

## Who Cares? project

### Transcript of podcast episode 4: SIDDIQA

*[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 Siddiqa. 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).

*[Music plays]*

Siddiqa: My name is Dr Siddiqa Qureshi. I live in a care home and I am already 84 years old. Physically I am doing quite well.

*[Music plays]*

Siddiqa: I am a Muslim by religion. I was born in India. My grandfather was a doctor and my mother and father were holding high posts in India. We have very happy life and my father was highly educated. I've got four sisters and three brothers. We used to live around eight bedroom house. I remember playing with my brothers and their cousin, going out and playing cricket. When we used to come from school we used to have tuition for maths, English. At the time English was the first thing that you should learn English, when you studied there, and then Arabic, because we were Muslim, to Arabic.

All Muslims pray five times a day. You have to get up in the morning, afternoon, evening and late night. Then we had – we will go to playroom and we had a carrom board and table tennis, and all those things what you use now, I have learned it in my childhood. So that used to keep me busy. We had a very comfortable life in India because, you know, all servants and everything.

*[Music plays]*

Michelle: My name is Michelle Qureshi and I am the daughter of Siddiqa Qureshi. She is a very confident person. She is a real go-getter and likes being a kind of leader and things, and striving for more. She is very determined, and I think that's also because of her experiences and what she's gone through.

*[Music plays]*

Siddiqa: In India they never accepted being a Muslim. The majority of people, they are Hindu religion. Muslim people, the religion was different. They believe in Prophet Muhammed so entirely different from the Hindu religion.

*[News clip: In London the flags of the new Indian Union flutter over the headquarters of India and Pakistan. An era has ended and a new epoque begins. A subcontinent larger than the whole of Europe becomes two self-governing dominions within the British Commonwealth of Nations. Pandit Nehru, congress leader, is India's prime minister. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Muslim chief, becomes Pakistan's governor general. But India's future welfare largely depends upon communal harmony. Can Hindus and Muslims live peacefully together?]*

Siddiqa: But at the time of partition, 1948, 47/48, they were killing Muslim people, and what they said was that, you are Muslim, you are taking our money. We should go back to Pakistan, otherwise we will kill you.

*[News clip: Stirred by intense religious passion, communal strife has shed much blood. Independence has not yet brought them peace. Rejoicing turned quickly into horror and mourning. Pakistan and India each say they are determined to stop the wholesale rioting.]*

Siddiqa: At the time they don't have any police protection or anything. They will come with the knife or gun and they'll kill you. So we migrated to Pakistan, because that's a Muslim country. That was the reason, you know, and there is no police, nothing you can call. Even the trains, they were just running, I don't remember the exact number, going to Karachi, Pakistan. In that train, all the people, majority of 75% people, were killed, even though only a few of them survived to go to Karachi.

*[News clip: Fleeing from their looted, bloodstained towns comes a new exodus, a million displaced persons. Throughout this vast land, Hindus and Muslims seek safety in new surroundings.]*

Siddiqa: There was so much violence, so we leave everything at that time and it was very scary because they might kill us.

*[News clip: Carrying their few possessions they flee from savagery and butchery that has never been exceeded, even in India's stormy history. One million people become refugees overnight.]*

Siddiqa: So we were lucky to be safe and we went on an emergency flight to Pakistan. We were very lucky to be safe, but there are so many people in partition, they died due to that. At least we were safe. We have to start my whole life from the beginning.

*[Music plays]*

Siddiqa: In Pakistan I was about the age of 10. This wasn't an easy life, to the new country, moving to the new country. In Pakistan they never accepted because we are Indian, and even in Pakistan we got a caretaker, a bodyguard, just for our safety, you know. Anyone can come and... So the safety is not 100% in Pakistan. If you're rich and live in a rich area you have to have a guard outside, make sure who is coming, who is going. So we have to struggle a lot for passing the exam and everything.

*[Music plays]*

Siddiqa: Then I went to school. In Karachi, you know, there are English school and Urdu school. English school was quite expensive if you want to send your children to it, but the standard was very high. Because I think the British people used to control that country, so the standard was very high at the English school. Only the people who are going to private school, English school, they can usually speak English. Like my brother, elder brother, he went – both of them went to English school and they can speak English. But I went to Urdu school so learning English, it wasn't easy.

Yeah, my family leaves India in 49 and my father died in 53. He had a fall on the floor and then he died due to stroke.

