

TALES TO INSPIRE

**INSPIRING STORIES FROM OUR
NORTH WEST COMINO SCHOOLS**



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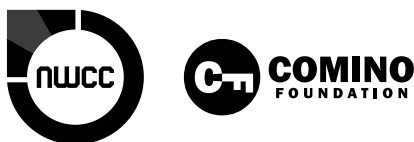
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At the heart of the education work of the Comino Foundation is the Socratic belief that 'education should be the lighting of a flame; not the filling of a vessel'. The North West Comino Consortium is a Community of Practice funded and managed by the Foundation to work with partner schools across Greater Manchester who share our ethos and aspiration for abroad, balanced and pupil centred education.

The consortium partners work together to pilot projects, programmes and pedagogies that help young people experience learning in settings that link the curriculum to real life practice. We believe that real-life learning, developed through partnerships with people and places in worlds beyond school can motivate young people to discover their passion for education and for a positive future.

One of the defining pillars of the work across NWCC schools within the past decade has been the development of pioneering work in the area of youth leadership programmes. Post Covid, and in the light of civic and climate crises, the UK is waking to the fact that the drive for positive change is coming from young people in the UK and across the world, and we are proud that many of our longest standing schools, are recognized locally, regionally and nationally for their transformational pupil leadership programmes. This year's menu of opportunities continues to develop models of practice which put young leaders at their heart, with transparent signposting to where and how they meet Gatsby benchmarks and nurture cultural, social and career capital.

Teachers and senior leaders in all NWCC schools continue to feel the impact of the Covid pandemic through the social, emotional and behavioural difficulties experienced by an alarming number of their pupils. A recent study by the BBC found that there has been a 77% rise in the number of children needing specialist treatment for serious mental health problems in the UK and in some schools, particularly those within neighbourhoods of high social disadvantage, there are some children for whom the pandemic only exacerbated the emotional scars of lives lived in trauma.

This project gave schools a safe space for some their most vulnerable pupils to 'share their story'. Pupils were able to talk about racism, gender, disability and what it has meant to be homeless or stateless, with skilled adults who helped them find power and resilience for the future by understanding how their difficult life experiences may have impacted on their emotional lives. The organization leading the project, 'Tales to Inspire' is a collective organization of inspirational social leaders who have learnt through experience, that storytelling engages emotion and provides young people with a platform to connect with others, where they can authentically reflect with meaning and purpose on their lives, and begin to develop a positive framework and identity for the future; and where they can experience the therapeutic benefits of what it means to be seen, heard and in control of their own narrative.

Pupils worked with the Tales to Inspire team in their own school, in small nurture groups of 5. to engage in an intensive two day experience of talks, workshops and discussions, which led to them documenting their own story with a Tales to Inspire ambassador. Each story has since been written up by a professional 'Tales to Inspire' writer to form a book which will be published by the Comino Foundation. All pupils have been given copies of their own stories to share as they wish, and all pupils were asked if they wanted to. Most were strongly positive about having their stories read by all, but a few preferred to keep their stories private so these will not appear in the book.



**Abraham Moss
Community School**





Living Life with a Positive Attitude Even When Things Get Tough

Benjamin

“Happiness is with my family.”

My name is Benji and I'm 14 years old. I was born in Syria and moved to the UK just a few months ago but I feel like I'm enjoying it here so far. I have a mum, dad and five siblings. I have an older brother who's 16 and a sibling who's 14 and then the rest of my siblings are younger than me. I get along with all my family well.

Growing up, I lived in Aleppo, Syria and we spoke Arabic at home. My earliest memory is eating bananas which my dad gave me, and I ate four bananas before I was full.

When I was young, I wanted to be a gangster because I liked videos of gangsters and they fight with people and have big rings which I thought was very cool. But I don't want to do that anymore.

In Syria, my dad was a taxi driver, and my mum was a stay-at-home mum.

I lived in Syria for four years, but it was very long ago, so I don't remember much. We had to leave Syria because of the civil war. I don't remember

who was fighting but when I was younger, I used to hear a lot of planes and helicopters dropping bombs. I don't have any family left in Syria because my whole family is in Turkey now.

First, we went to Turkey as well. We lived there for two years before we moved to Sweden for eight years.

I went to school in Turkey and had many friends. We played games together like dominoes and dice.

But we left Turkey because my dad said Sweden would be better for us. Turkish people don't like Syrians, so we faced some challenges because of that.

My dad went to Sweden first and then he took all our family. For the first three or four years Sweden was okay but after that people started being racist towards me. I felt like every Swedish person didn't like me for some reason and people asked us why we'd come there and told us to go back to Syria.

It made me feel bad, but I said, 'no problem' and then I came to England, and it made things better for me.

In Sweden, my dad did cleaning jobs, which were very hard work. We rented a small house with only three rooms, but we had a little garden. Overall, the house was very good.

One of my favourite things about Sweden was that it's very beautiful and I enjoyed swimming there. It has fantastic pools, but Sweden was very cold in the winter, so it was nicer when it was warm in the summer.

The scariest thing about Sweden was the Swedish Mafia. They are very dangerous and would kill you if you didn't work with them.

We came here three or four months ago, around the end of 2022. One of the reasons we came to England is that my dad can speak English and

wanted me to learn too. We chose Manchester because we heard there are lots of good schools here and the inclusion is better than in other cities.

So far, school has been very good, and the people have been very good too. I don't have many friends here yet, but I hope to make some good friends soon.

I don't have any other family in Manchester because everyone else is still in Turkey. But my dad doesn't really speak about his family anyway, he had two brothers who passed away during the war in Syria.

At Ramadan, the whole family normally come together to eat. I don't like the food here very much apart from pizza and tacos, but my mum cooks delicious food and I bring it to school in my lunchbox.

On the weekend, I spend time with my family, tell them about what I learnt in school, and do my homework. I play with my brother sometimes, especially FIFA on the PS4.

Sometimes we go out to eat in a Turkish restaurant and everything there is really good.

In the future, I'd like to stay in the UK, and I don't really want to go back to Syria because there's so much destruction and poverty. We love Manchester but, in the future, I'd love to move to London. I want to go to college and university and then I'll see what happens.

My dream is to play in the premier league and be able to start my own business and buy a house and car. I play left midfield now and my favourite team is Real Madrid, but I also love Manchester City. I've not been to the stadium yet and I want to, but I normally just watch the games on TV.

My life has been good so far and I've enjoyed spending time with my family growing up.



Embracing Change Across Countries and Cultures

Faiza

"Family is difficult but also happy."

My name is Faiza Mohammed Nareen and I'm 14 years old. I've moved around a lot growing up but I've enjoyed it.

