

Who Cares? project

Transcript of podcast episode 5: KYRA

[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 Kyra. 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.

Kyra: *[Lighter clicks]*

One of my vices is smoking. I wish I could give it up. I really want to, you know. When I leave here, because I will be leaving here, I'm going to work at it. I hate nicotine being my master, you know.

[Music Plays]

My name is Kyra Greenway. I'm a very old lady. Very old. I was born in Hammersmith and I was a twin. We don't look alike or anything. We were never very close. I don't know why. I had a rather unusual childhood. My father loved his wife very much and he had three children, but he met my mother, and he fell in love. He still loved his wife. Wouldn't dream of divorcing her, or anything like that. She knew all about it, and they had an affair, and I made an illegal entry into the world. Both my sister and me. So, the illegal entry was there. My mother looked after the two children, and my father claimed us, and gave us his name, which we have, and he came around to our house, and we went around to his house, to see his children.

So, it was a little bit unusual. We had a wonderful time. It was all the time bubbly and happy, you know. My mother was Russian. My father was English, you know. My father was a very educated man. Strict, but loving. Loving. He knew Latin, Greek and he was an archaeologist. You'll find lots of his Roman ruins, very beautiful brooches and swords, you know, Roman swords, that he found, in the British Museum. My mother educated herself really. She would read philosophy. Compared to my father, my mother was the complete opposite. She was a modernist. She'd read satire. My mother used to say, 'he abandoned me. He wouldn't marry me.' This was the thing, you know, children listen and they take a side, you know, and I always used to look at my father and think, you abandoned my mother. Not until I was older, and understood that he loved his wife, and he had no intention of divorcing her, but he loved this woman as well. She was my mother, Anna, and he hadn't abandoned her really, because he was round the house all the time, which isn't abandonment.

It's only when you grow up, that you begin to look at situations and understand them much more.

[Dining room background noise]

Carer: Hello, you all right?

Kyra: Yes, thank you.

Carer: Lunch looks good.

Iris: She gave us some rice with this. Nice. Ain't it this rice?

Kyra: The rice was lovely.

Iris: Yeah.

Kyra: Did you have rice?

Iris: Yeah, and a potato.

Kyra: Fancy putting potato with rice. Crazy.

My father was a Roman Catholic, but open minded, you know and he wanted us to be Catholics and to go to a convent with nuns [laughs]. It was a French order. I was very unhappy because I was being smacked all the time, you know, bullied by them. They never thought twice about getting a girl by the sink and smacking her hard on the legs, you know. They didn't think. They had me crying all day on the staircase, whilst people watched me, and the children going up the stairs. I was crying all day, and then she decided, at the end of the day, to punish me. She took me into the bathroom, put me by the sink and smacked me on the legs very hard. At the end of the day. I don't think Jesus would approve.

And I went with my father back to the convent. It was a beautiful place. There was a chapel that they had. It was a beautiful, beautiful place. Didn't realise that, when I was young, you know.

[Music Plays]

Kyra: My mother was very pretty. Very petite. We were taller than her. We used to walk along at 14 years of age, towering above her, you know, and she'd be just this little one in between us. I loved her very much. I loved her really very, very much. Her willpower. Her fight. She had a terrible temper though. She couldn't control her temper. Raging temper about things. Mainly about not being married. She had a temper with us, who were her children, and it killed her. She was angry and she had a heart attack. She was only 50. She was lying on the bed, so I was told, and I can see her face getting redder and redder. It's a terrible way to die. You must never die in anger.

[Music Plays]

Kyra: Music is my passion, yes. I used to go to concerts all the time, at the Albert Hall, when we were young. I loved to listen to Bach's double violin concerto. I love that. I could listen to that forever, because it's so complex, you're learning every time you listen to it. But I like

some songs, there's one song. I think this one – who is it? You know the one, 'if I was sculptor, but then again, no, la da dee da duh dee, duh da dee I ain't got much money but I know...'

['Your Song' by Elton John plays]

I think that's a lovely song – that's Elton John, isn't it, yeah?

