

## Who Cares? project

### Transcript of podcast episode 3: FREDA

*[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 Freda. 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](http://www.whocaresproject.co.uk).

John: I'm John Keble, I'm a volunteer here and I've met some absolutely amazing people here. Really I suppose, if you talk to nearly anybody in their 90s things have happened in their lives which are unusual and quite amazing.

*[Music plays]*

Freda: I'm a true Cockney. I was born within the sound of bow bells. That's a Cockney, right. I lived in a flat in Cable Street, which is in history now. That's in Stepney and we had a shop and we lived upstairs. I was very lucky. I had very good parents. Very, very lovely. Very caring parents and if you come from a loving home, it's good isn't it? It gives you a sense of security. My mother was always there. She never went out to work. My father was a macho man, 'I'm the man of the house. I bring the money in'. When we came home there was always a nice fire burning and food. They never went to the pub or anything like that, you know. Used to see the kids spend the night outside the pub in the cold, sitting outside while their parents were drinking you know.

They shielded us from lots of things, you know. Terrible poverty. I remember among the Jewish people as well. There was a lot of unemployment. I saw plenty of people go without food. Yeah. They used to play out in the street and mother used to call us in for our meal. They'd still be playing in the street. There was nothing to eat and I'd see them go to school with rags around their feet and we had the Empire. We were the richest company in the world. People were starving. So, we were really quite, you know, not badly off compared to some people. I remember my mother getting up at five o'clock in the morning, to go to the butcher. Queue up at the butcher, get the meat, you know the rations.

They were the heroines and the heroes. They were wonderful. You know. Really wonderful. I'm going to cry. I loved school. I liked maths. I liked English. My father was a tailor. He made men's suits. My mother was a dressmaker so I never had to sew a button on anything and I never did so when it came to needlework, I was in trouble. In those days, the teachers, men and women, had to be unmarried. I remember one teacher saying to me once, I was very saucy, she said, 'you'll never get married if you can't sew'. So, I said, 'well you're not married, are you Miss'. Well, she had a thick book in her hand and she smacked me on the head with it. It was allowed.

Corporal punishment was allowed. The cane. Hitting you on the head with a thick book and if you were very bad, they used to say, which is very cruel – your name would go in a book and when you left school, you could never get employed and that was the most important thing because there was such a lot of unemployment and to get a job was so important and to say to the children, you'll never get a job because you're in this book. Very, very cruel they were. Very spiteful and very cruel, yeah.

But most of our amusement was playing in the street. Ball games, playing with skipping ropes and we used to play out and there was no / hardly any traffic so we used to play in the road, you know. There was a cinema called the cable. Used to pay three old pennies to go in and you sat in the first three rows and this man, ha, the manager, used to go round and spray all the bugs. Well, I liked all the popular songs, you know, music. My mother used to get song sheets and we used to sit and sing all the songs. There was one my mother liked about in rain.

*[Music plays / Freda sings]*

John: Normally when I meet Freda, I pop into her room and chat to her. She tells me dirty jokes; I won't tell them to you. I tell her dirty jokes, won't tell them to you. You know, she's just, she's a very positive, upbeat sort of person. Quite feisty but I walk away from her, feeling far more positive than I do from most of the people here. That's Freda.

*[Music plays]*

Freda: I remember clearly like it was yesterday. I was nine-years-old, and all of a sudden we heard about Moseley, you heard of Oswald Moseley? He used to strut about, you know. Swastika on his armband and he used to go and see Hitler, you know, best of pals, you know. They called them the black shirts, you know. He was going to come down Cable Street, with the police. The police were looking after him and the police were on horseback. Just wanted to show his friends you see.

*[News clip: Passing the Tower of London, 5000 fascists, rally to their mobilisation for the much-advertised march through the East End and so Oswald Moseley, black shirt leader, arrives at Royal Mint Street, to inspect his followers. In Stepney, thousands of Eastenders prepare to resist the invasion, barricading the paths the fascists would take]*

Freda: So, we went upstairs and my father, with lots of men, Jewish men, went down to Aldgate to gather there. So young boys, and young communist league and the Irish were wonderful. They threw out milk bottles, dirty milk bottles, smashed them. The horses couldn't get through, you know. They overturned a lorry. They shall not pass. They were shouting.

*[News clip: Batons are drawn and heads broken, as the anti-fascist demonstrators resist efforts to disperse them. If the injured are taken to hospital, hundreds more receive first aid on the spot]*

Freda: And they didn't get through. But I was frightened for the first time in my life, you know. I thought they was going to come and kill us, you know. It was very frightening. It was called the Battle of Cable Street and now there's books. It's all in history.

