

Jefferson Lewis

Early Childhood (1 min 48 secs)

So my mother always tried to encourage us to stay tight as a unit, so we started off in Poplar, moved to Plaistow in the mid '70s. And it was quite interesting because we moved from social housing to privately, private accommodation, it was a terraced house on a narrow street, it was quite, you know, looking back it didn't seem as congested now, as it does when I go back there. But growing up in Plaistow was quite an experience for myself, young black male, just I don't know, it was just thinking about it, it was a pleasant childhood, I mean we got up to mischief with some of the other kids that are in the area. It was quite diverse, so it was a mixture of children of Muslim backgrounds, Sikh, British, Jamaican, obviously Jamaicans had quite an influence. There were a couple of Nigerian, people from West Africa, Ghanaians, and even in school there were people that were from Zimbabwe, Poland, Italy, you know, you name it, it was very diverse, even like Hong Kong. So I had quite an exposure to the different cultures, but yeah, I was always aware that my family was from a country that wasn't as popular, but even though they had a very strong identity.

Education at St Bonaventure's School (1 min 33)

[Laughs] That was just one of the most amazing experiences, it was difficult, because, you know, the first day you come in and you're seeing like young men with beards, like towering six foot [laughs], you know, it was quite scary. But it was an all boys' school, and you could not – you could not appear to be soft. You couldn't appear to be weak, you couldn't appear to be dumb, it was very competitive, I was quite short, a lot of the times I would feel like I would get bullied, but there were periods when I just had to stand up for myself, and it became easier as I got older. But having been at that school, it probably shaped me into the kind of person that I am today.

The teachers there were brilliant, I found that they actually cared, and I think one of the reasons why we were able to achieve so much is because the teachers were just great. You know, I look back and see how strict they were, but as, you know, even with the basketball team, I used to play basketball, even as short as I am, I would go on the court, and, you know, get in there and play my part. And it was just great to be part of such a winning team. But it was a great experience just being around people that were aggressive, people that were really excellent, and, you know, just seeing some of the people that were there, for myself I'd always try to compete with the other students in the class, I would always try to get marks above them. That was my goal, 'cause I don't like losing [laughs].

Early Career Opportunities (2 mins 31)

By the time I'd left school I was always interested in learning how to fix things, so I went to study City & Guilds electronics, I did the Part One and Part Two, so I could actually repair at the age of sixteen, repair circuits down to component level. I went on a Youth Training Scheme, and that

was an opportunity to get out there. The difficulty I had is that you couldn't get a job if you didn't have experience, and you couldn't get experience unless you had a job.

So this gave me an opportunity to get work experience, while getting paid, even though it seemed like a meagre salary, it was a foot in the door, and an opportunity to get out there and show that you can actually provide value. So whilst I was at the Youth Training Scheme I started off as an apprentice electrician, then moved onto becoming a text – it was company called Datawork, they made a dedicated text processor back in the days of WordPerfect.

But I actually ended up repairing those machines, the hard drives, you know, swapping out screens and circuit boards, sometimes even repairing the circuit boards, and the printers, so they were dot matrix printers, daisy wheel printers, also the golf ball typewriters, the IBM ones, there were two gentlemen that took me under their wing. And it was a wonderful experience because I thought as a young black male, why would anybody, you know, even give me the opportunity to develop myself in such a way, there were two white guys, I won't mention their names, but they were like mentors and they took me under their wing and showed me the ropes, working at the same place, we used to have a good laugh working there.

But it was just so nice to be able to be given that opportunity, because at that particular point in time, there didn't seem to be that many opportunities for young black men growing up, especially in East London. But they gave me the opportunity to show that I was good enough, and from there the company next door saw that I was good at repairing circuit boards, so when the YTS had finished, they chose to give me a role of fixing photocopiers.

I did that for about five years. They actually – the first YTS, the first people that I mentioned, the two guys, they actually helped me, they paid for my driving lessons, helped me actually get the licence, because with that sort of job you needed to get on the road. And as a young man I just wanted a car, you know, and if I get a free car, great [laughs]. So that was one of the motivators as well.

Experiencing Racism (38 secs)

But it's been an interesting life thus far, as I said, being a black person, growing up the UK, yeah, racism, you'll get it, I mean you'll get it wherever, you know, I've been attacked in Canning Town, I've been spat on in Romford. It's just what can you do? It's like it just comes with the territory [laughs].

And I haven't gone out there like a thug, you know, I wouldn't like to think I've been irritating anybody, just by my mere existence, it's just I'm just trying to get through life, just be there to support my family, pay my bills, pay my taxes.

Benefits of Over 50s Black Men's Forum (O5BM) (1 min 9)

Pretty good. It's enabled me to really get out the house, because more often than not I'm either working from home, or I'm in the city three days a week. So yeah, that's how it came about. And one of the things that I've definitely enjoyed is driving, you know, you've got a car sitting on the driveway, and it just sits there until the weekend, start to be able to get out and give it a good blast, and seeing as it's a diesel, that's a benefit... yeah, it's just been a case of linking up with men of like mind, around the same age. I find that the men there, we're all more or less at the

same level, same place in life, you know, where we've either got young families, or our families are grown, and that we're kind of not as young as we used to be, but still need to be active. It's a great opportunity to reconnect with a new set of people, 'cause more often than not as I said I'd really just go between home and work and family and not much else. So it's just been a great opportunity to meet gentlemen that are in the same place in life.