I'm from Pakistan but I don't remember much about the country because I only lived there for three years until I moved to Spain and then the UK.

I have one younger brother and sister and three older sisters so I'm the middle child. I'm not very close with my brothers and sisters because we don't get along too well. But I have a lot of extended family, especially on my dad's side, and we're very close.

We don't go out much as a family and we mainly stay in the house. We used to go to my uncle's on Eid and he'd come to ours the day after and the same would happen at Ramadan.

My grandma passed away last year and so did my grandpa from my mum's side but I don't really like to talk about it. I only have my nanna now and I speak to her on the phone.

I'm not particularly close to either my mother or father. My mum was an English teacher before she got married and my dad works in a food shop.

I don't remember being a child in Pakistan but my mum sometimes tells me funny stories. My mum said when I was a baby I would fall asleep anywhere and that I was born on Eid day.

I have some funny memories from the rest of my childhood like when I wanted to go to Pakistan but my dad left without me and I remember a time my little sister had lots of knots in her hair and my mum brushed it and lots of her hair came out.

I have a happy memory of when my sister was born and my uncle came to the house for dinner.

My family moved from Pakistan to Spain for a good life because my sister has a mental illness which has been challenging. It's hard because sometimes my sister fights with my mum.

I can speak a few languages because we moved around so much growing up. I can speak Urdu, Punjabi, Spanish and a little bit of English.

We lived in North Spain for 10 years and it was very good. I was so happy when I lived there. I'd go to school and then go to Mosque and chill at home- it was a good life.

The weather in Spain was great which I liked. We didn't go to the beach much but we went on school trips to museums.

I lived in Spain for 10 years before coming to the UK when I was 13 years old. It wasn't too hard to adjust to a new place when I moved to England but I didn't speak any English. I have a friend group here in school who can speak Urdu so we communicate well, which made it easier for me.

Moving to different countries during my childhood was a good experience. In the future, I want to visit Turkey but I think I'll probably stay living in England.

But the happiest moment of my life was finding out I was going back to visit Pakistan. Some of my family aren't very close to us but we also visited them and I was happy when I met my auntie.

When I was younger I didn't play with my siblings, I'd rather relax and rest in my spare time, but nowadays they want to play with me but I just don't want to. Although I do like cooking with my sister. I don't have a favourite dish to make and I don't cook a wide variety of things, but I eat everything!

My dream was to become a police officer but I've realised I don't want to do that now so I'm confused about what I want to do. I originally wanted to become a police officer because I watched a drama which inspired me but there's no specific reason why I don't want to do it anymore.

The biggest challenge I've had to face so far is having to have an operation when I was very young in Spain. I had an extra bone in my stomach and they had to operate to remove it and I was in the hospital for about a week, I think. I remember it a bit even though I was young but I don't remember too much, thankfully.

My parents haven't really spoken to me about the operation because it's been a really long time now. Sometimes when we ask them things they don't tell us they just keep it all to themselves.

I'd say that family are difficult but can also be a source of happiness. Life has been very hard because of my sister's mental illness and things have been very challenging. But I also know that family can bring a lot of happiness.



Journeying to Freedom

Fithawit

“If I could introduce anything to my country it would be freedom. I wouldn’t let the soldiers force others to become soldiers or put anyone in prison.”

My name is Fithawit Gebrezagahir and I’m 17 years old. I was born in Eritrea, in East Africa and grew up there. I’ve had some difficult times being split up from my family but I’m happy in my situation now. I have four brothers and one sister. My sister always takes care of me and takes me to football, and my big brother is friendly, thoughtful and kind. So, my sister is my favourite.

My mum has a big family, but her father passed away when she was a little girl, so she’s had a difficult life because of that. She talks about her dad all the time; he was a nice person and he helped her a lot.

My earliest memory from when I was younger is asking my mum where my father was, and she assured me he is a nice person but had to leave. I didn’t know my dad then because he left us in 2015 when I was about five. Life is difficult without a father and everything fell to my mum. Thanks to her we are all strong.

My father had a difficult life. His dad passed away when he was around 18 and his mother was blind, so my father had to help take care of the family. He was a soldier and it was awful so he left Eritrea. In our country boys and men are forced to be soldiers. If you don’t do what they say they put you in prison.

When he left us, he went to Ethiopia first, where he camped for a few months before travelling on to Sudan half by foot and half by car. He lived in Sudan for three months before arriving in Libya through the Sahara which was so hard. Then he went on a small boat across the ocean from Libya to Italy, it was so dangerous. He stayed in Italy for two weeks then took a train to France where he finally caught a train to the UK. He’s lived in the UK for eight years now and works in a clothes shop.

We weren’t in touch while he was travelling. Our country wasn’t free, and they wanted to take all the men to be soldiers and he wanted freedom. We didn’t speak to my dad for many years while he was travelling.

Meanwhile, I was living in Eritrea with my mother and siblings. My country was nice because we spoke the same languages as our friends, and I could go and see my grandparents.

I don’t remember much of my childhood, but we had a big house and we had friendly neighbours.

My sister, two brothers, mother and I journeyed from Eritrea to Ethiopia, but we were stopped at the border by Eritrean soldiers and taken to prison because we’d run away from our country. They separated us from my brother and sister. My sister had to stay in prison for eight months and my brother for five. My mum was in prison for four months.

My two brothers and I were taken out of prison by my grandma after five days. We were allowed to go back to our village with her and she took good care of us until my mum was released.

I was scared and my grandmother assured us that my mum would come. The soldiers used to hit other people and it was scary. They didn't hit me, or my mother, brother, and sister.

After 12 months, we finally reunited as a family, and we had a lot of fun. Then a few months later we left for Ethiopia again. We lived in refugee a camp in Ethiopia for seven months but after that, we moved into Ethiopia Addis Ababa which is the capital city.

After five months there, my dad started the process for us to move to the UK. I struggled a bit in Ethiopia because the language was hard but we had an aunt who lived there and spoke the language, so she helped us.

There were a lot of ups and downs but finally, we came to England on a plane. When we came to the UK it was difficult without a father at first.

We didn't see our dad for eight years and it made me feel so happy to see him again. We cried a lot when we saw him. He said, 'Welcome to England' and that he'd missed us so much, me and my little brother cried. He gave us each a flower.

Ever since we've all been living together and it's great to have a family unit again.

My dad is great, he's kind and happy. He will always drop me off and pick me up when I want to do anything. He gave me a phone for my birthday which I love.

The language here is difficult which I don't like. When I started this school, I wasn't good at the language but the teachers were nice. The other kids were hard on me because I couldn't speak English.