*[Music plays]*

Freda: And course, then the war came and upset everything. You know. Evacuated and that was another horror story because I'd never been separated from my parents, you see. I thought it was an adventure but it wasn't an adventure. The war broke out on a Sunday, on Friday, all the school children were evacuated. Didn't know where we were going. Parents didn't know where we were going. We had a bag and they took us to the station and I ended up in Brighton and this very nice lady took us in and, 'oh', she said, 'tomorrow we go down to the seafront' and oh that'll be exciting. Then it hit me, I'd never been parted with my parents before.

And of course, I started crying and my sister was four / five years younger than me. She started crying. Both started crying. So, I went out, because we were there with our teachers, from school, because we went from school and I wrote a postcard out, 'dear daddy, come at once, I'm in great trouble'. Posted it Saturday morning. He got it on Sunday morning. People we were with, this woman, she says, 'on Sunday we're going to...' – she had a son who had a farm, 'we're going to the farm'. So cheered up a bit, and took us to this farm and all the lovely fields and sheep and had all cows and all that.

It was lovely, enjoyed ourselves. All of a sudden, we heard this tuk, tuk, tuk. This old car coming down the road. It was my dad. He knew where my mum was. She had been evacuated because she was pregnant so they evacuated her as well and he got my mum. Went to mum, hired this car, came and got us and I said, oh never want to be separated again. So, what happened, the lady who was there, evacuated with, she had this enormous bed. About five could sleep in the bed so mother said, well can I stay with them, and she stayed with us so we were quite happy and there was nothing going on in London. Very quiet, nothing happened. We decided to go back to London and about six weeks later, then we started having the bombs, you know.

And we used to go to the shelter every night. We used to pack bedding and all that, and we used to go to a place, Tilbury docks and we laid on cobble stones but there was a terrific atmosphere. We used to sing songs all night. All night people were singing. Everyone was friendly, all in the same boat. We could hear the bombs going and when you woke up in the morning, you went home – most people didn't have a home to go to. They were bombed out. My dad said this is no good, you know, so he packed us off to a place in Lancashire called Darwin, it's near Blackburn. Heard of Blackburn? And we stayed a few years there until things got better you know. Came back.

But when I think what they went through it must have been horrendous, you know. We were kids, you know, we didn't realise. To give up your home and go and live somewhere. A strange place. Must have been terrible and eventually we had VE Day, that was wonderful. We were with Canadian soldiers. We were having a lovely time [laughs]. Going in all the pubs and everything. I was only about 14 or 15 and everybody was kissing each other and hugging each other. Oh, it was wonderful. And things went back to normal.

*[Music plays]*

Freda: Well I used to like going dancing, yeah. The Royal Opera House was a dance floor. The Lyceum. Ballroom dancing was the thing. I used to jive the length [laughs]. Lots of boyfriends. I wasn't bad looking. I had red hair and I was, you know, made up and I loved clothes and everything you know. I used to be a size 16. I used to be a 38DD. As you can see I've lost a lot of weight. My husband would be upset wouldn't he [laughs].

Sandra: My name is Sandra Palacio; I work as a health care assistant. Freda is a very happy person. She is very positive. When she came I was already working. We made that connection as well, apart from being the carer, that she's very chatty. Friendly in all ways. Every time that I came into her room, it's like a – ah, you're here. She's very happy and she is always talking about, 'how are you? I miss you' and it's really something quite nice to be appreciated.

Freda: Well, I was brought up very orthodox funnily enough. My sister, she married out and my parents were very orthodox and that was a terrible, terrible thing to them and my father, he disowned her completely, which is very sad. I was never really, just keep the Jewish faith and I keep the holidays and things like that, but never fanatically religious. So, when I was 14 – we left school at 14, I said to my father, I'd like to work in an office. I'd like to learn shorthand typing. You don't need it; you'll get married and I tried to persevere but he wouldn't have it. So, I took myself to the West End and I went into one of these dress shops, saw an advert, window dresser they wanted.

And I said, I'd like a job as a window dresser and I became a window dresser. Then I became a sales' woman and so I went to work at 14. I was always in fashion. I worked for House of Fraser for years. I was a buyer. Know the one in Oxford Street. Then I met a wonderful man. You want to hear a romantic story; do you want to hear it. I had a friend. You heard of Margate; you know Margate at all? So, I must have been about 18 and my friend says, 'you know what, you want to get away from London'. I lived at home with my parents, 'come to Margate'. So, I went down there and I met these three guys there and they were photographers about my age, you know.

And people came down for the day, and they used to take a photograph for them and I got friendly with them, that was all and I was there a whole season, and then I came back to London and then eventually got married. I had two children, two boys. My husband got an au pair. I was pregnant with my second child and he insisted that I have an au pair, who he was carrying on with and once I found out, I didn't want to know so I got rid of her and him as well. I was lucky I could do that. Tell you why. Because my dad's got a big house and I lived in my dad's house. I had a separate flat in my dad's house.

