytechnic in 1962. I worked for the London County Council, in the schools division and I designed two schools that got built. I also decided then to also qualify as a town planner and went to University College London to perform a course in town planning, while I was still at London County Council and then I became a town planner, Lambeth Council came after me. I went to London Borough of Lambeth. I was planning the new Brixton town centre and then I was headhunted by the Greater London Council to be head of the whole of central London as what they called a planning architect and I was there for 16 years, until the GLC was abolished by Margaret Thatcher.

The GLC then allowed me to go and study for a doctorate and I decided to do a doctorate on the development of officers near railway terminal in central London and because of that, and because I was in charge of development of central London, I managed to get this into the Greater London development plan and from that came all these developments, like at Waterloo and the biggest one was Kings Cross St Pancras, which you see today, which I had a great deal to do with. I even suggested where the British Library went. I found the site on what was then the old Summertown Goods depot. It was empty, so I decided that that's where it should go.

I had architects, town planners and engineers working under me but I could choose what projects I would like to do. I chose Piccadilly Circus. I had a secondary job to be responsible for development alongside the Regent's canal all the way to docklands and so I named it the Canal Way Walk and that's why the canal is now open all the way to Limehouse basin. Eventually there were 10 boroughs that I was looking after so there was a great deal to do. Then I took over the building of St Katherine's Dock and then that went into docklands so I became in charge of docklands you see.

Jo: He would work long hours and everything would be quite focussed around dad's work. I would say it was quite a dominating factor but obviously that was about trying to get on, and succeed and that was perfectionism. Got to be the best and so everything is to the wire as well. You know, holidays were sometimes dominated by faxes having to go off or you know, things like that.

John: I had a lot to do with the control of high buildings as well. So that views of London had to be protected from development nearby, obscuring them. Unfortunately, since then, a lot of high buildings have gone on, which have not followed the principles that I established but not just me, but you know, I had a team of people establishing them. I don't want to take all the credit for these things.

I've worked in many countries including Ethiopia and Russia and China to help them replan their cities and things like that. Ethiopia was an incredible experience during the famine. So, I was helping to – we planned Addis Ababa, the mayor, the capital city. Russia was very different because glasnost had just started. I was very welcomed and they got out plans of the city, because I was trying to help them replan Moscow and St Petersburg, which I hope I helped them do.

Jo: I would say this, the GLC were dad's golden years and I think that is where dad was happiest. He loved it. It was a dream job. He was, you know, in charge of the central area team. He had really nice people that he worked with, who were talented. I think dad would have stayed there if Maggie hadn't abolished it. I mean he did do some really good things in the private sector as well, when he set up his own business, but I just think that dad was really, not being a businessman and getting business, and being about profit, wasn't really his bag.

[Music plays]

John: I set up a private practice because I'd left the GLC. I called it GLC Limited, you see. Greater London Consultants. Of course, that got mistaken for GLC was Greater London Council. I was getting a lot of people running me up and saying, my taps are leaking.

[Music plays]

I had a strange thing in my life. Not many people have this. I have proprioception and there were things that I could tell what was going to happen before it happened and it happened to me several times. I caught a lady in church, I thought in front of me, who was standing up at the back of the church, I said I thought she was going to fall down and I walked forward and caught her.

I didn't know my wife was going to die. She'd gone into hospital for her treatment and I went there to take her home and I had a car packed and I had a wheelchair ready for her and she said, 'I want to lie down'. She never got up again. Just before she'd died, I'd done this card for her, showing us dancing and after she died, you know, three or four months after she died, because I'd done this card for her, of us dancing, I thought, well I've got to start dancing again. The teacher said, 'what can you do?' And I said, I could dance every step, tango, rumba, samba, you know, all of them. And after three steps, she said, 'John you have to lead me' and I then learned that all my life and my Valerie, she had led me, and that's why I was such a good dancer [laughs].

Valeria and I were married for just under 60 years. She was my soulmate. There are not many people who can say that. I never had another woman. I'm nearly 90 now, and it's not going to happen even with all these lovely carers around [laughs].

I was living on my own then. I just missed her a lot, that's all. I was cooking for myself. I didn't have anyone. I had a cleaner coming in but that was all. I ended up with a full-time carer because I, you know, I had the stroke after she'd died.

[Music plays]

I was working in my study at home. I was working too hard. You know I was totally absorbed in my work and I was doing an email to Brian and he rang me up and I said, oh Brian, I'm doing an email to you now. I tell you what, when you've read the email, I'll give you a ring back and I didn't ring him back. Then he got worried. His wife got worried. I'm there in my study. The phone goes. I pick it up and it's Brian, saying, 'hello John, you're supposed to have rung me back'. I said, 'who are you? What's happened? I can't tell you what's going on' and I was having a stroke.

I must have then got my way downstairs, because I had a lot of bruises on me. Cuts and bruises, it's a three-storey house. They told me later, they were saying, 'sit down in the chair John. Sit down. Sit down' and I was saying 'I can't sit. I don't know how to sit down'. This is what they were telling me. Joanna was on her way because she got there just as the ambulance came. If they hadn't called me, I would have just had a stroke and gone on the floor, and not woken up until, whatever. Anyway, I came out of it very well really. You know, I've still got all my, virtually all my memory and a little bit of weakness in my left arm but that's about all.

Brian died five years ago. Even today, I'm doing a crossword every day with his wife. I remind his wife, Tess, of Brian.

Martin: Right okay, look this is a really, really old song. It's more than a hundred years old. It's more than 200 years old. It's rooted in the abolitionist movement, right. Alexa, play, Amazing Grace, Judy Collins. Do you want the words or are you okay?

[Music plays / residents sing]

John: My family decided it would be better if I came to a care home and I came here in November of last year and I'm very happy here. I'm very well looked after. Joanna lives about 20 minutes' walk away and often comes to visit me with her dog. She works for the City of London. She's an architectural historian, historic buildings. She's a lovely girl. She mothers me now.

Jo: It has been quite a journey this bit. I think he's grown into being here. It's taken quite a long time. He probably talks to more people here, actually, a more varied selection of people. Particularly the carers. He loves activities. You know, so I think the music and singing. My dad loves being fussed over. You know, having a long shower, because he grew up where he didn't have a shower, and had to go to the communal bath. He talks about it being like a hotel. It's really comfortable. Health wise, he looks good. He could do with a haircut but you know, he looks really good and I'd say he's content.

John: For the suggestion box now, I'm going to suggest we have a choir here, of inmates – not inmates, ha, residents, and staff, who would like to have a choir and we go around to other care homes and our choir will sing. Well, I'm going to do that today.

[Music plays / residents sing]

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]



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