

My story: In conversation with BBC journalist, Ashley John-Baptiste

Transcript

Richard Baynes, journalist

I'm with Ashley John-Baptiste. He's somebody who's experienced care and who's achieved a lot while still in his 20s. And now he's trying to help other care experienced people overcome stigma and reach their full potential. Ashley, tell me, first of all what you're doing now, and a bit about your life and experiences so far.

Ashley John-Baptiste, BBC broadcast journalist and presenter

Well, I am a BBC news journalist, I'm a reporter for the BBC. And also I speak so I get the awesome opportunity to speak to all sorts of audiences often about my story, and my care experience. I was put into care at around the age of two, I can't remember the first time that I lived, of course, because I was so young, but until the age of 18, I was moved between 4 foster families and a residential care home. So that's five moves. And yeah, you know, the start of my life was very different from the life I now live, I certainly didn't have the optimism that I now have, I wasn't really optimistic about my future, I didn't have high hopes or expectation, I was just a kid in care really grappling with identity and trying to survive. At the right time, things converged and I was fortunate to get those crucial GCSEs, which led to me getting an opportunity to study at Cambridge at summer school for a week, I studied history there and that really gave me the aspiration to want to actually become an undergraduate at Cambridge University. So, I did the whole application and I got into Cambridge, which then was a massive shock. So, I studied history at Cambridge, I got a two one. Whilst that Cambridge, I was in a band, I was in a boy band. And so my mates it uni dared me to audition for The X Factor, which I did. So, days after graduation, I was in a boy band on The X Factor, we made it to the live finals. And I decided to quit the show. From there, BBC Three offered me the chance to present a documentary about being in care. And it was that that sparked my aspiration, really, to become a journalist. So I did the BBC Three documentary. And then I got the opportunity to train up with BBC News. And the rest is really history. So, you know, I have covered the Grenfell tower fire, reported in Russia during the World Cup, and I'm just loving what I'm doing as a journalist,

Richard Baynes

Just reeling back a little bit, while you were in care, were you aware of stigma around that fact? What was your consciousness of that?

Ashley John-Baptiste

I think it's just embedded in you. It's not a sort of conscious thing, but you just have this underlying mindset that your life is not going to do much. Being turfed around so many homes, not having a lot of investment, when it came to what I wanted to do in the future. I just didn't expect much for such a long time, I kind of just assumed that as a care kid with no family, moving around, dealing with this massive burden of rejection, because it is rejection, when you move between homes, when you feel like a reject. You don't feel like the prime candidate, you know, to do really well in life and to, to soar. And so yeah, there were the stats. And you know, care leavers going into prison and homelessness and whatever else. But I just by virtue of what I went through, had a low sense of esteem.

The final family I moved to I had a foster dad as well, as a foster mom, that was quite significant having a positive male role model. And getting those good grades. And being in a home and having a community that were positive. That was really important. When I got those grades for the first time, I realised that I had this thing called potential. That wasn't something I knew I had for a long time. Like I didn't have a whole load of people saying you've got brilliant potential, you're going to go really far... Like that just wasn't the discourse of my life, you know. And so, when I, when I got those grades, and I saw that the impact it had on those around me, you know, they were so kind of shocked, but also in a positive way. That kind of gave me a new drive to want to do well and kind of build a future. I think there were a few things that motivate me now. Primarily, I think, especially with what I do in journalism, and especially the talks I get to give - a sense of wanting to give a platform to the struggles, the challenges, the unique experiences of care experienced young people, you know, people who've left that system. To really give a platform to it, to give it a voice, to allow other people an insight into that world. That's a real factor for me of motivation. But also, I just want to do well I want to have, good experiences, I'm really fortunate to be, you know, reporting at the BBC. And, you know, I'm still quite young. And so things still feel really formative. So I'm motivated to be consistent and to grow and to, to flourish. And in what I'm doing.