[Music plays]

My husband was Australian. I met him in Russia and we came back to England and he loved me and he married me and after that, he whisked me off to Australia. I wasn't an extreme feminist, you know, I should work this out myself, you know. He said, I want to go back home, you know, so I said, all right. So, I was married to him, you know, so I left England and I was there 30 years, and I had the most wonderful life.

I loved the Australians. It was lovely. The people are so friendly. Despite the men calling you Sheila, you don't mind [laughs] because that's the way they are. The country is beautiful and the climate is gorgeous. We lived in a flat in Hawthorn, in Melbourne. It has the Royal Academy there, where I went to art school. It was lovely. We enjoyed it. I started to learn Patanjali yoga. I meditated for about two years. I didn't have a guru. I had a teacher, Veejay, who's Indian. He was a doctor. He was wonderful [laughter]. It was just watching the breath. Closing your eyes, sitting up right, seeing that the eyes met the tip of your nose and there were asanas. Asanas are exercises and I went into samadhi, lower samadhi.

Samadhi is bliss. Spiritual bliss. I went into that, you know. It fulfilled my dreams, you know. I was very happily married. I made loads of friends. They were happy times. They were very happy times.

[Music plays]

Carer: Kyra, just to let you know Doctor Bunford gave you a medication review last week, okay, so he prescribed this one.

Kyra: Mm-hm.

Carer: Okay, to be started tonight.

Kyra: What is it?

Carer: This one is vitamin D.

Kyra: [Coughs].

Carer: The one you had...

Kyra: It goes in water, does it?

Carer: Yeah, this one. So, every day.

Kyra: Okay, thank you.

Carer: You're welcome.

Kyra: I've been here three months. I couldn't believe the kindness, when I arrived, you know. They'd do anything for you. Anything, you know. They come in at night to see if you need anything you know. I'd say about a care home, you'd be in good hands. They're awfully kind people.

[Music Plays]

I suppose I did go for further education. I went to art school. My husband insisted. He saw talent. I was always sketching and drawing, you know. I was a bit frightened, you know, of going to art school. I didn't think I was good enough, and the whole thing, but he insisted and I went, and I met the sculptor first, and he just asked me to do a nose. Just a nose. I did a nose in clay, and he said 'you're in' [laughs]. I learned to paint, or I did painting but I majored in sculpture, which I found easier than painting, and I became a sculptress because I used to sculpt portraits, you know, of people. Male or female or children.

Children aren't as interesting, they haven't suffered. It was very hard work. To carry them was very heavy. Take them to the fountain, cast them in bronze and then give them to the person who commissioned me to, you know, sculpt them. They would buy it, and that was my trade really. I had a studio of my own and I worked as an artist in there. It was lovely. Freedom, you know. Working on my own, everybody must feel this when they're doing things by themselves. It's got an air of freedom in it.

Alison: It's a bit windy.

Kyra: Very windy.

Alison: A bit rainy and a bit windy [laughs].

Kyra: You know, Patanjali meditation is watching the breath. It gets subtler, and subtler and subtler until you're hardly breathing at all. Smoking hinders me with my breath. I can't do it anymore. I can't do yoga anymore.

I didn't have any children, regrettably. I had two miscarriages. No reason. There was nothing wrong with me. But two of them, you know, and late, and so I tried again and I couldn't get pregnant. I was very sad because I wanted children, you know. I had a wonderful husband. He died of cancer. He used to smoke, you know. He had been smoking ever since he was 14. I smoke but I only smoked when he died and that was 20 years ago because I wasn't suicidal but I thought, I don't want to live without him. Now he died of this, I'll die of this. So, I can die but I realised that it takes a long time [laughs] with smoking, you know, so yeah. So, I smoke, yeah. Not all the time, just cigarettes occasionally. I had a wonderful life with him. Wonderful life.

He had six weeks to live. They made him very comfortable and he was very clear minded about he felt. He said, oh well, I've written a book and I've done this and I've done that so I feel satisfied with what I've done on earth but he wasn't religious or anything, you know.