Christianity here is a bit different. I am Christian so we celebrate Jesus but not the same as the UK. Jesus was born on January 7th in our religion, not December 25th.

But living in the UK is better because my country was so hard and scary. It was hard to get food, water and electricity and there's no freedom of speech. The government exploit you and the soldiers come and take people, so it made us scared they'd come and take us.

We have freedom here and you must be 18 to work but in my country, you had to work from five years old. If you didn't work, you had to go to school, but it was so far away from my village. It was scary there at night. There was either morning school or afternoon and afternoon finished at 5 o'clock so we'd have to run home through the trees in the dark because there are scary animals.

I still call my grandmother and she asks me if she can send me anything, so I ask for food. The food there was so nice. I hope I can go back to my country one day to visit my family.

I have a lot of hobbies, especially sports. I like running and I won second place in the 800-metre running race. We played relay and we came first in that. I also play football and I'm good at cricket too.

In the future, I want to be a hair stylist and a designer. I draw designs style my mum's hair. My mum taught me how to do straight hair and taught me lots of different hairstyles.

I've learnt the most important life lessons from my parents. My biggest challenge has been not having my dad around, I felt like I was missing out on having him backing me up.

Now I'm always happy because I'm with my family, my family is the main centre of my life. I'm so happy now to live with both my mother and father.



Seeing Change as an Adventure

Najib

“Life is about adventure.”

My name is Najib Najib and I'm 14 years old. We had to move away from Syria because of the war but I hope to go back one day to be with my family.

I have a mother, father, one sister and two brothers. All my siblings are younger than me.

I was born in Athens, Greece but both my parents are Syrian. We lived in Greece for four years before we moved to Syria to make a new life. But after just six months things changed and we had to leave Syria to go to Sweden.

I don't remember anything about Greece, but I know it's a really good place because everyone who's travelled there has told me positive things.

When we moved to Syria we lived in Aleppo and Homs. Our home and family are there. Everyone in Syria speaks Arabic with a Syrian accent.

We had no choice but to go to Sweden because of the war, we had to go anywhere that was safe.

The war is very bad. It's useless and you can lose many people that you love. The war is between the dictator government and the rebels who are fighting to free the country and I want to make our country free so I'm on the side of the rebels. The government has help from Russia and Iran and the rebels only have a little bit of help from Turkey.

Three of my uncles, my grandfather and my grandmother passed away from the war and a few weeks later my other grandfather also died from cancer because the country is very poor. A lot of people don't have food, they just drink tea and eat bread. People are careful not to waste anything. But despite all the trouble, people in Syria are very hardworking.

My whole family moved to Sweden when I was around five. We lived in one place for a few days then moved into a small apartment. Next, we moved to the south of Sweden, to a place close to Malmö, and we lived there for eight years.

My uncle moved to the Swedish city of Helsingborg, and we'd go and visit them weekly. Whilst we were with them, we were still a family. I was used to a big family because my dad has 17 siblings, and my mum has 10. Now, they're all over the world and I don't even know them all. One of them is in Turkey and some are in Scotland, Germany, Sweden, Syria and Saudi Arabia.

It was a small town of around 3,000 people and even though the weather was bad the country is so clean.

It wasn't a very diverse community like it is here. Here you see people from all over the world. But the Christian people I met in Sweden are some of the best people I've met in my life, they were so respectful. Most Swedish people aren't very religious, and they like to keep themselves to themselves.

I could speak Swedish, but I found the language hard, so I got an F in Swedish in school. I can speak three languages now: Swedish, Arabic and I'm learning English.

I managed to make a lot of friends in Sweden. They were mainly other refugees from Palestine or Africa, and some were Christian people.

I liked our house because it was very nice and well-priced. We had a big house and garden, and my family could play badminton every day. In school, I played ping pong with my friends and sometimes we didn't have a racket, so we played with just our hands.

But I still felt lonely in Sweden. In some lessons, we had to be in groups and all the refugees would be in one group and all the Swedish children in another which made me feel like there was no community. I felt like my teachers treated me normally and in Year 6 I had the very best teachers. One was from Manchester, and one was from Sweden.

My parents felt isolated too and that's why they made the decision to come here. They didn't understand why Sweden was so accepting in some ways, like with LGBTQ people, but they didn't show more support to people who follow Islam and sometimes they were racist. For example, someone in Sweden burnt the Quran and there was no punishment.

We also didn't like the Swedish social care system. They'd take refugee children away from their families for no reason and give them to other families to adopt.

We had friends who lived here in Manchester, and they told us how diverse it is and how easy it is to find a job. Our family travelled here a few times to visit before we moved here, and we loved it because there is more peace and freedom.

On our way to the UK, we went to Denmark and flew from the airport there. That was in 2022 and we've been in the UK for nine months now.

We signed up for a school as soon as we arrived. We waited and now I've been accepted, and my siblings have too. School for me has been very good so far especially because there are lots of different people.

We have a nice sized house and a small garden, but we have a park close by we can play in as well.

I love how easy it is to find a job here because when my dad broke his back, he couldn't have a job for two years. My dad found his job very fast, and he works as a barber now. My mum takes care of the children, and my youngest sibling needs a lot of care because they're only 3 years old.

As a child, my dream was to become a father when I grow up and I also wanted to be an engineer and live close to my family in Syria. I don't remember what Syria was like, but we still eat lots of Syrian food over here like lots of rice.

I still want to be an engineer when I'm older, but you can have more than one dream and my second dream would be to become a ping pong player.

I want to stay in Manchester until the war stops in Syria, but I absolutely want to go back because I never feel at home, and I always feel different.

But overall, I feel good about my journey so far.



Home is Where Your Family Are

Salman

“I’d tell others to take all the negative energy to their side rather than seeing it as a force against them.”

My name is Salman and I’m 15 years old. My dad has always worked hard to keep us comfortable, and I hope that in the future I’ll be able to do the same for him as an engineer.

I’m from France but I moved to the UK about two years ago. Both my parents were born in Pakistan. My uncle moved to France first and then the rest of the family followed.

We lived all around the outskirts of Paris, and we also lived in Pakistan for two years so we moved around quite a bit.

My family live all over the world- I still have cousins in France, some in Pakistan and some here as well. My very spread-out family means I can speak three languages: English, French and Urdu.

I have one grandfather in Pakistan but unfortunately, the rest of my grandparents passed away. One of my grandmothers passed away when I was two and the other I don’t even remember but wish I’d had the chance to know them.

My most precious memories are those of my grandmother. I remember when she called us, and my mum was crying a lot and I knew afterwards that she had passed away that day. So, the next day, my dad booked a flight for me, my mum and brother and we flew to stay there for a few months. I was happy for my grandmother because she had a good life and I have accepted that she’s where she needs to be now.