Michelle: So her dad passed away in front of her. He was coming down the stairs and had, I think, an aneurysm. My mum I think was 17 or something, in her teens. So he fell down the stairs and he passed away there and then. So I think that was a real trauma. She doesn't really talk about it much. She talks about what they had before then, like they were very secure and well off, and then I think things changed because I think money became a real issue then.

Siddiqa: My mother had seven children. So life wasn't easy, but my mother look after very hard, and I think, and she was very organised.

Michelle: To be a single mum of seven children in your twenties, she was, in somewhere like Pakistan, is a big thing because, you know, if you're not married, and how do you support yourself? There's no benefits there. I was talking to my cousins, they were saying that my mum's sisters would say that they didn't have enough money for food and things like that. So I think she saw that of her mum being this real kind of fighter and working all these jobs and being determined.

Siddiqa: My mother was a teacher. Then we got the money from India. My mother worked so hard, built a very nice house. Still the house is there in Karachi.

*[Music plays]*

Siddiqa: Then after like O Level, which is used to call my 'matric' exam, I passed that exam, then I have to do two year school which is like A Level. Then I got admission, I have to apply for admission in medical school. This medical school was built by English people, so its standard was very high. It was very difficult to get admission in medical school. They got 30 seats for girls and 70 seats for boys. 30 seats including whole of India, and those who are living abroad, they can apply and get admission. Only 15 or 16 seats for the people who are living in Karachi.

Michelle: She didn't want to be a doctor, and so they only offered a few places each year and she went and deregistered herself because she didn't want to study medicine, and it was her older sister that got really angry and said, are you crazy? It's so hard to get this place. What are you going to do? Because I think in those days as a status, like you know, what would you earn if you're not a doctor or in a profession? So she went, took her to the head, the university, and asked them to give her place back.

Siddiqa: There are four sisters. There are three of them all doctors. She said, no you have to do it. If you don't study, what is the future in Pakistan? If you become teacher then my salary is so low, you can't survive. If you don't get married, who is going to look after you? Unless you are rich you will survive. They are poor, they can't survive. Like our servants. When they are poor, they are very poor. Two class system. When they are rich, very rich. You can't even – those who are poor, very poor. They won't have anything to eat.

So the system is - here at least you get the government support here. In that country there is no government support. So what they will do if they are rickshaw driver? How much they will earn hardly depending on the traffic, maybe £15, they got four, five children. I went to Karachi a few years ago. I wanted to do the shopping they were selling in that, when the poor people used to sell their things, you know. The man was saying, I have got eight children. I haven't sold anything. My children are going to die hungry. So you feel so sorry about that, that there is so much poverty.

They've got young children sitting with them. Four or five, they used to bring the children. They are sitting, then they are crying for food. How you feel that, doing shopping or anything? That's the worst thing that I have noticed. The poor are very poor, and no government support. I think once you go there you feel like crying. Those who don't have a job, they suffer. In India, we were very well off, so we never had any problem apart from the partition. In Pakistan we had a bit of more problem. But I think the best place we found is England.

[Background care home sounds]

Siddiqa: Because at that time there was arranged marriage system, someone introduced my husband, and his father was also a doctor and his sister was a doctor. So that's why I think I got married to my husband, you know. They were living nice and comfortable.

[Music plays]

Siddiqah: Then when I got married, my husband was working in Libya. So then I also go with him. Then there were so many riots in Libya. So then we had to leave that because we can't find safety there. So we came to London and we came here in 1966. But my sister, she is the one who suggested you should become anaesthetist, because they were very short of anaesthetists here putting the patient to sleep. At that time there was a very need of doctors, so there were no restrictions, we got a permanent stay here. I did my anaesthetic job and used to work different hospital. My husband was working in Lewisham hospital and he was an anaesthetist as well.

Michelle: Her experience in the '60s was very difficult. There was a lot of racism. Because she would be wearing a sari, people would just stare or ask to touch the material. They weren't given proper housing. Or they would have patients that would just refuse to be treated by them because of the colour of their skin.

Siddiqah: My husband was a very competent and efficient 14:22 person and he did GP practice to become a general practitioner. I used to live in Wimbledon village with a two bedroom flat. I used to get claustrophobic in a small place. I used to go to Wimbledon Library, study, and passed my anaesthetic exam on going to the library. The thing why I'm explaining, nothing is difficult in this world. If you work hard, you will get it, isn't it? Only positive thinking. Suppose if you can't do first time, do it second time. Never give up.

