

Mile in My Shoes: Shale's story

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So, I'm giving my Vans. So, I've got a thing around flat tennis shoes. They've got barbed wires on them. It's just like – it's out there. I like things that are a bit more out there. I like what I like.

As a child, we couldn't afford shoes so... Four brothers, four sisters, and it was like, there was eight kids. So, you know what, a lot of hand-me-downs, a lot of fighting, screaming, sharing rooms. You know, you couldn't get the latest trainers that all the kids kind of had. I can remember going to school, they had holes in them, but I never told my parents they had holes in them. So, I used to like to hide my feet when I'd go anywhere.

So, when it, fast forward, and when I was able to get into the work and employment, the first things I would buy is shoes and I just – my wife says I've gone crazy, because I've got, I don't know how many pairs. Yeah, so whenever I see a pair of shoes, I just can't hold myself back.

I often think it was the one thing that I always wanted as a child, but I couldn't get. It just takes me back to my childhood in a way. It reconnects me. It's always the distance travelled for me like, where you were, you know, I say, look how far you've come.

My name is Shale Ahmed. I am the Project Director of Aspire and Succeed in Lozells, Birmingham. So, Aspire and Succeed was set up in 2008 on the backdrop of the 2005 riots where a group of friends who were teachers, youth workers, debt advisors, kind of came together and said – services were not talking to each other. You know, so often the school doesn't know what kind of household these children came from. Parents didn't know what was happening in school, what was happening after school. So, we all came together and said, there needs to be a bit more collaboration.

I came into community work by accident to be fair. You know, I was a normal teenager in a neighbourhood like this, where I didn't really finish school. I wanted to be the class clown, and I didn't really give any thought to what I want to do after that. And for about four years I just went from job to job doing nothing, just working in a warehouse. I can remember working in the warehouse and looking at my payslip and thinking, 'Oh my god, is this what I'm worth?'

I was very fortunate that I went to a youth centre. They used to take us on trips. We used to have workshops. Used to give a lot of life experience and lessons. By chance, a job came up at the local youth centre for youth worker support, a full-time job. And then I can remember going in to get the application form – I was laughed out the office. I was actually laughed out of the office by one of the staff members. They said that 'You're not going to get this job, you don't have the qualifications.' And they laughed. There was a bet. They was like, 'I bet

you five pounds you're not going to get this job.' And I said, 'You know what? I'll bet you that I'm gonna get this job.'

And then by luck what happened was, I filled out the application form. 52 people had requested the application form, and I was the only one that sent it back. So, by default, because it cost them a lot of money to readvertise, they said, 'OK, whatever the pay was we're going to lower it a little bit, and we're going to give you the job.'

'Tajamal how are you? I be with you in five, 10.'

The biggest need in the neighbourhood is worker rights. So, people got issues with the quality of housing that they have, the affordability of the housing that they have, debt advice, income maximisation.

'How are you?'

'Yeah, not bad, not bad. Moving back on Monday.'

So, at the moment there's some really, really hardcore stories. One elderly gentleman who lives on the eighth floor of a tower block. And his lift breaks down, and he's on a mobility scooter. They don't come out to fix it, so he's got to struggle and take them stairs. And we've got to constantly fight with the council to say, 'You need to change his banding, to put him on a band A so he can bid for a house.'

They have turned him into a band A before because in Birmingham what happens is, you have different bands. If you're a band A, you get first choice. Band B and C can take anything between like, a year to about 10 years to be able to go on to the property ladder and find a suitable house.

So, this gentleman they gave him a band A, but unfortunately what happens in Birmingham is that you have to accept a property in order to view it. So now, you don't know if that's suitable for you. So, he had to accept it, he viewed it, and he can't get his mobility scooter through the alleyway, or through the front garden. And there's no bathroom downstairs and he requested he needed a bathroom downstairs. Now he has to turn that down. And because he turned it down, they put him on a different band. So, we're constantly... this is not right. This is unjust, unfair. So, we've gone back and forth, and they've put him on a band A. We've gone to see a property now so hopefully that will get sorted.

We had a young woman – well, a couple. And they were, kind of, evicted from their home because the landlord wanted to increase their rent. I can remember, they came here with their black bags and said, 'Look we've been kicked out. He's changed the locks. We don't know what to do.' And it was 5pm and we were just about to go home. So, the guy had to kind of stay behind and do whatever. And fortunately, at that time we had a very good relationship with the homeless team. We made a call; they managed to find them secure home somewhere in Lozells.

And what happened was, she was ever grateful and said, 'Look I just want to come back now. I want to be able to kind of, do something.' She came to the centre, she started volunteering, she picked up the language, she speaks really, really well now. And she was one of our main staff members during the summer holidays, working with the children, organising activities, organising events.

So now she's in a position to look for full-time employment, so that's going to be two people in that household who are working. And what she really wants to do, because of that incident, you know, it scarred her a little bit? She said, 'What I really want to do now is both of us, husband and wife, to work. I want to buy our own house so we're never, ever in that position again.'

She was broken when it happened, I can remember she came here with all her belongings, her black bag. She's taken a positive out of that incident that happened, and it's been an amazing journey to see a really fragile person at that time, who had lost everything, to be a position in, what, 24 months to fully change her life around. If it shows that if one thing goes wrong, then everything goes wrong. But it also means that if one thing can go right, then everything usually gets right.

And we've seen historically, over the last 16 years, that if you can sort out housing for people, if they've got a stable home, they've got a roof over their head, everything else becomes easy. People can feel a little bit better about themselves if people have a bit more room in their house, a better-quality home where they can invite friends or family over, a space where their children can study. These are kind of the building blocks of better health.

For us, I believe, you know we want the government to recognise what the building blocks of health are. You know, the things around decent and affordable quality homes that they can really do something about it. Landlords shouldn't be in the position where they can just put your rent up by five, six hundred – whatever they feel like. So there needs to be some regulation on that. We also think that we've lost a lot of homes to multiple occupation homes and, you know, serviced accommodation. So, the nucleus of the family home is gone because people have rented out individual rooms because they see it as a lot more money. So, we need to find a way to build more homes locally in this neighbourhood.

So, my community work is only like 15 seconds, just behind my house. So, I'm fortunate that I still live in the house that I was born in. And I'm living there with my parents, my mum and dad are still there. My youngest sister, and my wife and three children. We've got two girls and a boy. And... yeah, we've just, we've got two houses next door to each other so there's a lot of space. And we need the space because external family come over kind of every single day, so in the evening there's still 20 people in that house because my sisters come with their kids, my brothers come with their children, their wives, their partners, everyone comes.

Home is where everything begins. It's a ripple effect, isn't it? I think with my journey I'm just grateful. I just think where we came from to where we are. You know, it's like son of a



restaurant worker, the grandson of a ship merchant, you know – to be able to go, not finish school and then go back to education years later. Whose children now go to grammar school. You know just look at that journey from where we came to where we are. In a million years I couldn't have dreamt where I am today.

What keeps us grounded a little bit is because – the harrowing stories we have to hear from some of the families, it kind of takes you aback sometimes and you think, you know what, it's still really, really tough out there. It's still really, really hard for families. I'm really fortunate. And that's one of the reasons I continuously think, you know, we have to give back.