I don’t remember much of my childhood. It was just nice. My earliest memory is from when I was around eight, enjoying my break time with friends in my French primary school.

My religion is an important part of my life. I’m Muslim so I celebrate Eid. In England, we don’t have much family, but in Pakistan and France, we do. It’s nice when we get to celebrate religious holidays with the whole family, we’ve done that a couple of times and it was fantastic.

I have a little brother in Year 8 and a mum and dad. My dad works two jobs at restaurants and my mum is a stay-at-home mum.

My parents had their own Pakistani restaurant in France. All my dad’s side of the family had their own businesses.

Now, we don’t get much time together as a family because my dad’s usually at work but whenever he gets a break or a day off, he spends all that time with us. When I get home, I usually just do my homework or go to the gym which I started about two or three weeks ago.

I’m very protective of my brother even though he’s a bit annoying. He likes to play football and gets in trouble a lot for throwing the ball around. Sometimes, he gets angry and gets into fights and then I have to go and calm him down.

In Year 7, he got his tie ripped because three boys in Year 8 were bullying him and so I went to speak to them and stand up for him. Even though he makes me angry when he’s annoying, I don’t have a choice but to stick up for him.

I think I've learnt to be protective of my brother because my dad's always been so protective of us and as a result, I've never really felt the strain of all the challenges my family have faced. My dad works very hard for us so I hope one day I can work hard for him so he can rest and enjoy his life.

My dad's taught me to work hard but he's also taught us that you can't trust people because they always hide their true feelings. That was made clear to us when my uncle took everything away from us.

When we first moved to England, we came just for a holiday but then we made the decision to move here permanently. We lived with my uncle whilst my dad sorted out the businesses back in France but then he came to join us, and we moved into a house and got a car.

At first, we had nothing. All our clothes and games were back in France. We had to use the money from the restaurant to get our house and it was quite difficult for my parents, but my dad didn't let me feel any of that strain.

Every time I moved, I found it hard to adapt. When we moved to Pakistan for those two years, I forgot French almost completely, so I had to learn it all over again. The biggest challenge I faced when moving to the UK was finding a school, it took a few months to get one sorted. But I find school here very similar to school in France, so I don't really have a preference for either.

I've had the same dream to become an engineer for my whole life. I like making things and copying other designs, so my hobbies are very similar to engineering. Right now, I need a phone holder so I'm going to make one with wood because I have all the right tools at home.

I hope that if I become a mechanical engineer, I can find balance in my life, so I don't have to sacrifice downtime like my dad does. I also hope that I'll be able to help people as an engineer and build new technology to improve people's lives.

I'd say my childhood years were fun when I was little. I was surrounded by everyone helping me and now I'm in high school I have to be a lot more independent in my learning and work hard.

Overall, I just want to be able to help people in the future and I want to show my uncle that even though he took everything from us we're still standing.



Understanding That Happiness is Temporary so it's Important to Talk About Your Problems

Valentina

"I think everyone needs someone to listen to their problems."

My name is Valentina Rexhaj and I'm 15 years old. Life has been difficult so far, especially because we had to leave my mum behind in Italy, but music has helped me through difficult times, and I've learnt the value of being a good listener.

I'm from Albania but was born in Italy and speak Italian. I've never properly lived in Albania but my parents are Albanian and we've gone there on holiday.

I never moved around when I lived in Italy, and I didn't explore much of my country. I stayed put in my city, Sicily. Sicily was pretty, the school was alright and my friends were good as well.

When I was around seven years old, I started singing. My brother played the guitar, and I went with him to where he played. My dad asked me if I'd like to try singing. I found it hard to say no back then and I didn't want to make my dad feel bad, so I did try. I'm a shy person and I don't like talking in front of people so from that very first lesson I realised it wouldn't go anywhere.

I'd rather sing at home alone when no one is there. I didn't go to the singing lessons anymore when it was lockdown. We went to the supermarket in the car and my dad asked me whether I wanted to sing anymore and I said I didn't want to, and he got so mad.

During lockdown, we were back and forth between school and home. It depended on the number of cases. I was okay though.

I have two siblings, a brother, and a sister. I'm the youngest, my sister is married, and my brother still lives with us but I don't see him much because he's always out with his girlfriend.

My dad is strict so I only really go out about once a month. He worries that it's unsafe for me because I'm a woman which I find frustrating. When my brother was the same age, he was allowed to go to sleepovers with friends and my other friends with Albanian parents are really chill so I don't think it's a cultural thing.

My mum doesn't work but she's still in Italy because she doesn't have an Italian passport yet. My dad works every day so I'm alone a lot of the time. He washes cars for a living, so he gets in at around 7 pm and is completely exhausted so never wants to go out. We probably only go out together about once or twice a month.

I'm closest to my sister and my mum. When I lived with my sister, we weren't that close, but she moved to the UK before me and that was difficult. She was my rock, so it was hard to separate. Now, we're closer than ever but she lives in another city, so we don't see each other in person every day but we still call.

My mum and I are so close because when I was at home in Italy, she was always in the house so we'd sit in my room and chat.

When I first left my mum, I didn't cry, and I didn't like Italy much, so I didn't mind moving away. I think it's because I saw coming to the UK as a holiday at first. But when we went back to visit Italy last summer and

had to leave again, I cried so much, it felt very real then, and I hated not knowing when I'd see her again.

But one positive thing about moving to the UK is I have more friends at school than I did in Italy. Even though I struggled with the language barrier at first and school is a lot different from Italy, my teacher introduced me to someone who speaks Italian so it was nice to have someone I could communicate with easily.

Now I know more Italian people in the UK and some Albanian people too, so I feel less alone and more balanced.

I'm always with my friends in school and we go out to eat and we go shopping and things like that. We have quite a light-hearted friendship, so we don't really talk about deep stuff because sometimes when I start talking, I start crying.

I don't think I've found someone yet who reacts the right way when I tell them deep stuff. The most important thing I've learnt from my dad is not to trust people. He came home from work once and told me all about his life. Instead, I like deep and meaningful books and TV shows. I like finding out about other people and enjoy when others trust me by telling me things about their lives.

When I was younger, I wanted to be a teacher, maybe a maths teacher. I was one of the smartest in my class. My dad told me I should be a doctor or something like that, but I know I couldn't handle that job. I'd say my main dream is just to have a lot of money. If I had to choose a career, I'd either like to work in business or become a therapist because I think I'm a good listener.

Other than leaving my mum in Italy, I'd say the biggest challenge I've faced is seeing the relationship between my parents because they're still together but they're not close. My dad talks about my mum or my mum talks about my dad. I hate listening to them talk badly about each other,

but I do listen because they need someone who is just going to listen to them. When they ask my opinion, I don't say anything because I'm not going to get involved.

