

Who Cares? project

Transcript of podcast episode 9: LORAINÉ

[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 Loraine. 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]

Loraine: I didn't have a very good start in life. My mother died when I was just a few months old and then my father unfortunately committed suicide when I was nine. An early introduction to, you don't live forever, you know, so I think that's probably made me fairly independent.

[Music plays]

Loraine: When was I born? Oh, centuries ago. Wolverhampton, UK. We were a sort of fairly average family, I suppose, for that time. Times were hard in those days. Jobs were hard to get. But I remember lots of things when they used to deliver bread and milk and cakes and coal by horse and cart. I never knew my mother, well I mean, I suppose I must have done [laughs]. I never saw a photograph of her so I don't know – I think she probably looked like my sister by comments that were made at the time. I was the youngest in the family. My sister, I have to count how many [laughs]. In those days they had big families. No birth control.

When my father died, the family sort of dispersed. Unfortunately, I found him when he – he put his head in the oven and switched on the gas and off he went. That's all I know about him really but I don't dwell on it, you know. I was only young anyway. I seemed to cope with quite well, I don't know why. I think when you're young, you don't take life so seriously as when you're older. If I'd been older it probably would have affected me more.

[Music plays]

Loraine: I went to live with my eldest sister, who had two children of her own. I think she was probably about 25 years older than me, something like that. I lived there until I left, when I was grown up.

Billy: Loraine would you like to come down to the gardens this afternoon?

Loraine: No thanks. It's not hot enough for me, for the garden [laughs].

My son is living in Sweden at the moment. My daughter, she was born in Brunei, consultant anaesthetist, she is. She's a very strong girl. Very strong ambitions. Like me I suppose.

Sarah: My name is Sarah and I'm the daughter of Loraine McDonald, she likes to call herself Lori. So, she'll be 95, she'll be yeah. As I've got older, I have realised just quite how amazing and strong my mum is. I'd never really thought of her in that way until I understood just quite what she'd been through and what she'd done in her life, and when I found out she was an orphan, she sort of mentioned it, when I was a teenager, almost in passing, so I didn't quite register the enormity of that happening. It's only as I've got older, I've asked her a bit more about it and the effect it had on the family and all the brothers and sisters having to separate and go their own way.

I think at one point, she was almost going to go into Barnardo's and then her other sister went into, I guess it must have been like foster care really, and then there was this stigma of her dad's death and the circumstances. I just think back then, you just – it was that stiff upper lip and keeping it in so I really admire her resilience and she never, ever felt sorry for herself.

[Music plays]

Loraine: School life... I think as I said, I was living with my sister. She seemed to move from this place to that place, all over the place so I never had a school where I went to for any length of time. Strangely enough, when I was at school, we had a geography lesson and they were talking about Singapore. I thought, oh, that looks good [laughs]. I wouldn't mind sort of going to Singapore, seeing all that, or somewhere like it. It sort of stayed at the back of my mind for quite a long time. That was one of my decisions to go travelling. Yeah. I had that feeling. I remember now looking back, seeing advertisements for the seaside. Aberystwyth and all that sort of thing. That's sort of been planted in my mind. Thinking, you know, I want to travel. I want to see something different to all this.

When I had the opportunity, I went to Singapore, which was quite strange. I left school when I was 14. That was the school leaving age in those days. I used to go dancing. Saturday night sort of thing. You made your own fun. You used to listen to the radio. Of course, we didn't have television until the late 50s. I had one very good friend but she got married and went her own way and I went my way sort of thing.

Sarah: She didn't really have any friends. I don't mean that because she's like socially awkward [laughs] but she's quite private. She was really close to my auntie Nelly, so the older sister that looked after her, but also really close to my auntie June, and I think it's that bond from the tragedy from their dad dying and keeping in touch was a big thing.

Loraine: My sister, June, she was two years older than me. Oh, she was absolutely lovely. Very kind, caring, a lovely sister.

[News clip:

Prime Minister: I'm speaking to you from the cabinet room at 10 Downing Street. This country is at war with Germany.]

Loraine: I remember when the war broke out. I was working at the time. Where I lived we didn't see a lot of the war. We used to have perhaps the odd incendiary bombs, sort of you know just fire rather than destruction by explosions. Food rationing. You'd see a queue forming and you'd go and join it. You didn't know what they were queuing for. Some sort of food. Anyway, whatever it was you wanted it [laughs]. I remember Churchill's speeches. I liked the one where he said, 'we will fight on the land. We will fight on the beaches'. I think that's very, very inspiring.

[News clip:

Prime Minister: We shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches. We shall fight on the landing grounds. We shall fight in the fields and in the streets. We shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender.]

[Music plays]

Loraine: I worked in a big store in Wolverhampton, called Beatties, and I worked in the perfumery department. It was just a job. I thought, well, I must do something a bit more serious than this, you know [laughs] so after 10 years I decided to do nursing. Very selfish thing really [laughs]. I just thought it would give me a chance to see the world, which I did. My whole life. I mean I married because I was in nursing. I was abroad and I've been with my husband, travelling all over the world. Working at different places and just visiting different places.

