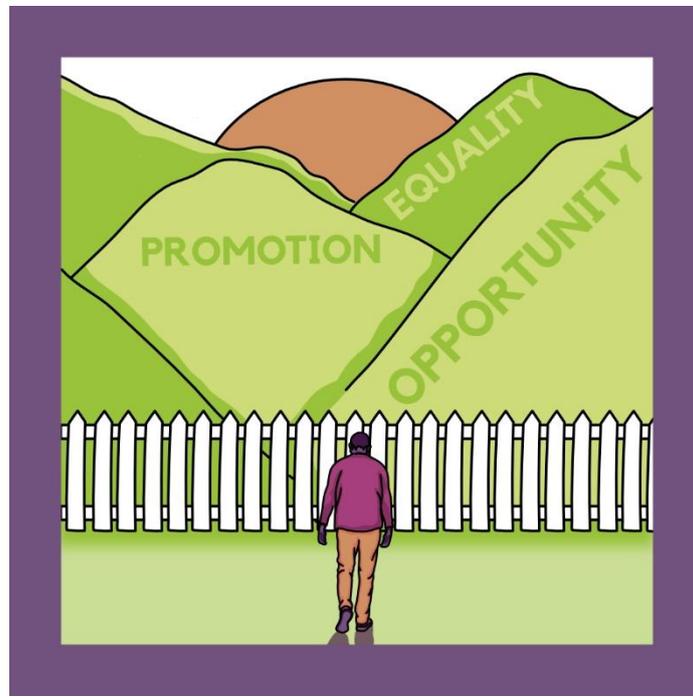


## Lived Lives 2 - Gareth



### *Interview Transcript*

When I went to junior school, my school was like a multicultural school. I saw that as normal, black, white, Asian, Chinese, all playing, getting along. And then when I went to high school, we were like a minority going into a bigger secondary school and that was like a predominantly white school. So you went from being an all ethnic school to becoming a minority in high school. It was just a new experience. I've never seen so many white people in my life, never. I was exposed to people that were involved in crime and drugs and stuff like that. It was two different worlds. Talk about friends that killed have each other. I talk about people that have gone to jail. That was my community, not to say that I was ever involved, but I was around those people. But my saving grace was that I played sport.

I played football professionally for three years. Football was a big part of my life so definitely that shaped some of my values. When I started playing football professionally, I had plaits in my hair and the coach at the time said, "You got to cut them off." I experienced a mixture of racism. So there were some teams where I might be the only black player. I've had one of my own players call another player "monkey" when we were playing and someone threw a banana on the football field,

monkey chant. So it was like, no, you're not one of ours. This is what you get sort of thing. So when you look back, it was this sort of gentle racism. The very subtle comment like black people are late and they're always cold. It's something that you don't question at the time, but maybe as you get older with a bit more knowledge, and then maybe a bit more confident you look back and you think, God, I can't believe that I did that. I can't believe that I cut my hair. Why was that person so offended by an Afro-Caribbean hairstyle?

I've been working for the council for 11 years now. The first council role I had was as sport development officer. As the service started to change my role started to change within sport. So I was still doing sport, but I was starting to do jobs that were non-sport, such as issue-based stuff around like anger, boys group, girls group, health. And then we had another restructure and the sports role was deleted and I had to apply for another job, which was an interventions worker. I've been in that role for a few years now, delivering across the district.

When I started working for the council, I worked in Hemsworth, predominantly coal mining community. And in the area, I definitely felt the difference of being black. There was no other black members of staff so you felt it when you were in and around the area, going to groups. I think I had one black boy who came to a sport session and he was racially abused in that sport session by another young person in the group. Where has that 10 year-old-boy got that language from?

I also remember working in Knottingley and my colleague was Asian and we used to pick up these children and take them to a sports centre. After about two weeks, there was a rumour going around Knottingley that there was a black man in a white van kidnapping kids. I worked for the council, I wasn't kidnapping kids, but because of how it looked, when you look back, you think maybe that wasn't great.