Each of them has a point, but I can't talk about either because I'd feel too bad. I think my dad misses my mum's presence so sometimes I feel like I must spend time with him to replace her.

Sleep is how I cope with everything whether I'm happy or sad. When I'm feeling down, I just sleep or listen to music. When I'm happy I listen to happy music, then sleep.

I'd sum up my childhood years so far as just okay. I've learnt you cannot be permanently happy, being happy will only last for a short time. Everyone in the corridor at school may seem so happy but they all have problems and that's why it's so important that everyone has someone who listens to them.



Staying Kind When Facing Life's Challenges

Zaineb

“Life is about what you give. Life's a path and you make your own.”

My name is Zaineb Malik and I'm 14 years old. When I moved to the UK, I struggled with feeling alone but I found happiness through my strong relationship with my family and strong determination.

I'm half German and half Pakistani but if anyone asked where I'm from I'd say Pakistan. I was born there and went to school there my whole life until I moved to the UK.

My grandmother was German and wasn't Muslim, but she converted when she met my grandad and moved to Pakistan. She didn't find the conversion too challenging because my grandma's sister also converted around the same time.

So, on my mum's side, my family aren't originally Muslim, but I don't really think religion matters too much. You can't tell anyone their religion is wrong or right and everyone should do what they feel is right.

Now when we visit family in Germany, I feel like they don't care about our difference in religion they care about our personalities. My aunt Tanya isn't Muslim, but we get along really well, and she even helped me learn German numbers. My great grandma is really lovely as well.

Thanks to my diverse family I can now speak English, Urdu, German and a little bit of Pothwari, Punjabi and French.

My great grandparents from my mum's side are really nice and loving but I wish I'd met my great grandparents from my dad's side.

Before we came to England, I went on holiday to Germany in 2018. I stayed there for three months and renewed my German passport but my grandfather wasn't well, so I had to go back to Pakistan. But my dad got a visa for England shortly after, so we came here.

I was 11 and a half when I moved here and luckily, I spoke English. When we first arrived, we stayed in Birmingham, but that house was too small, and everyone kept falling down the tiny stairs. So, after just a couple of days, we moved in with my uncle in Manchester. We stayed in his house for a couple of weeks then found a house near him where we live now.

I have two brothers and two sisters and they're all younger and very different. For example, my sister loves social media, she makes a lot of TikToks whereas my brother wants to be an army officer and he's always talking about that.

I'd say I'm protective of my brothers and sisters- no one else apart from me can annoy them. I love winding my brother up about sports, I always tell him that Ronaldo sucks, in reality I think he's a good player.

In some ways, I'm closer to my mum because I tell her everything about my life and she knows everything about me. My dad and I don't see eye to eye sometimes, so our conversations normally end up as debates and my mum has to come and referee.

I think it's the debates with my dad which make us so close. I love debating with him but my mum won't debate that much because she normally just ends up agreeing to avoid an argument which could wake up my younger siblings.

My mum is a full-time stay-at-home mum, and my dad taxi drives. He works for all the driving apps and loves the flexibility of it which most other jobs don't offer.

One of my earliest memories is when I was leaving for Germany in 2018. I was only nine and my youngest siblings were little, so they were fast asleep, and I didn't see them before I left.

Once I got to Germany, my sister missed me so much even though we argued a lot before I left. She couldn't even speak to me on the phone because it made her cry.

In Germany, I stayed with my mum's sister, and she has a daughter who's the same age as me. We did a lot together like having sleepovers where we stayed up all night and saving up all our pocket money to buy sweets. I liked annoying her like I did to my siblings. I sometimes annoy the people I love the most.

I still speak to my cousin all the time now. Sometimes we video call and both bake at the same time.

Moving to the UK was really hard for me especially because I was a really quiet kid when I first got here. Everyone in my class knew each other from primary so they didn't treat me the best.

In Pakistan, I didn't get bullied because everyone knew me but when I started here I was brand new. It was a bit hard at first.

In Year 8, I was bullied a lot, people were mean to me. Some people would talk behind my back and spread rumours because I was friends with their friend. But I always defend myself so eventually, I stood up for myself and they backed down.

Now, in Year 9, it's happening a bit again but I wish it wouldn't. I do have really good friends also who support me through things.

The pandemic made things worse. We weren't in school in person, and I found the zoom lessons really difficult but I managed to make a few friends.

In February 2021, we wanted to go back to Pakistan for a while, but we had to get tested first. My mum took me to the testing centre and I was crying the whole way. It took 10 attempts to get a usable swab from me because my nose kept bleeding.

The test came back, and my mum and I both had COVID. We had absolutely no idea, we weren't even sick. When my mum called my grandma and told them we wouldn't be able to come because we had covid and she thought it was a joke. They thought everyone who got covid would die. But we all recovered.

Other than the pandemic, the biggest challenge I've faced was about five years ago when we lost my grandfather's brother's wife who to me was like a grandma. She passed away and my mum's best friend had to explain everything. My cousin was extremely upset and even went into a delusion world for a couple of weeks, she'd imagine her grandma was there with us talking and stuff.

Although I've faced challenges in the past, I'm really excited about my future. My dream, when I was younger, changed a lot from doctor to firefighter to pilot. But now, I want to become a doctor although I am a bit worried I'd faint if I saw an organ or something. My parents are supportive of my goal to become a doctor, but my dad says I should become a lawyer because I'm so good at debating with him.

I think the most important thing I've learned in my life so far is that what you give, you get in return. I learned that from my parents because they're very kind people.

I'd sum up my childhood years as really good and I'm grateful for all the challenges I've faced because they made me strong.



**St Monica's
Roman Catholic High School**





Achieving Your Dreams Even in the Face of Adversity

Chiara

'Life is about working hard.'

My name is Chiara Fellone and I'm 15 years old. I love swimming and I've persevered with my passion despite facing health obstacles and the pandemic's restrictions.

I'm from Manchester but I'm half-Italian on my dad's side. My dad has two Italian parents even though he was born in the UK. My mum works in the NHS as a receptionist and my dad's retired but used to be a builder.

I have one full-sister and one half-sister but neither of them lives at home anymore. One sister is away at uni in York and the other is 35 so lives alone.

My grandad on my dad's side died before I was born but other than that I see all my grandparents. My grandma on my dad's side can only speak a little bit of English so we struggle to understand her.

My earliest memories are of being at the park with my dad on my scooter. I was a hyperactive kid, so I did something every night. I started off doing kickboxing, Irish dancing, swimming, and Brownies. I think I had one night off doing activities a week, but I loved it. Swimming was my favourite and it kind of just became my main hobby.