Anyway, got him out and eventually got divorced. Had two boys and my mother encouraged me to go out. She wanted me to meet somebody and I said, oh I'm not giving my children a stepfather, you know. Anyway, cut a long story short. One day, a lovely day, my mother said, take them children to the park. So, one was a year and half, and the other one was six and a half / seven. I said, I'm not going to the local park. I said I see all the people they know with their husbands, you know. I'm not going. She said, 'well don't go to your local park, there's another park a bus ride away, go there'.

So, I listened to her and I went there and getting off the bus walking home, a car went by and stopped and it was one of these young fellas. I hadn't seen him 10/12 years. And he says, 'oh', he says, 'I can see you're well and truly married', you know. I says, I don't know why, 'well I'm divorced', 'really?' he said, 'do you go out at all'. So, I said, yeah, well I gave him my phone number. He was very persistent. Anyway a few days later, phoned me the same night. A few days later he phoned and I went out to eat with him. Now at that time, I was 34 and he was 35 and we're having a nice meal and he said, 'how come you're not married'?

He says, 'because I always loved you'. I said, 'what do you mean'. He said, 'no', he says, 'the only person I loved was you. I compared you with other people'. So, I thought, oh we've got a nutter here. Anyway, he wore me down and I had 35 years, wonderful years with him. He was wonderful. 35 years. He died at 70. He was a very bad diabetic. But I was so happy with him. He used to say to me, 'I'd cut my arm off rather than hurt you'. Big man, six foot, three. He used to tower above me. He used to look at me and say, 'to think I'm frightened of you' [laughs]. The two of us, we used to go anywhere. He used to tell a joke, and he'd said, 'are you going to say it or am I going to tell it', you know.

He told good jokes. I mean he had his faults, course he had his faults but he was such a good person. I was so lucky. Such a wonderful man and a wonderful father and a wonderful father to my boys. They took his name and I says, we only have one of our own and I've got a wonderful daughter. Please God, if you have children, you have a daughter like her. She sees to my every need. I was very fortunate. Miss him so much and then I went and helped him with photography. So, I used to go, he'd do the photography and I used to do posing and the selling. I was a good sales woman. As you can tell. I've got the gift of the gab [laughs].

We used to do a lot of weddings. So, on Saturday we did non-Jewish weddings and Sunday Jewish weddings. Yeah, we had a very good business. Lovely business. It was nice because we always got dressed up to go, you know and nice places to go to. Had nice meals and everything.

Debbie: What's the matter darling? That's conditioner. That's shampoo. They're both for the hair.

Freda: I've got no moisturiser for my face though.

Debbie: No, you didn't ask me to buy face stuff. I'll buy you some on Sunday.

Debbie: So, I'm Debbie Lee, I'm Freda Lee's daughter. On average I come in two days a week and it depends really on how mum is, on what we do. Sometimes she's feeling a bit more livelier. She's quite complex actually. She was definitely a woman before her time, I would say, in terms that she was always very modern in her outlook. I think she just was a feminist really. You know, without even realising she was a feminist. She was a very strong woman. I think she saw her parents, you know they were very sweet – well complex people because they'd come from trauma, as a lot of Jewish people of that generation had and proper poverty.

You know, they were, you know, first generation immigrants, like everyone has to, you know, struggle in that situation. My grandfather was illiterate. He never really got round to

speaking, you know, learning English. My grandmother was, you know, certainly not illiterate. She was born here but she was a very quiet woman. She was very unassuming and she wasn't very able so my mum came along and she was dealing with landlords, dealing with all of that. All the admin and when she was telling me this, I said, from what age mum. She said from the age of five. So, it's quite extraordinary. She always took that role on. She was always a very, very independent woman. She had a really tough first marriage.

So, she was brave enough to come out of a really dysfunctional marriage, when it was very difficult for women and he went off, and he didn't ever support them. There wasn't like, you know, benefit systems and things like that now, so she had nothing and she had to like to, you know, bring up two boys on her own and then she met my dad, who she knew when they were much younger, and yeah then they had a good life together.

Freda: I was so happy with him.

Debbie: Mum, if anyone's listening, have you got any advice if you're in a bad marriage what you give them – what would you advise them to do, if they're in a bad marriage?

Freda: Bad marriage. Get out of it [laughter]. You've only got one life.

Debbie: Very unusual to be divorced.

Freda: Yeah.

Debbie: Society looked down on divorcees.

Freda: How many people said to me, 'oh we put with it'. I said, no not me. I said, I don't know what, it might be a bit of hardship. It was hard but there might be a new life for me. I said but I'm not living that sort of life.

Debbie: Mum, you've got to tell them the story, about what you had to do to get the divorce? It's unbelievable. You had to get an eyewitness, didn't you?

Freda: Oh yeah.

Debbie: Of him being in bed with another woman.

