

Who Cares? project

Transcript of podcast episode 8: BRIAN

[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 Brian. 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]

Brian: My name is Brian and I live in a care home. I'm an ex coal miner. I'm an old aged pensioner now [laughs].

[Music plays]

Brian: I used to do a bit of DJ-ing. I've always loved Motown and soul music, Northern Soul. Because I used to have a big, massive box full of Four Tops, Diana Ross and the Supremes, 'Stoned Love', Otis Redding, 'Sittin' on the Dock of the Bay' [laughs].

[Music plays]

Brian: You name them, I used to have them all. Then I started going to the pubs then in the village.

[Music plays]

Brian: Until somebody nicked all my records.

[Music plays and stops abruptly]

Brian: I was born in South Yorkshire in a village called Thurnscoe. It's a mining village where I were born and bred. I call it born and bred because that's what we were. We were born and bred working in the pits. Me mam was the nicest woman you could ever meet, and she was born in the town called Goldthorpe, which is four miles from where I was born. She met my dad. He was born in County Durham. Oh I loved her. You know, I loved her cooking, the old Yorkshire puddings. Because in the kitchen it were a coal fired oven, and just chuck a couple of shovels of coal on the fire and get it hot.

Me dad, he had an allotment. We grew – you name a veg, we grew it. We had a big, massive greenhouse. We grew cucumbers and tomatoes, and we used to sell them in the village. We had a horse and cart and we went round the village with the horse and cart selling the veg. I have three brothers and two sisters, and there's one brother I love, and he's brilliant, George. Poor old lad lives in Barnsley [laughs]. He's the oldest. He's an ex-miner. My brother Michael, third brother, my brother Paul, he was an electrician at the colliery. Then I've got two sisters, Jeanette and Margaret. I grew up with my cousin. He was like my brother to me.

[Music plays]

Brian: In the village was a pub just at the bottom of the street called the Fairway. We used to go in there with my dad and watch him play cards and dominoes, and got used to playing dominoes. I took over from him and beat his working colleagues. They said, where did you learn how to play dominoes Brian? I said, at home. Because we used to clear all the dirty pots off the table, wipe it, and we'd play dominoes on the kitchen table. I beat my dad [laughs].

[Music plays]

Brian: My dad was a bit of a... when he'd had a pint, because he used to go to the club across the road from the pit. On a Sunday he'll go to the pub at the bottom of the street, and he'll be in the taproom, what we call the Dog Inn because at the time you could take your dog in. He was sat right at the table, drinking his beer. No, I didn't like my dad hitting my mam. I loved my mam very much. When he'd had a few beers he used to just swear all the F words all the time.

He used to call her mam, and say, 'mam my dinner's –' and I said, dad what are using F words for all the time? Said, you're not in the colliery now. Don't you swear at my mum again. He said, why, what are you going to do? I'm going to fasten your mouth open with wire. I did give him a good whacking, because he hit my mam, so I hit him. Said, you don't hit my mum, dad. Smack right on't chin and knocked him out. He changed a lot, not hitting my mum.

[Music plays]

Brian: I was at a comprehensive school at west end of the village. We used to walk across what we called the fields and get to the school. It was a nice comprehensive school. I enjoyed it. I used to get called Rocky, because I did a lot of boxing. I had the style of Rocky Marciano. He was an old '50s boxer. That's what my boxing trainer called me. He called me Rocky.

[Music plays]

Brian: I've always loved boxing. I started going to the gym on the local colliery site when I was 10. I got my first fight when I was 11. I got through to the Yorkshire schoolboy championships. I was a runner up in all England championships. My old boxing trainer was an old blacksmith called Jack Hill. His second was called Percy Eyles and we called him Nutty, because he used to go round the pubs with big cases of peanuts. That's why we call him Nutty [laughs]. 'Punchdrunk' Richard Dunn from Bradford, I trained with him. I've trained with a couple of other professionals in the Doncaster area. There were Keith, there were Dave, people I used to spar with.