I had loads of friends in primary school and we'd argue a lot apart from one friend that I've known since playgroup and am still friends with to this day.

I love swimming because it clears your mind. When I was nine, I properly joined the City of Salford Swimming Club. I have to go to the gym alongside swimming to strengthen my muscles and I used to have a PT but now my dad's been diagnosed with cancer we have to be more careful with money, so the sessions had to stop.

My dad went for a Wellman check, and they rang him that day to say he needed to go into hospital the next day because he had cancer. It was quite a shock at first because he's a fit person. But we're able to talk about it as a family which has made things a bit easier.

I do swimming competitions now and I've recently qualified for Worlds, so I practise seven times a week. Before the race you're so nervous but once you're in the pool that all sort of goes and you're in the moment. I'd say they're good nerves.

I've had some challenges growing up because I have a few disabilities. When I was first born, I was a bit of a pain because of all the things I had wrong with me. We're still not sure exactly what those things were but I've been diagnosed with autism, and they've found out I've got a curve in my spine which is called scoliosis.

They also think I may have dyspraxia because I struggle with my balance, and I'd get into accidents all the time growing up. Once I fell over the Hoover and smashed my teeth.

I've always had a tick and it got worse in about Year 6. I'll either wink or roll my eyes or do a half smile which I can't control. We've spoken to someone about it because they said it could be Tourette's which sometimes comes with autism.

Scoliosis can be challenging for me particularly as it gets in the way of my swimming. It makes my left side a bit weaker and makes me walk slightly to the side. They don't see scoliosis as a disability during my swimming competitions even though I've got a disability card. I don't need walking support, but I do get quite a lot of back pain.

I also struggle to sleep, and I probably don't fall asleep until between 12 and 1 in the morning which is difficult when I must be up at 4:15 some mornings for swimming. To get to sleep I usually have to put music on.

I found out that I have autism about two years ago from school and I get extra time in tests and stuff. There are a couple of other people at school who have autism and I feel pretty okay about my diagnosis. We think science might be one of my special interests.

Growing up I wanted to be a dentist because I really liked the dentist we had. Now, I'm taking triple science for GCSE, and I'd love to be a marine biologist one day. I want to be a marine biologist because one year we went swimming with dolphins and it made me want to become a dolphin trainer. But I've realised I don't really like the way they treat the animals in captivity, so I've decided on becoming a marine biologist because you're still working with sea animals but in a better way.

My second dream would be to become a swimmer. I want to go to college after school and then go to Loughborough uni because they're good for sport. They said my swimming times are good enough to get in so I'm hoping I can do that then marine biology.

I chose this high school because all my friends were coming here. Overall, I like it here, but I much prefer it now we can actually see people rather than just being in the house all day like during COVID. During the second lockdown, I came into school because I found it too difficult to concentrate at home.

The pandemic wasn't a good time, especially as I wasn't able to swim. All the pools were shut, and we'd restart swimming in the breaks between lockdowns but end up going back in again.

But I started doing open water swimming in Salford Quays once a week instead. I don't swim there anymore because it's much colder than a normal pool. I would have to wear a wetsuit, gloves, and a hat.

My family and I go on holiday every year to Spain or Italy. I love our holidays. When we want a hotel holiday, we go to Spain but because my dad has family in Italy, we have houses there so we can go for quite cheap.

The biggest challenge I've had to overcome is the issue with my back. But I'm determined to keep going.

If I could come up with any rule, I would like equality for everyone. I have a lot of gay friends who struggle with stuff and I'd love for everyone to be treated equally.



Being Authentically Yourself

Heidi

“It’s okay because it’s who you are and if you were to be without it you wouldn’t be yourself.”

My name is Heidi Parry and I’m 13 years old. I’ve learnt to embrace who I am because your differences are what make you, you.

I’m from Manchester, specifically Prestwich area and we’ve lived there almost my whole life. I have seven siblings in total, two boys and five girls but there are only four of us who still live at home because the others have their own places.

Having lots of siblings is good because you get a lot of presents on your birthday. But the best thing about it is having a lot of people you can talk to. I’m closest to my sister Erica. She’s 15, so quite close in age to me.

My parents are very nice. My dad loves running and he did the New York marathon, but he broke his ankle during it. My dad goes to work and sometimes does work at home as well. I’m not exactly sure what he does but I think he does something related to designing buildings.

My mum stays at home and takes care of us all. She has a big job because we’re not very good at tidying our bedrooms!

My number one hobby is playing video games. My favourites are Pokémon, The Legend of Zelda, and Roblox. There are other games I want to try as well but I don’t have them yet.

When I was younger, I wanted to be a vet, but I’ve realised that’s not for me. Now my main dream is to become a video game designer. I particularly want to design neurodivergent characters because I think it’s important to create characters that people can connect to and feel an emotional attachment to, especially as I’m autistic myself.

I was diagnosed when I was in Year 3, and I don’t really remember it. I feel fine about it because autism makes me who I am and without it, I wouldn’t be myself.

I have another dream of becoming a writer but right now I think that would be more of a side thing. But I like writing about shows I’m interested in or books I like to read. I use Archive of Our Own or Wattpad to publish those stories. One of my stories has been really successful and has over 1000 reads!

I wouldn’t say I’m super extroverted or introverted. I like talking to my siblings, but I like alone time sometimes. If I feel stressed at night, I talk to my sister Erica about how I feel.

In 2020, she was very stressed, and I was there for her. Back in June 2020, our house flooded. There was a huge rainstorm and one of the sewer drains got clogged. All the water was pushed out and started flooding towards our house which is at the bottom of a slope.

The entire bottom floor of our house was destroyed and had to be replaced. A lot of our electronics were ruined as well. Luckily, they weren’t any of mine.

On the night it happened my neighbours let us sleep at theirs. They’re really kind people. Then for six weeks, we lived in a flat in the Salford area. It was really strange because Salford is usually a bustling place, but it was COVID, so it was completely quiet. We stayed there until around Christmas 2020.

I felt very stressed when it was first flooded but I was keeping an eye on my sister's son Nate and was more worried about him. In the months that followed, I was mainly focussing on the fact we were getting help and it would be alright in the end.

But I think my sister Erica might have been the most stressed. She couldn't sleep much during that time. I would normally stay up to try and support her and make her feel better. She was trying to stay strong as well, but we were just helping each other.

Our house is lovely now. We got a nice blue couch and all the walls have been painted. We turned the conservatory into a roofed area, and it looks really nice now. My parents are actually looking to move house, but I want to stay in ours because I really like it.