*[Music plays]*

Siddiqah: I used to work in Seventh Day Adventist hospital, that was a Christian hospital, giving IV drip injection, everything. Being anaesthetist, you know, if you are going to put the patient to sleep you have to give injection to the vein. Surgeon has to wait until the patient is anaesthetised and come on the table, you know, for operation. There was a consultant from St. George's hospital. He said that you are the best, you take 15 minutes to anaesthetise the patient. Even at some district hospital, they used to ring 15:43 me. They were very short of anaesthesia doctors. Doctor, can you come and do it, otherwise we have to cancel the session. I said there are other doctors, well why don't you call them? But she used to say, no the surgeon wants you to come [laughs].

Michelle: Then they decided to kind of specialise in GP, general practitioner, practice. Then she was a GP for many years, but she would also do locum. So she would do locums in hospitals. So she would work in A&E or she would work in, you know, different departments in hospital. She'd also worked abroad, so it would kind of be quite varied as well. I mean I think it took quite a while for her career to lift off. It wasn't easy getting a GP practice either.

Siddiqah: Mostly I used to come to London doing general practice. There are so many poor areas, you know? But I think like Morden Hall medical centre, there was a centre there in Morden. There was no nurse. I used to do weekend emergency calls. There was no nurse. I said, what is happening? There should be a nurse with so many patients. In case of any patient collapse, who is going to look after?

I am busy there. So I spent nearly £300 on medication, everything, all my own money. I bought a toolbox and put everything, so I will know what I am going to do. Luckily I managed very well and no patient died.

Me and my husband were very fond of travelling. I had a green card, I have lived in Chicago and different kind of places. It is a great pleasure, you know, how many people travel?

*[Music plays]*

Siddiqah: Also we have worked in an Iranian oil company, so that my husband also worked.

Michelle: So my mum and dad went to Iran for a year. They were looking for couples as, I think, GPs. I was with them. They would give your housing. That was in 1979.

Siddiqah: So that Iran, we thought we – we were nicely comfortable, and my daughter went to English school.

Michelle: The foreigners were treated really well. So they just had really an amazing lifestyle. Obviously that changed.

Siddiqah: It was good for foreigners, not for people who are living there. They don't have any hospital nearby, they don't have any medicine or anything. That's why the revolution came.

*[News clip: Fundamentalism took hold with a fury and a force that helped ignite the still impoverished masses in Iran, who felt they had little reason to be grateful to the Shah.]*

Siddiqah: But the Shah of Iran was leaving at that time, so there were many deaths, and they are killing as well, especially the foreigners. I remember that there were so many Filipino people, they kill in front of me. It was very upsetting to see. He said, they all said that you are foreigner, you are taking our money. It was very upsetting I think. The oil company, the hospital, everything was closed. So what the director said, we are not working for the Shah of Iran, everything is finished now. Then we have to leave.

Michelle: When they were trying to flee, we were in the car, and she was saying that I was in the car and she was trying to put my head down because you were seeing people being killed. They were just stabbing each other. That's probably what she saw in the partition as well. So you kind of really think, wow, that resilience, or like that's quite stoic, isn't it? Yeah, I admire that.

Siddiqah: India to Karachi, Karachi to first Libya and then Iran. So many places, it wasn't easy.

Michelle: Yeah, there's three countries she's had to almost escape really, which was at that point her home. You kind of leave that all behind.

Siddiqah: So you can go back to London. We had UK passports. So that's where we came, here.

Michelle: As you progress through the decades, her experience of racism became less or different. Obviously they kind of adjusted more into the way of life here. Because it was a big change leaving their home country and coming here as well.

*[Music plays]*

Siddiqa: I've got two daughters. One is senior crown prosecutor, eldest daughter, and she is the one who always said, my children should educate and go on the top. I used to collect both grandsons, Haris and Hamsa, bring them home, feed them. I have made a room as a study room and they can sit there and do their homework. So I feel very proud at what both grandsons did, because of my hard work. Hamsa was the youngest one. He wanted to take the exam, Westminster School exam. It was very difficult to get the admission at Westminster.

We used to look after Haris. So I used to get up eight o'clock, I'd stay with her, and I used to take him for tuition, I used to take him for boating in Putney. Cambridge, also, he did very well. But unfortunately he died. He had an accident. He was on a bicycle and then... That's the worst thing. He was a highly intelligent boy. He was only 21. Losing the grandson was very hard to accept that. We never expected that he will die so soon at his age. So then when his funeral was there, there were so many people. He did so much work, charity work, which I didn't realise. There was a service in the House of Lords for him.