He didn't believe in God or anything. He just accepted he had six weeks. Gruelling six weeks.

[Music Plays]

I was in terrible grief. I mean everybody is when somebody dies, I suppose, but I didn't take it very well at all. I'm not over it now, you know, because I miss him so much. There was never anybody to fit the bill, you know, afterwards. There was only him, you know.

Kezia: Well, hello, hello.

Kyra: Oh.

Kezia: You've been waiting for this.

Kyra: Oh, hello Willy!

Kezia: And so has he! Tail's going mad already. Yeah, you remember Kyra don't you?

Alison: So, my name's Alison. I'm the wellbeing co-ordinator at Ronald Gibson House. This morning we have Kezia and Wilson coming in. Wilson is a therapy dog from Pets as Therapy. He's a lovely golden Labrador. He literally just melts at people's feet.

Kezia: Yeah, good boy. How are you?

Kyra: I'm fine, thank you. Hello Willy. Hello beautiful. [Laughs].

Kezia: Big kisses, big kisses.

Kyra: Any kisses, Willy?

Kezia: Good boy. Honestly, he made himself at home again straight away. I can't remember what did you have again, was it Labradors, no, Collies?

Kyra: Collie and a cocker spaniel.

Kezia: Ah that was it.

Kyra: Two of them.

Kezia: Gorgeous, I'd love a cocker spaniel.

Kyra: Oh, they're lovely.

Kezia: So lovely. No offence Wilson.

Kyra: Floppy ears [laughter].

Kezia: Yeah, good boy.

Kyra: Your hair looks lovely, really lovely.

Iris: Ah, thank you.

Kezia: Have you just had it done?

Iris: I've just had it done yeah.

Kyra: Do you mind if I go out for a cigarette, because it'll be teatime soon.

I love seeing Wilson because he knows me now, you know. He comes up and stares at me and gives me a kiss. I was brought up with dogs. Whisky and Chips. They were lovely dogs and you know, I still cry when Whisky died. I still cry when I think of him, you know, because of his eyes, you know. I'll be here probably a couple more weeks but they've got to review me first. I'm waiting for her to come any time, social worker. I haven't met her yet and then that's it. Then they have a flat all ready for me, I don't know. I don't know how I'm going to gear myself up to doing things for myself, you know. Gear myself up. Making a cup of tea. Gear myself up for cooking something you know. It will be hard at first. But it'll be wonderful [laughter] because I'm doing things for my bloody self. Everything's done for you here.

Everything is served to you. Sitting in that bloody chair. All the time, you know. Before I came here, I was walking with a walking stick down the road. I've got this. But it's a wheeler, with wheels, when I walk. It keeps me steady really. So, what I'm going to do when I get in the flat, is keep this near me and keep my hands off it and try to get stability on my own. You know I had to go and ask for a cigarette. I'm not allowed to keep them at all. They've got to be handed back in. They're my cigarettes, it's a bit much, you know. Not that I hate it here.

[Sirens in background]

They're very good and they're very kind.

When my husband died, my father wrote to me. He said you wouldn't come to England and look after me, because I'm not well, do you know. I couldn't refuse. I didn't want to go back to England but you know, when my friends are there, even though my husband had died but I went and you know, my hair went white within a year of being with my father. It was worry, I think, because it was brown. I had brown hair and it went this colour, you know. Hard work and worry. I hadn't experienced it before. It was his wife too who had senile dementia and he wouldn't have her in a home and he had her there. He didn't tell me this, but there was her to look after as well. So you can understand why my hair went white. They both died eventually. She died first.

Going to meet my father after 30 years, he'd changed a lot you know. My husband said to me that people change when they get older. They change. Be aware of that, you know. So, I did and he had changed, dramatically.