The flooding was the worst part of my COVID experience. I didn't cope well with online lessons, and I had very little motivation to get through it all. So, I was still allowed into my primary school during the pandemic.

When there was another lockdown, and I went into high school I struggled even more. I couldn't focus so I was allowed into school again and I worked a lot better.

I still don't always have the best focus in lessons, so I have a TA to help me. It makes me feel unhappy when I lose my focus and sometimes, I get very annoyed. I try and will myself back to focus and I have my doodle book to try and help. Sometimes I can't get out of the rut even if I try.

If I'm feeling stressed at home, I play video games or use my weighted blanket. Sometimes, my dad says that I shouldn't spend so much time on my games because it probably doesn't help.

Getting through the flooding was hard but without it, I wouldn't have the friends I have now. Our friend group just grew and grew.

The most important thing I've learnt is that it doesn't matter what other people think of you. I'm quite confident with who I am, and I don't care if people try and insult me because I see it as them just being jealous of me being me.

I'm autistic but I was born this way, so I don't know how my life differs from another person's. I sometimes understand things differently.

My brother Fraser is also autistic and he's part of this thing called Spectrum Gaming. I go to some of their meetups like Forrest Schools. There are loads of fun activities you can do there, they have hammocks, and you can toast marshmallows.

My brother is one of the main people working for Spectrum Gaming and we're really good friends with Andy who's one of the founders.

My autism means I like my comfort zone and I hate going out into my danger zone. The stretch zone is when I try and overcome some challenges like when I tried and tried again at indoor rock climbing. That was me going into my stretch zone and I ended up getting to the top of around five rock climbing walls.

We went abroad for the first time to France in 2019. I'm terrible with languages so I was very nervous, but it was amazing. Last year, we went on a road trip to Italy, through France, Belgium, Germany, and Switzerland. Seeing Switzerland was probably one of the best experiences of my life. I really enjoyed that trip and the pool.

Resilience is something I used to struggle with, but I've learnt over the years and I'm proud of who I am today.

Living with Tourette's Syndrome and Embracing Life's Challenges

Isabel

“Although your feelings may be abnormal it's okay to feel like that and feelings can be changed so it's going to be okay.”

My name is Isabel Shepherd, I'm 16 years old and I'm from Manchester. My Tourette's syndrome has taught me a lot about resilience, and I'd like to emphasise that no matter how lost you may feel, you can find yourself again.

I live with my mum, dad, and sister who's in this school in Year 7. Me and my sister get along quite well other than the usual sister arguments. I have two cats called Lilo and Stitch and a dog called Daisy. She's a little Shih Tzu and hasn't had a haircut yet so looks like a little teddy bear.

My relationship with my parents is good, I'm close to both. I remember every Sunday growing up, my dad and I would sit and colour while my mum was at work.

My dad's an accountant and my mum has her own business and also works in sales so she's very busy. But I don't mind them being busy because I'm a very productive person too which I think I get from them.

I play the guitar and have done since Year 4 or 5 so I'm now working on my Grade 6.

I'm in Year 11 and my GCES are in a few weeks so I'm feeling a bit nervous and will probably sit my music exam after them.

Alongside studying, I play in a guitar ensemble on Mondays. I like playing as a group because I find it quite nice to work as a team while trying to keep the rhythm and stay in time.

Swimming, for me, is how I release my emotions. If I have a bad day and then I swim the next day I wake up and just feel so much better.

I don't know what direction I want to go in for the rest of my life. I don't know the destination. I really enjoy maths and physics in school, they're two of my favourite subjects. So, I hope to go to university to do either of them but I'm not sure which yet.

The biggest challenge I've faced throughout my life is my Tourette's syndrome. It started when I was a child with just little noises, but it didn't get picked up on for a very long time. I did very well in school, so it just wasn't a problem and my small movements were passed off as just something I was doing because I was a child.

I remember my first physical tick when I was a child. It was in Year 6, and it was a mouth stretch. I didn't think anything of it because it just went away.

My symptoms became very chilled for a while. The first few years of high school were good for me because my ticks just weren't present. But lockdown caused another big spike, I was isolated and didn't have the swimming to help me.

Towards the end of the second lockdown in Year 9 I noticed I had an eye-rolling tick. I blamed it on my anxiety. When my ticks were at their worst point it was around the start of Year 10.

There are a lot of misconceptions about Tourette's, it's often viewed as quite violent and very disruptive. You don't tick twenty-four hours a day,

they can come in attacks where you tick constantly and feel like you've completely lost control of your body.

Getting my Tourette's diagnosis was heavy, but it wasn't a shock because we kind of knew. It made a lot of things make sense.

It got to a point where I felt like I'd completely lost myself and my tick's had taken over my entire body. I couldn't control what I said or did and that caused me a lot of anxiety. It really got me down and I was in a bad place. When I wasn't ticking, I was completely exhausted and out of it.

I lost a good period of my life and there's a lot of time I don't remember. It's really affected my studies, but I've come back from it. I've started a targeted therapy for ticks and my therapist Penny really, really helped me. It literally completely changed my life for the better.

It took a while to find myself again because I wasn't me for so long but I'm a lot happier now. I've learnt breathing techniques for when I feel myself bubbling up and my body can naturally suppress ticks better. I have to find a moment of calm to even out the very violent and uncomfortable feeling that comes with my ticks.

Now I've built up the tools to keep it at bay I do have minor episodes but it's nothing like it was before and I'm so grateful for that.

It must have been very hard on my family because they'd gone from seeing me bubbly to seeing someone completely different and out of control. It was like they'd lost me in the same way I'd lost myself.

I'm not really sure how it all impacted my sister, but I can imagine how strange it would have been. We had to adjust as a whole family to find ways of talking that limited triggering my ticks.

I think it can be embarrassing dealing with ticks in front of my peers. In Years 7 and 8 people didn't know me with ticks. But coming back

after lockdown and coming back at my worst with my ticks. But I've had very little bad reception from teachers and peers. I've never encountered anything confrontational just dirty looks and whispers. I can laugh about my ticks when they're funny, there's no point being sad over it.

I have a close friend who's always there for me and she's really understood what I've been going through. I had an amazing support group.

Now I've finished the tick therapy but eight per cent of people who have ticks also have OCD so we're meeting every now and then to discuss that. Then after my GCSEs, we're going to have a good go at tackling the core problems.

It's taught me a lot about resilience and I'm now able to face unprecedented problems every day.

One of the most important things I've learnt is that there is an end to everything. What's going on now isn't your future and it's not the be-all and end-all. You still have enough of yourself to come back although it can be very, very hard.



Finding Peace Knowing the Universe Will Sort Everything Out

Savia

“What’s supposed to happen will happen and everything will be fine eventually.”