When I left school at 15, my old boxing trainer Jack, I just stoked the furnaces up for him. I wasn't qualified to cut metal, so I just stoked the furnaces up. He says, Brian, how did you learn how to do that? I said, Jack, I did that at school. He said, and you're very good at it.

[Music plays]

Brian: I started working in the pits when I were 15. I went down that big, black hole. The people that operate the, what we call the winding house, you get on a big, called a big cage, and it'll drop you down a shaft and bring you back up the shaft when you've done your shift on the face, or whatever you're doing. The first job I had before I started on the coal face, I used to splice broken haulage ropes. That was very good. You have to have steel needles to tap it in, and then just wind the wire strands in, and then tighten all these ropes up, so they can get the equipment up to the coal face.

After I've finished splicing ropes, I did my coal face training and tunnelling. Two machines I operated, and pretending that these corridors is a roadway in a mine, we put steel arches and get corrugated sheets, and cover it all in, and then put steel bars across. You grew up in the pits. You become a man when you're digging coal. Carrying girders on your shoulder, you had bigger arms than Arnold Schwarzenegger then [laughs]. Yeah, I loved it. Quite a few people, my uncles and other relations, cousins, all worked in the pits.

[Music plays]

Brian: I love South Yorkshire. It's where I was born and bred. I've had a few good laughs in the pubs in the village. When we've had a shower, washed, take all the dust off, we go across the road to the Coronation Club. It was a working men's club. We'd go across the road to the Coro' and have a couple of beers.

[Music plays]

Brian: My dad, he started smoking in the chicken hut at the top of the garden. We used to go in the hut and get the eggs out. In the hut he had a machine that ploughs the land, a rotavator. He's smoking and dropped the cigarette in the petrol tank and boom, gone, disappeared. He was burned to a crisp. They just managed to identify him, the fire brigade, because he had his fingers chopped off in the pits. That was it. He was gone. He was burnt. He'd gone. I was 20.

My mam was – she was well and truly – well broken at the time, but she got over it because she didn't like him smacking her round the chin.

[Music plays]

Brian: I stopped boxing when I had accidents in the pits. There were two accidents, or three actually. Well you can see that finger there is bent because it got split down the middle. When it happened, you put your finger to the light in the pit and you could see right through it. It's got blue marks there. That's coal dust, that, that blue mark there. The hospital just stitched him up and that was it.

That's not the worst one. The worst one was on that side of me neck. As I threw the corrugated sheet up to the colleague up on the top of the machine, he missed it and it just [whistles] just sliced down my neck. It just missed the jugular vein in the neck. It didn't bleed that much because the coal dust sealed it. When you've had a wash, it just sets in and it just has that blue mark there, leaves it there, and that's there permanent for the rest of your life.

One accident I would never, ever want to see ever again is an old working colleague called Bob, he was a well-known fellow in the village, and we used to get out of the pit and go across the road to the club, have a couple of beers. He was a good mate. He taught me how to operate the machine that cuts the coal. What he was doing, he put picks in the disc, and that's what he was doing. This – I called him an idiot – I called him a manslaughterer later – what he did, he'd never done any coal face training, and my mate Bob forgot to take the starting handle off. This boy I called an idiot [whistles] turned the handle and my mate went round the disc, sliced him up.

We had to put his body in plastic bags and take him out of the pit. We told his missus that your husband's in plastic bags. She said, you're kidding me aren't you? I said, no. The bloke got 10 years for manslaughter. If I was a judge I would have hung him.

[Music plays]

Brian: Never been married. I got engaged once, and then I found her in bed with another bloke after I'd done my shift in the pits, and that was it. I said au revoir, get out of my house, I never want to see you again. That was it. Relationship were done. I never had another one.

[Music plays]

[News clip: Yorkshire is Britain's largest mining area. South Yorkshire, the Scargill heartlands. Between Barnsley and Doncaster lies the Silkstone Seam.]