Richard Baynes

Now, you mentioned earlier, your foster father as being important, your last foster father, tell me a bit more about that. And any other role models, people who were important to you.

Ashley John-Baptiste

You know, as tough as things were, I've always been fortunate to have good role models. So, when I was living in the care home, I was quite young. And I was primary school age, when I lived in a care home, none of the other boys went to school. But I had a key

worker who made it his job to force me to go to school. So even when I didn't want to go, and even if he wasn't working, he would call up the office. And he made sure that I was up and ready for school. At the time, I hated him for it, for obvious reasons I was the anomaly in the house, everybody else, you know, they would chill at home. But looking back, if it wasn't for that key worker, I don't know if I would have gone to secondary school, I don't know if I would have been functional enough to thrive in a normal, you know, secondary school. But because of his attitude of going above and beyond to really support me, that actually impacted my life quite profoundly.

You know, having a foster dad, when I moved into my final foster home was massive as well. Quite a big insecurity for me was not having a dad, that just really hurt actually. And so, when, when having a foster dad who was like a black, positive male role model, in a society where I feel like black men are often portrayed negatively, that was really powerful to see that I didn't have to be what certain other images suggested. He was a good husband, a good dad, he worked hard. He was consistent in who he was - his identity. And so that was actually just really empowering for me to know that I can build a life of consistency, good foundations, good principles. And so, I just think having him in my life, kind of propelled me to want to be a good person to be a good man in society.

[Richard Baynes](#)

Now, obviously, you work in TV now. But do you think there are any examples in popular culture where there are positive and accurate portrayals of people with care experience?

[Ashley John-Baptiste](#)

Often when you think about looked after children or orphans, you think about the comic superheroes, the fictional characters. I don't know if I can say that care experienced people are portrayed well in media, I don't know if it's covered a lot. I can't really think of any voices that springs to mind, you know, that may be just my ignorance. But genuinely, I think if you ask me, what do I think about when I think about the portrayal of care experienced people in the media, I think the stats of being likely to go to prison likely to be homeless, likely to be not an employment or training. And that's kind of unfortunate, isn't it? That when I think about media portrayal, I think about fictional characters or really depressing stats, which isn't accurate, of course, which isn't a reflection of the diversity and breadth and richness of care experienced young people, that community. It would be brilliant to see that better depicted. I mean, you know, you have the Tracy beakers and yeah, I do think that there is a massive disconnect between media portrayals of care experience young people, and the reality of that.

[Richard Baynes](#)

Now, we talked a bit about the stigma you felt in care, and the challenging experiences you had, but just give us an idea, how bad did it get?

Ashley John-Baptiste

Some of the worst experiences in terms of being typecast and stigmatised as someone who has been in care, was having a foster mom actually tell me that I was a mistake. That was quite brutal. And I remember I was quite young, and I'd have been early teens when that happened. And there isn't time to unpack the story, but essentially, I really didn't do much. But she got angry. And I said, oh, sorry for that incident, it was a mistake. And she said, Well, your whole life's a mistake. To hear that at like 12 or 13 is not good. But I don't think I'm unique in that sort of experience. I don't think I've been overtly stigmatised to be fair, I think it's just the sort of broader societal expectations, so or, you know, certain teachers just not really pushing you or having high expectations or, you know, even going to Cambridge. And this could have been a race thing - so many people assume that I went to the Polytechnic and not so Cambridge University. So, you'd meet people in the street, you'd go, you know, I remember particular night nightclub that I went to, and it was a Cambridge University nightclub. So many students assume that I went to the Polytechnic, which is a great university. But for them, it was just beyond belief that I went to the actual University of Cambridge. And that could have been race or just classist or whatever how I spoke. Yeah, and you do encounter, you just encounter people, you know, when they hear your story, when they hear that, you know, you go to you go to little events, and you give talks and people know you're a care leaver or whatever. They never expect the Cambridge line, or they never expect that BBC News reporter line. So I just think it's really challenging those small mindsets that I kind of do a lot. But that's all good, that's fine.