[Music Plays]

Yeah, I had a good relationship with him. We talked about many things. I introduced him to a book called Bhagavad Gita, which means the son of God. It was a section taken out of the Mahabharata where Krishna talks to Arjuna, who's devoted to him and he teaches him the way of wisdom and it's very different to what Christ talks about but it's wisdom, like a work for work's sake only, not for the fruits thereof, which is a very hard thing to do. There's all sorts of wisdom like that, going through the whole book, you know. I told him about Krishna, you know, and my father went mad. He jeered at my door saying, Krishna, Krishna,

Krishna, Krishna, Krishna. He jeered. He was supposed to be sick, but he managed to do that.

I didn't know why, and it filled me with horror. He thought just because I was devoted to Krishna, he said I was devoted, that I'd abandoned Christ, which I hadn't at all. It was a horrible experience. So, to please him, I went to mass, you know. Otherwise, we got on very well. I realised he was a bigot. He wasn't the same person at home and the daddy when I was young. I suppose life changes you.

[Music plays]

It was after my father died, the pandemic. I was in a flat on my own. I was all right, I was lucky. I watched other people on television. I would listen to it, but it didn't affect me. How did I come to be here, you're wondering aren't you? [Laughs]. Well, I have diabetes and I have leg pain, terrible leg pain. The only way to get rid of it, is to walk and get the circulation moving, you know. In the middle of the night it happens too. When it happens, it's always at nighttime. So, I would walk outside, from lamp post, to lamp post, keep going, until someone reported that this woman was walking aimlessly in the middle of the night. So, I was nabbed and here I am. It's no good explaining to them, it's a waste of time. Oh yes, I must tell the truth too, I was in so much agony. Now I didn't know that paracetamol was dangerous. I didn't know. I thought it was just a painkiller and I was in agony. So, I took 20 of them, which is a lot, I know. I thought, that will kill the pain. I felt so sick. So awfully sick. I felt ill. I rang for an ambulance you know, because I couldn't bear the nausea. They may have thought that I was suicidal, you know, taking this. The ambulance came, and they said, she's taken an overdose. I said, well no, wait a minute. You know I tried to explain to them, that I had diabetes and that I had to take a lot to get rid of the pain. I wish I'd taken the pain because I wouldn't probably be here.

I'm going out to have a smoke. I like it out in the garden. I like the fresh air. It's not that I want to smoke sometimes, just to get out of the room and I need that, you know. I read a lot. I read a lot of Indian mysticism. The Upanishads and the Vedas. Very difficult. You have to concentrate, you know, and not just that. I read the Koran. I had to read all of it, you know. I'm a Roman Catholic. I go to holy communion. Someone comes here and says mass for me, but I'm open minded. I watch the news every day because it's important that you know what's going on in the bloody world, you know.

Visited Egypt, Russia, Sweden. I love Egypt, most of all. It was so different. Different world. There must be a bit of my father in me, you know, because arachnological, escapades, you know. I walked up Ramses pyramid, you know. I couldn't get to the top. It was gigantic. The stones were huge. They were so close together; you couldn't put a pin between them. A razor blade, and Ramses was inside the pyramid, his effigy in stone and it was huge. It went on for miles, all the way up. I would love to see Egypt again.

I'm old now. I've lived my life. I just meditate. I don't do the asanas. I don't do the breathing, because I need Veejay to guide me. It's very important, when you do yoga, to have a guide. Being old is awful, you know. It's restricting. You can't do the things you used to do and it's just eating. It's sleeping. It's all we ever do here is eat. Eat and sleep. Yeah. I was glad that I met yoga. It changed my whole being. Completely. You know. Losing my

temper, everything. There was examination of conscience in that really and self-awareness came. I'm proud that I took the challenge, you know. I'd like to be conscious when I go. I'm very accepting of when I resign myself and I leave my body. I'm resigned to it.

I'm not frightened of it, it's only the body. The soul's gone. I've got acceptance really in anything that happens, it's just acceptance.

[Music Plays]

Kyra: That's it. That's it. It was raining and I couldn't have my second cigarette. Wasn't that a tragedy?

Alison: Did it get soggy? [Laughs]

Iris: Is it raining?

Kyra: Started to rain. I got in just in time. Hello Anthea. It started to rain, Anthea.

[Music Plays]

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