Brian: Old Maggie got rid of the pits. Thatcher. She got rid of those miners. She closed them. I think she's an old trout, and that's it. She never liked me old mate Arthur. Arthur Scargill. Because he was a miners' leader.

[TV clip:

Scargill: I will never, ever be a party to Tory party legislation which seeks to castrate and mutilate this trade union movement, and nobody in the NUM or anywhere else can be a party to that kind of legislation

Crowd [singing]: We'll support you ever more. Arthur Scargill, Arthur Scargill...]

Brian: We went on strike to stop closing the collieries. We were on strike for 12 months.

[TV clip:

Margaret Thatcher: Well I think the unions are obviously one body where a fanatical, tiny fanatical minority can and seem to be able to take over a whole union, and then say that they represent the whole union.]

Brian: We were stopping people from going through the picket lines. Saying, you can't – we're on strike and you're not going through.

[TV clip:

Margaret Thatcher: What we have seen in the past few weeks is not picketing at all. It is an attempt by force to prevent others from doing what they have a right to do.]

Brian: We had a little flat cap and people were filling the cap up for us.

[TV clip:

Male: In other words, they're trying to starve us.

Male: Exactly.

Male: Starve you out.

Reporter: These men have been without overtime for 19 weeks and on strike for five. Nobody knows how much further the coal strike will spread, which way a ballot would go.]

Brian: But it was just too late, because the old battle-axe, Maggie, closed the pits. That was it.

[TV clip:

Scargill: The National Union of Mine Workers shall organise a return to work on Tuesday. We go back together.]

Brian: We couldn't work at any other collieries, because every mine had disappeared. All they'd do is just take all the winding gear down and fill the shafts in. All the machinery's still all rusted away down – what I call downstairs. Down that big, black hole. Even the gymnasium don't exist anymore, because it was on colliery premises.

[Music plays]

Brian: I started working in the pits 1971 until end of the miners' strike in '85. I did miss the pits. I loved it.

[Music plays]

Brian: Once the shaft was filled in, unemployed. Then I went on security in Doncaster and Rotherham areas. Then I saw this advert for security in Croydon and I came down to London in February '89. There weren't many of us left Yorkshire. I was virtually the only one what left Yorkshire to come down South. I worked with a company in South Norwood. I found it difficult at first off, getting used to people's accents [laughs]. It were difficult to get to know the people, and living in areas around London. Then I just got used to it.

This chap from South Norwood, he had his own security company. 18 months I worked for him. He ripped me off. He underpaid everybody. So we all got together. I said, you, you, you, John, Trevor, you, come with me and we'll take him to court. We did. We closed his company down. After that company went bankrupt, I went in the National Theatre for quite a few years, next to Waterloo Bridge, the big, massive concrete building, being an ordinary security guard at first. There were four managers. They all said, Brian, you've been here longest now. We'll train you up to do our job. So that's what I did.

All the actors and actresses would come to the office, we'd take a picture of them and give them a pass card, so they can get through all the pass doors. I enjoyed, I loved it. Especially when you get the top actors and actresses coming in and talking. We'd just have a little chit-chat and I got used to some of the actresses' and actors' accents, and people were just getting used to my South Yorkshire lingo as well. When I wasn't working, I used to watch some of the shows in the theatre. There's three, and the biggest was the Olivier theatre, after Lord Olivier. Then you've got the Lyttelton and a smallish theatre was called the Cottesloe, after Lady Cottesloe.

My favourite theatre was the Olivier, because they used to have some good shows on there. I found it very adequate, you know, very good. I knew what I could do.

[Music plays]

Brian: Then after I finished with the National Theatre I did security in the Croydon areas. Then all of a sudden I just packed security in, because I got too old to be a security guard. People were saying, how old are you? I said, ah, I'm 65. Said, you're never 65. I did a little bit of gardening and that's it. So I've got to live on me old aged pension, me miner's pension, and that's what it is. That pension's nothing. That pension, I said, look I flogged my nuts off in a pit for that. I had my own flat not far from here and I lived in South Norwood. I came down to Addiscombe, and then down to this place here. Well, somewhere to live. I've been here a little – quite some time now. Couple of years now.