*[Music plays]*

Siddiqa: I've got another younger daughter. Her name is Michelle. She is very busy I think doing counselling. She has got two sons. One son went to – he got a footballing scholarship. Then the daughter, she is good in gymnastics.

Michelle: So as a mum growing up, you know, there were like cuddles and I know I was loved and I felt like there was that warmth. It was always busy. She was always distracted I think because we would always have visitors. She would always cook food. Actually I don't remember my mum ever just sitting down or watching. She was always on the go. Then as I got teenage, she became a bit more strict. Coming from maybe a more traditional, you know, Muslim family, and then kind of having two girls in a Western country who became quite Western, I think it's very different parenting in that generation and that culture.

I think because their own experience when they came here was quite, oh gosh this is what people think of us, I remember even growing up when we had neighbours, they were quite racist. So that formed your own kind of perception of being protective as well. Then when I got together with my husband, she was very supportive and with the children, she was really involved. Like she practically wanted to be there. Like one of the reasons I was able to go back to work is because my mum looked after the kids. So when I doubt myself in something she'll be like, no, why not? You can do that. So in that aspect I think she's always been, yeah, quite inspirational.

*[Music plays]*

Siddiqa: I used to live with my daughter. Downstairs room I used to live with her. She used to live upstairs. No, I never had Covid, because I was very taking precautions for myself and my daughter was very strict and conscious because of the children, as well as I am elderly. So at the time of Covid we were not meeting anyone.

Michelle: Her health was in better condition than what it is now, hence she was living with me for five, six years. She was independent. She was going on buses, she would get a taxi and she would do her shopping and stuff. Then that changed a lot because obviously she couldn't go out. You weren't allowed out. It became quite insular. So I do think the pandemic allowed her to think more or ruminate more, and become a bit more anxious. Then when everything did open up she was very anxious about going places and getting on buses. I just felt she became frailer. I guess it's the different stages of life, isn't it? You know, she's at a different stage of her life so she needs me more, I have to give her reassurance more, whereas that was the role she played to me.

So I did notice changes to my mum, and she was going to America for six months in October. Even leading to that, she'd be very anxious and very erratic. Anyway, she went to America and she wasn't feeling too well.

Siddiqah: The elder sister also was a doctor, and she is the one who is 92 years old, but she is unconscious in Houston. So that's the reason I went to see her in Houston. But I was very ill. They had to put a pacemaker for me. My heart was not working. My daughter came, Michelle, she came to collect me from Houston.

Michelle: I think that was quite traumatic, because she had fallen and she was only found in the morning. There's a real change in her, and then obviously she was on a lot of medication. It was just too much for me to look after her. So I felt that this was a safe environment, a really nice care home, it's round the corner from me so I can come nearly every day.

Siddiqah: I think I find this nursing home, care home, is quite comfortable. The carers are very good and even in the morning they will bring breakfast, and lunchtime, and anytime, you know, the service is excellent.

Michelle: Yeah, I think they've been brilliant. I think the care home have been absolutely amazing with the transition from living with me to accepting that there's been health changes, and your independence has kind of gone to living in a different environment. Here, what's she going to do? Her meals are cooked for her. So what they were saying here, what she does is she makes people's tea, she starts cleaning, she starts doing stuff here.

Siddiqah: They have got exercise classes, singing classes. There are so many things now. Today they had cooking classes.

Michelle: There's a real warmth here. Just a real understanding of who my mum is. Yeah, and that means a lot. Like they'll come and hug my mum or give her a kiss. That means a lot to my mum.

*[Music plays]*

Siddiqah: I walk about half an hour exercise, go around and – even this morning I went five times downstairs. So that gave fresh air. It's very important to get fresh air and oxygen. I did my computer course. I got A grade with that one [laughs].

*[Music plays]*



Siddiqa: So that's what I have done I think. So quite successful. Looking after grandchildren, they did well. I think what I feel proud of, working very hard, and looking after my husband, he died of cancer. Looking after the whole house. Education is very important. If you don't have any education, you won't have a job. If you don't have a job, you struggle. What I find, if you don't work hard, there's no life. Follow the religion. Every religion said, look after each other, look after your neighbour. Whatever you can, the best thing to do. So I think the personality is very important, I think the positive thinking, I never give up.

*[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.

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