Freda: Once I found out he was unfaithful to me, I left no stone unturned. I had a very good solicitor but they had to prove it. And also, the woman can say, she could say, yes we'll do it together. It wasn't allowed. It wasn't accepted. There had to be somebody who saw them in bed together.

*[Music plays]*

Freda: I've always been rather left wing. I was brought up that way. My father, although he was a religious man, my father was a member of the communist party. I belonged to the young communists as well.

Debbie: They were very, very political as a family. So, you know, they were indoctrinated really with communism, when you know, communism seemed like a great ideology but she was very glamorous and she went to work in the West End and she was really, really good-looking

woman. She looked like a young film star so she was living this very glamorous life and she was going you know, dancing and what have you. But my mum's, let's say, socialist sort of principles were always there. She's a Labour voter, you know with all the bling around her. She was the original champagne socialist I'd say. Probably the best way to describe her but she always had that strong sense of equality.

But then on the flipside of that, she was a typical Jewish mother. You know, she had the gold shoes and the gold handbag, from the bling. Loved Marbella. So, she was like a glamorous lefty really.

*[Music plays]*

Debbie: I'm going to be controversial but the Corbyn thing broke her heart. I think she wasn't convinced the left would not let them pass the stuff that was coming from the far / the extreme left. You know, it was the same rhetoric as Moseley was using and she just, you know, it's – I don't think she's quite got over it to be honest. As somebody who was so active in the Labour party. Yeah because she went and voted, glammed up to the nines, because it was her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. Told everyone it was her birthday so they all gave her a standing ovation. All sang happy birthday at the polling station [laughs]. She made her entrance. I think she was wearing mink as well, and then she said, 'I just don't know whose box to tick' and she couldn't vote for Boris Johnson, but she voted Green.

*[Music plays]*

Freda: I've been here – pardon, March it'll be two years and I said to my daughter, I'll die before I go in a home. I got very ill. I've had cancer twice and I've got a stoma. I've had it 27 years now. Yeah. [Door knocks].

Carer: Would you like a cup of tea?

Freda: Hello dear. It's my nurse. Oh, he's wonderful. Yes, hot and strong like my men [laughs]. Thank you, Cleno.

Debbie: Look, mum would rather not be in a home. You know she'd rather be independent, living in her own flat, doing her own thing, but you know, being pragmatic about it, and as a family we are, we're emotional but we're pragmatic, this was the absolute best solution and we're very, very blessed, very, very lucky there was a place here for her. I called it a cruise ship with nurses basically [laughs] telling her how this place is.

Freda: And they've been very good to me. I can't grumble. They never let me get pain. If it's very bad they give me morphine straight away. Right through the night they come and give me pills. I get tired now. You know I'm an old woman really aren't I? I may be young at heart but I am old. Not old and crusty. I'm not an old fuddy duddy. Don't think I ever will be.

Debbie: If there's an outing, she'll muster. She loves going out. After the pandemic, you know, what made me laugh the most, is there's a hair salon here, and she was like pestering everyone. I think she was the first one through the door [laughs]. Last week she was 93 and we had a little tea party for her, and she's lost so much weight, bless her. She's like seven stone now

so her boobs are completely gone and when I saw she'd got a bit dressed up, and noticed they looked a bit perky and I thought, what's going on. I said, what's going on with your boobs mum, 'put pop socks down there' [laughs]. So that's my mother. My Essex Jewish princess girlfriends, like, you know, we all pray to be still like Freda. Glamour to the end. She said, when she doesn't get her hair done, or she goes out without lipstick, even you know, to one of the activities in the communal room, that's when she'll know, you know, I'm gone [laughs]. That's when you'll know.

*[Music plays]*

Freda: I'll tell you something, nobody in my family has ever lived as long as me and I want to go. So, we have a Rabbi here, and he's very approachable. So, I said to him, Rabbi, can't you have a word with him upstairs. I said, I've had enough, I want to go. He says I'll have a talk to him, 'hello God. I'm speaking on behalf of Freda Lee. She feels she's had enough and she wants to know when. Yes okay I'll tell her'. She says, 'well Freda', he said, 'you like a nice home and he's building you a very nice home and it's not quite ready yet so you'll have to have some patience and wait' [laughs].

Debbie: I mean, you know, she is end of life. She's palliative care so she's very philosophical about it and I think that's really nice for me and probably my daughter because we can talk pragmatically about things and she doesn't have any fear. She feels very, you know, which is really, really comforting.

Freda: I look back, I think I've been pretty lucky really. What can I say? Appreciate the good things in life. Don't take things for granted. Trust people but be tough. Don't let people walk over you. You know, stand on your own two feet. Always have done. I've had hardships in my life but on the whole, when I look back, the good times make up for the bad times. I was one of the fortunate 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 Sasha Neal and directed by Rachel Edwards and Sasha Neal.

*[Music plays]*