Well, it was difficult at first. Then I just got used to it. They come in and knock on the door and say, here's your breakfast. Here's your baked beans and your eggs and that. I say, look I'll teach you the Yorkshire way, how to make a proper breakfast. I'd just like to stay a little bit more until they say, Brian on yer bike, and that's it [laughs]. I'm happy. Got the old boy in the corner hiding [laughs]. He's alright, Ron's, a very polite person. He's okay.

Ron: My name's Ron Wallis and I'm an activity coordinator. On a Tuesday afternoon we'll always have a ladies' afternoon. Wednesday we'll always have the gentlemen's afternoon.

[Music plays]

Ron: We have a cinema club every Friday. We have a music session every Thursday afternoon.

[Music plays]

Ron: Brian loves to go to the gentlemen's club every Wednesday afternoon. He's always the first to say, yes, he'll definitely be there. He's always ready when I go to collect him. Gentlemen's club, we offer a range of alcoholic drinks or soft drinks for anyone that wants to join, and we have a good chat. Sometimes we even play things like dominoes, have a little bit of light music in the background, but a lot of the time we have a good chat amongst ourselves about our lives, about sports.

Brian, he's a really nice bloke to get to know. He's still quite young compared to a lot of the residents that are here. But yeah, I believe when he first came here it was because of a medical situation. He really likes to get involved in activities where possible. He's always said he'll give any activity a go. He even said he'd come and join the ladies' club, but I said unfortunately if he wasn't a lady, he couldn't join. He likes to come out on trips with us, having a cup of tea with other residents on the bus, and just getting out for the fresh air really.

Because we talk about the same sort of thing, he likes football, I like football, he doesn't mind the rugby, I don't mind the rugby, so there's always that connection. When you make that sort of connection, it's good.

[Music plays]

Brian: When the pandemic started, I think it's very, very traumatic. I was a little bit down. I thought, it's going to spread and it's going to kill me off. First of all I wanted to really get some poison and go and join my dad in the graveyard. But then somebody told me not to be silly, and I'm not going to do it.

Ron: Working in a care home during the pandemic was a very, very scary experience for me. The amount of people that were up and doing things, and then next day they were so poorly in bed and looked like they were going to pass, was very scary, very tough time. I remember there was one time that the care home was literally so struggling for staff that activity staff didn't do activities, they did caring roles, just to make the numbers up and help support the carers as much as they can. It was very scary, it was very tough to get through each day.

Brian: I've been ill with that. I said, I hope I get over it, not die and that with this Covid. I had a little bit of it, and that's why I'm taking all these tablets, and I don't want to take them all. I'm not going to die now, so I'm alright. I said, I told them I'm too young to die yet, and that's it.

[Music plays]

Brian: I like gardening. I've loved gardening since I was this big. I redecorated my mam's front garden where we were born and bred. I did all that, transformed it. I chopped all the weeds down and literally landscaped it. I made a lawn out of it and I put a little rose bush in, in the middle of the lawn.

Ron: We're hopefully going to be able to get into the garden a bit more once the weather turns, because I know Brian does love to do some gardening. He does like his arts and crafts as well. He likes to draw things and design things. Brian, he doesn't really get many visitors, I must say, not that I'm aware of. I think most of his family live up in Barnsley.

Brian: Well all my relationships are up North. I have my brothers, my cousins, me mam, and she's knocking on, she's 94. But I have made some friends with the security guards in the National Theatre, and a couple of new friends in South Norwood.

[Music plays]

Brian: Well, I haven't got a music box, but what I can do with my telly, I can search for music. That's what I'll do. Sit in my chair and flick the switch on my remote and get the music. Well, if you've got any soul music, just bring it to me and I'll play it.

[Music plays]

Brian: I think you've asked some decent questions. I've tried to answer it as best as I can, and that's it.

[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]