I did my training, which was three years and got my badge, SRN. I worked at the Royal Hospital in Wolverhampton, quite different really to what it is now, I suppose, because you've got all this gadgetry, all this machinery and more primitive I suppose, than what it is now. I sort of went high up in scale you know. Junior nurse and then staff nurse and then ward sister, which I finished as ward sister. I left there and I decided to go abroad. So, I looked in the Nursing Times and there was a job in Gibraltar so I went there.

[Radio clip:

The rock of Gibraltar has appealed to the nation of men for centuries. This great military fortress has belonged to Great Britain over 250 years and today is considered one of the

strongest bastions in the world. Higher up on the rock is a residential district with brilliant tropical flowers, charming homes are built at unbelievable angles on the steep streets.

Loraine: I think I was there about three years, Gibraltar, and I worked in the hospital there.

Sarah: I always thought she had a real sense of adventure. There's so much to learn from travelling around and knowing that things can be done differently and just appreciating different societies so I think she sort of had that in her. But this was so unusual for those times.

Loraine: Oh, ha, the most alarming – this patient died and they just had a small mortuary and the relatives were sort of gathered there, sort of sitting around waiting for things to happen. This was at night time and then one came up and said, nurse I think my husband is still breathing and I thought, oh my god what's happened here. So I went downstairs, to the mortuary. He wasn't breathing, it was a cat on the roof [laughs]. What a relief. And then from Gibraltar, I did a little bit of industrial nursing in-between jobs. My next job was in Kenya.

Sarah: And also, she's not materialistic so she'd be quite happy just to move somewhere with a bag, with nothing else. It's just her and her mind and her freedom, not sort of weighed down by belongings.

[Music plays]

Loraine: I worked in a private hospital in Mombasa, where I met my husband, mm [laughs]. He was working for Shell and we met through a friend. He was in the army at the end of the war. He was called up and he was in the Guards. He left the army after the end of the war and trained as an electrical engineer and reached the stage of Chartered Electrical Engineer. He used to tell me a lot of rude jokes, I know that [laughs]. One of my friends at the hospital said, I'm sorry, Lori – they call me Lori – I'm sorry, Lori but John is already married and I said, no he's not, he's already told me, he's in the throes of a divorce [laughs]. Very kind man. Very nice. Very caring. I just knew he was the right person.

I met John in January and we were married in July, same year. Oh, the wedding day was [laughs] a very simple affair and I think we had about six guests.

[Music plays]

Loraine: And we went to Nairobi for a couple of days, because my husband had a very important job and I could only get those couple of days off from my job.

Sarah: He was very neat and very bright, intelligent. A very fair man. Strict but fair, so I think she admired those qualities in him. It was a relationship of respect I would say. She really respected my dad and his strength, because he was a very strong man as well, and how he was a good father and a good husband and would always treat his family very fairly and was very kind and caring about his parents so I think she had such respect for him. And also, I guess because she didn't have her dad, so she would look at him, I believe, and see how he was with myself and my brother.

[Music plays]

Loraine: Three years in Mombasa. I remember I went with a girlfriend, in – not a safari, just into the game park and all of sudden, we saw this elephant coming towards us. Good job she was driving, it was her car so we had to back up, sort of in a bend in the road. When he couldn't see us, he stopped. I thought this is it [laughs].

[Music plays]

Loraine: I stopped working when I got married. [Sound of plane taking off]. We went to Cyprus where we lived for 18 months and that's where my son was born, in Cyprus. We went from there to Brunei I think, yes to Brunei. That's where Sarah was born, in Brunei. We were there I think for about 18 months, two years, something like that. Very basic really. Where did we go from there? I have to stop and think. We've been all over the place. And then from Brunei, we went to the Far East and then from there we went to Singapore for five and a half years.

[Music plays]

Loraine: We lived on a small island called Pulau Bukom and we used to go into Singapore to do shopping and all that sort of thing and that's where Sarah and Duncan, my son, went for schooling, at that time. It was quite unlike what I'd heard when I was at school. Of course, it had changed. It's only a small island anyway but it had changed over the years and now it's a big commercial island. They're mostly Chinese there and then a lot of Asians too. It's very modern of course. They were beginning to build the new hotels and everything, mm. It was still nice. We used to go swimming. We used to play a bit of tennis. Oh, we used to go dancing at the nightclub, that sort of thing. But he was a busy man. He had very little time off.

Coming home on leave, we were in Nairobi and then the Air Force there, was trying to take over the government and we were in the hotel and my husband said to the two children, sit on the floor because if there's a loud noise, bang they'll start shooting so they sat on the floor. Yeah, they weren't scared. Pretty tough I'd say [laughs]. Quite exciting really. Wouldn't have been if they'd started shooting [laughs]. We managed to get home okay. [Sound of plane taking off].

Then my husband retired and we came back to the UK and I lived in Kent – we lived in Kent, I should say. Yeah. My husband was very musically minded. He used to like operas. I like

opera duets and stuff like that, but he used to like the real, you know, boring stuff, as I called it. [Laughs] he would say, I would be in the kitchen cooking the supper and he'd say, Lori, come and look at this. Come and hear this. I am busy. I like classical really, you know. The Lark Ascending, do you know that one? That's really nice.