I've reported things, but maybe it's been looked as not important. Above the pub there was a youth group that did martial arts and I went into the pub and the dog barked, the whole pub stopped. I walked in and you could see everybody like what's going on. There's a black guy here. I felt that straight away. And then the dog barked and the landlord just said, "Don't mind the dog. It's a racist dog." It was a tumbleweed moment. It was like, time had stopped, like someone had pressed pause in the pub. You could feel all the eyes on you. And when I brought that back, it was very much like laughed at as a bit of a joke. Doesn't fill you with any sort of confidence to report anything because it can be sort of received as a joke rather than maybe asking like how did you feel. That was never really the question. It was more

of a comedy. That wasn't a good situation.

I was asked by a manager once to work with a young person whose mum was... So there's the National Front and there's a group that sort of branches off that and his mum was the leader of that group. He asked me to work with him, but then when I look back, I kind of think that was really sort of not ideal maybe, maybe inappropriate. So you've got the mother who's sort of racially driven person and you've put the only black male in that environment. I did try to work with the son and I did challenge some of his views and I could maybe see maybe why the manager thought it would be a good idea to put a black male with that young person, but it's probably more benefit for the young person and not really considering my feelings and emotions because some of his thoughts were very extreme, asking me why is my skin in that colour? Do I have red blood? How did I get here?

First time I went to pick him up the manager said, "You don't need to know the house number. You'll know the house when you get there." And when I got there, it was a house that was full of national flags, Union Jack flags, door boarded up. It was just like, I'm really sort of being exposed to it here.

I've always been welcomed by staff. But again, I think it's those subtle comments that maybe when I look back now, I think God, but at the time you just got on with it and tried to do your job. From the back of the Black Lives Matter Movement, the BAME group gained more momentum, I'd seen the emails on the newsfeed of a BAME group. I just thought it would be something good for me to at least attend and share some of my knowledge and experience hopefully to help shape other BAME people's futures in the council, the next generation or the generation after that, so that when they come into the council, it's a better experience for them.

The purpose of the BAME group is to support BAME members of staff within the council to try and put some strategies or approaches in place to make it a fairer council for BAME staff. Because it's a fairly new group, the first few meetings were about setting it up and the name and about the purpose of the group, terms of reference of the group, and really trying to identify what power has that group got. We had the leader of the council on. He was saying a lot of good things, but the reality is that there is no BAME staff at the top. When you come into a group and you say that we're doing lots of stuff in Wakefield at the moment, the numbers don't add up. You don't have anybody on your Steering Group or Leadership Team that's BAME. Your sort of Senior Managers, there is no BAME. On the shop floor we're not seeing any change.

In terms of progression I don't see anybody going higher than a Coordinator. So above a Coordinator, there'll be a Manager, then a Service Manager. They're not getting above a Coordinator. And there's a feel of a certain type as well. They don't want people that are going to say, "Well, no. I don't agree that." They want people that are, "Yeah, let's do that." So there is a bit of a mould and not everybody fits into that mould. Whereas sometimes somebody come in, maybe a bit keen, a bit fresh, it's seen as being quite negative, but actually, someone's questioning an approach that might be really old, that might be out-of-date. Times are moving on, but they don't like maybe someone who's going to come in and turn everything upside down. So you do get a sense of you've got to fit the type as well.

In the BAME group, recently I spoke about previous [inaudible 00:08:37] having like a mentoring theme, like if people are interested in progressing that they could mentor, mentoring. So there is a bit of a focus on trying to help people. When the leader of the council came, and he mentioned about offering more jobs to BAME people, like [inaudible 00:08:58], the feedback from the group was, it's not just about [inaudible 00:09:02]. It's about if you deserve something, you get it. It's not about, well, let's just get 10 BAME bin men or bus drivers so we can say we've got 10 BAME workers in council. If you've got 10 BAME workers and they deserve to be a manager or a Teacher or a Coordinator or a Service Manager that they get the job. I wouldn't want to get a job just because I'm black. I'd want to get a job because I deserve it.

So I think the Black Lives Matter movement really raised people's awareness of, you know, there are people out there that do feel that they are being treated unfairly. And I think the George Floyd moment was a real powerful moment. It's like, when is it going to stop? As a black male, you learn not to voice it or you just know that's how things go. It's something that you become accustomed to and you sort of live with and you maybe accept this is how life's going to be and that you are different or treated different. My struggle and my journey might be slightly different to maybe some of my colleagues simply because I'm black and I think those conversations need to happen. And I think through the BAME group at the moment, we're starting to have those conversations with people who potentially have the power to change some of those outcomes.