Richard Baynes

And do you think things have changed for young people in care now?

Ashley John-Baptiste

I'm not in care. Now. I don't know what it's like for a teenager at school. I don't know how well teachers are resourced to meet the unique needs of looked after children. My guess, especially for England, because I feel like things were a bit more progressive in Scotland, but I don't think it changed much in England. I still hear stories of looked after children just really not being approached properly, having teachers who don't have insight into their needs. Young people who again, are stigmatised and looked down upon.

Richard Baynes

So, what do you think will help young people to succeed?

Ashley John-Baptiste

A key thing that holds care experienced children back is a lack of exposure to the world of opportunity, whether that's higher education, or careers, or whatever. So, for example, with my story, I remember being 16 and having a meeting with a social worker, and they were sitting down to do a Pathway Plan with me. Essentially, they were sitting down to talk to me about my future after care. It was a tick box exercise, it was a social worker

with, you know, a list of questions, one being what you want to do in the future. Now, me as a care kid, not having much exposure outside of southeast London, I was limited in my view. And so I didn't really have any aspiration then. There was no effort from my local authority to expose me to new environments, opportunities, there was none of that. It was only when I went to Cambridge for that summer school, that my horizon was extended, and that I had an aspiration to do something that was grand and beyond what I knew as a South London care kid. So I feel like, yeah, a key thing that holds people back is, is a lack of exposure, you know, I feel like you can't, you cannot achieve what you can't see, you can't aspire to what you can't see. So it's important for looked after children from a young age to be able to see what their futures could look like beyond the parameters of care, or a council flat, or their local authority. So I think it's really important for social workers and people in authority generally, to be getting these young people to think about their futures, to dream big, and to see what they could do and where they could study and what careers they could get into. And if that involves taking them out and taking them to new places, new places of work and showing them you know, the Bank of England or taking them to the courts or taking them to good universities and places of learning and work then that needs to be done.

Richard Baynes

So, do you have one message you could give your colleagues people like myself who work in the media, about how to portray young people in care?

Ashley John-Baptiste

My message to other people in media covering the stories of care experienced children would be let their voice lead the narrative. So don't make it about the stats. Don't make it about, you know, the top lines. Even you know, this week in England, the education secretary, Damian Hinds, he launched something called the Care Leavers Covenant. And his voice is important. The strategy is important. But what I want to know is how do young people feel about it and do they trust in what this is going to do for them? So I just think keep them at the centre of the narrative. That's really important.

Richard Baynes

Now, you were nominated for the Royal Television Society Young Talent of the Year Award early this year. What advice would you give to young people, care experienced young people, who want to work in the media?

Ashley John-Baptiste

Starting at the BBC only four years ago, back then, I was quite reluctant to be open about my experiences as a care experience person. And anytime I was asked to do a piece to camera or whatever about a care story, I would just cringe because I thought this is making me vulnerable. This isn't all I am. But I've now learned that actually my experience of being in care is such a tool, an asset, when it comes to my journalism, I've been able to originate some really unique, powerful, high impact stories and pieces of

journalism, just by virtue of tapping into my background and thinking about some of the issues that haven't been covered. And so I would say to any person who's been in care, own your story, and see, literally see the currency in it for being in journalism or the media that you have stories you have experiences that people do not know about, and there will be a platform for you to tell your story. So take pride in it and use it, maximise it for good, maximise it to tell those stories that currently aren't being told. There's an authenticity about that that is attractive, I think, to editors and to viewers.

Richard Baynes

And finally, a message you could give to young people in care who are experiencing stigma?

Ashley John-Baptiste

For care experienced people who battled with the stigmas attached to being in care, who may even believe them, I would say, set your vision higher. Know that your potential is far greater than what a stat or what a small mindset may say about you. And live by the convictions of your aspirations and not by the limitations of what statistics may say.

Richard Baynes

Ashley, thank you very much.

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