[Music plays]

Loraine: Sometimes I get it on television, a programme. They had Pavarotti on, the other night.

[Music plays]

Loraine: I had to sell my flat in order to live here. I lived alone in Putney, because my husband died in 1996.

Sarah: She sort of managed everything and moved out of the family house, 10 years or whatever after. So, auntie June was in Putney and that's why my mum moved to Putney because I was there as well. We all used to live in the same road so my mum used to go and visit auntie June every day. Just go walk up the road and go and see her. So, she was really, really close to her. She used to say she was the kindest woman in the world. She admired that softness in auntie June but wanted her to stick up for herself more. So, she was at home initially during the pandemic, so I used to just order the shopping or drop it off at the door. I couldn't obviously go in, particularly with my job and the Covid patients, looking after them and stuff.

Loraine: I did get Covid. I had a little fall, wasn't much of a fall at home.

Sarah: So, she went into hospital, then she caught Covid in hospital and my auntie just happened to be in the next ward, at that time. It was strange, so they saw each other, luckily, because my auntie then died a couple of weeks later.

Loraine: I wasn't ill with it at all. The only thing is, I did lose my appetite.

Sarah: And then she came back to her flat. She's always been happy with her own company but she couldn't cope. The Covid really affected her. I don't even know if she remembers this at all, much about it. I have a feeling she might not realise just how fatigued she was. She couldn't really move more than six foot without stopping. I suggested she went into Lyle House so she went in there to get her strength up, and then I sort of, asked her, does she want to go back to her flat, and how does she feel? And what sort of care might she want? I just put it out there and then I just let her decide over months, what she wanted to do. I think she probably decided to stay, because she knew it was too much for me to look out. But it's difficult.

Loraine: It's not like being at home of course. You don't expect it to be, do you? But they do their best. It's the best thing. You know we all need this sort of place and it's nice to have a place like this. Laverne, do you remember my sister, June? June Gibbons?

Laverne: Yes I did. Was she on the second floor?

Loraine: She was on this floor. She did have dementia I think.

Laverne: Yes she did.

Loraine: Well, I was in hospital, when she died, myself, two years ago.

Billy: A very pretty lady wasn't she?

Loraine: Yes, very sweet lady. I miss her terribly of course, but [sighs] life has to go on hasn't it.

[Music plays]

Loraine: Because my daughter is so busy in the hospital, she doesn't get to see me all that often. But she brings the children along when she can. My grandchildren, Alistair, who lives with his mother, in Kent. That's my son's son. My other two grandchildren, I see.

Sarah: I don't see my mum as much as I would like to just because of the logistics but she's very interested in how they're doing. She really likes Billy because I think she's seen a lot of him.

Billy: We've got a great relationship. A really good relationship. My name's Billy and I'm a wellbeing and activities co-ordinator so I do activities with the residents. We do one to one activities. We do group activities. You name it. Whatever they want, we try to provide it for them. I love my job, I love my job. Previously I was a care assistant here, general care. The thing that I found difficult, was that I would for instance give someone a shower, get them dressed, get them ready, take them to breakfast, and then they'd be like, can you sit with me and have a cup of tea and you had to move on. The role I'm in now, is brilliant. I get to come and be around wonderful people and have fun all day.

Loraine: He tries to think of things to amuse, make people interested in everyday life, rather than just sitting in there.

Billy: I have a lot of one to ones with Loraine, in my new role, because that's how she likes it. Often it's sitting in her room and having a chat. She's a very strong, determined person. She's very vocal when we have our residents meetings. She's very independent. Fiercely independent.

Loraine: I make my bed every day. Give myself a wash every day.

Billy: She's kind. She's bright. She's also quite private about her life. Like she'll tell you little snippets but you have to kind of ask the question. She doesn't just give you the information. She'll definitely let you know if she doesn't want to do an activity [laughs].

Loraine: I very often don't join in, do I? Well, I don't join in at all.

Billy: We have a nice chat though.

Loraine: I used to. I used to do the quizzes. This life's okay for me [laughs]. I spent a lot of time in my room I suppose. I have a fairly nice outlook. I watch the traffic go by [laughs]. I don't spend

much time in the lounge because you, you know, you can't have a lot of conversation with some people because they're... dementia, you know.

Sarah: She'll often remind me of what happened 20 years ago. Yeah, no, she's quite on the ball is my mum.

Billy: She loves watching documentaries and she particularly likes programmes about people abroad. So quite often, she'll say no, I want to watch A Place in the Sun. I don't want to do the activity. She also is very knowledgeable. She has her nursing background. She actually when I was training and everything was very helpful to me.

Sarah: She's a kind lady. She's pretty tough [laughs] so sometimes she can come across as harsh. But she's not really. She always listens. She's always there for you and she just never, ever moans or feels sorry for herself. She's really like a rock. There's this song by Coldplay called Green Eyes, because my mum's got very green eyes, anyway, when I play that song, it reminds me of my mum.

[Music plays]

Sarah: She's like, she's really extraordinary.

Loraine: Just follow your dreams. If you want to do something, do it. If you can. Go for 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]