My name is Savia Champion and I’m 15 years old. I’ve been through some difficult times growing up, but I’ve remained strong in my belief that the universe will sort everything out.

I’m from central Manchester, Salford way. My mum works in a nursery with kids and she’s half Jamaican, so I have some extended family in Jamaica that we’re in contact with. My dad is from Manchester as well and he’s a sales director.

I’m the youngest sibling. I have one sister who works at the uni she just graduated from, and my brother is currently in university. Me and my brother who’s in uni now used to fight a lot and I think it’s because we are the closest in age. But I’ve always been close to my sister as well and we’re always there for each other.

I have another brother, but he passed away when I was younger. I was seven when he passed away and he was 19. He was a talented dancer and was even on Britain’s Got Talent once. He was at uni doing physical science or something like that and taught dance on the side. He was so talented and inspiring and taught me how to skate which I still do today. But he passed away in a motorbike accident.

It was really difficult for the whole family, but we had a lot of wider support and friends were always coming over and checking in on us. I didn’t go back to school for the rest of the year and neither did my siblings. Thanks to all the support we were fine in the end.

My earliest memory is a weird one. It’s of going outside and seeing my dad on a red swing but it feels like a very happy memory.

My happiest and most precious memory is camping with my family. Me, my cousins, uncle, and dad go camping in the Lake District every summer and I just love being surrounded by nature.

I had a good childhood. I’m really close with my family and I have a friend who lived directly next door.

We weren’t overly religious, but we used to go to Church fairly often until we just kind of stopped when I was in primary school. But I’ve become quite spiritual and I’m into star signs, crystals and connecting with nature.

I’m a Virgo so I feel especially connected to nature. I feel more connected to the universe rather than a particular religion and I like to believe in the power of the universe rather than a specific higher power.

I wasn’t always spiritual. I just got into it a few years ago because I liked the calming effect of it all. At the time, I was just working out who I am. I changed my style a lot.

When I was younger, I was really into history and wanted to be an archaeologist. But that dream changed to wanting to become an actor. Acting is a hard industry to get into so I’m still keeping history as an option at the forefront.

I was really quiet early on in high school. I didn’t have a lot of confidence and I was really anxious. Drama has helped me come out of my shell

especially in our school production of *Oliver Twist*. I played the chairman, and it was really out of my comfort zone, but it was fantastic for my confidence.

The most important thing I've learnt so far is not to take things for granted and to appreciate what you have. I've also learnt not to put everything into just one person because you'll never fully know anyone, and anyone can just turn on you.

I've had some bad experiences with people betraying my trust. It's made me very upset and left me isolated but I've just decided not to care so much.

In the meantime, I'm trying to remember that I do have people who care about me and will help. I know that it will all work out eventually which helps me to stay calm. My spirituality brings me comfort because the universe will sort everything out.

Other than drama, my hobbies include skating and reading. I normally just listen to my friend's book recommendations and right now I'm reading 'The Picture of Dorian Gray'. I also enjoy fashion; I find it very interesting.

I've never moved away from Manchester, and we've always lived in the same place but last summer we travelled around Italy. We went to Rome, Florence, Pisa, and Luca. It was so cool because I love history.

As a kid, I went to Madeira twice with my cousins and siblings. We stayed in a villa and had 24/7 access to the sea, so we went snorkelling and stuff. It was amazing.

I'd sum up my childhood years so far as happy and adventurous. One of my favourite childhood memories is from playing with my friends in primary school. There was a woodland opposite and we used to enjoy exploring around there.

In the future, my biggest dream would be to become an Oscar-award-winning actor, but it just depends on how everything works out. I might not pursue that because you just never know. As an actor, one day you might be working and the next day you've just got nothing. It's an unstable income and the likelihood of making it is very low. But I'd be very happy in a job with something to do with history. Maybe working in a museum or archaeology.

Life is about exploring. Not just new places, even though I think that's important, but also exploring yourself as a person and making sure you understand yourself and who you are.

I think it's important to remember that eventually, everything will be fine. It might take two days, or it might take ten years, but you will get there.

Escaping War in Ukraine and Learning that Strong Friendships are More Important than any Material Possessions

Yeva

'I want to make sure others are better equipped if they have to face that battle.'

My name is Yeva Kukharchyk and I'm from Chernihiv, a small town near Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine. My earliest memories are of spending a lot of time with family and friends.

My family isn't very big and I'm an only child. I have a grandma, grandpa, and a mum but I've never known my father.

I'm very close to my mum and even though I don't know my dad that's okay with me because I have friends who support me every day.

Growing up I lived in two flats in Ukraine. First in a small flat with my grandparents. Then my mum and I moved out when I was six years old and lived very near to my grandparents in a big flat.

As a child, I always wanted to explore the world and go travelling. My dream was to explore Europe, Asia, and America. Now it's possible.

My early childhood years were nice, and I have many friends, many of whom are still alive and write to me every day. I met my first friend when I was two years old and my best friend lives in Germany now.

The war started on the 24th of February 2022. I woke up early because there was fire everywhere and I didn't know what was going on, so I switched on the news and they said there was war. I asked my mum what was going on and she didn't know either.

So, we spent the night in the basement of our apartment block while bombs fell from the sky. It was so scary but there were a lot of people around supporting each other and my grandparents were there too so I felt better that my family were close.

We were in the basement all day and night for about a month. I saw soldiers, they came in big groups. There were bombs falling every night and Russian military planes flying overhead. My grandpa used to be in the military, so he taught me how to recognise the types of bombs which definitely helped save our lives. The basement wasn't very deep so it wouldn't have protected us much if something hit the building.

The shops were open but there wasn't enough food to feed everyone. When the bombs stopped falling, we went to buy food, but you had to take a weapon with you and we made petrol bombs in the basement. Everyone in every flat had to have a weapon because there is a street war, and it was so scary. I think it was much scarier than just a classic war.

The Russian military did something so there was no signal which made it hard to communicate with friends and we couldn't listen to the news. We had to communicate using walkie-talkies. When we got some signal back one night my mum called all her friends asking for help. But they were scared too so they didn't want to come down to help.

But one evening a call came and my mum's friend told her they will send a car to rescue us. So, we started to pack up, we took only the most important things with us which wasn't much. We only took medicine clothes and food.

We escaped on a 20-tonne truck at 11 in the morning full of AK 47s. It was hard to tell where we were going but we escaped to Lviv. It took 5 days (500km) because of the huge amount of traffic. Then my mum's friends gave us a home for four days.

The journey was so long and took nine days total, but we thought it would take three maximum. There weren't any shops on the way, but we took food with us from our town, and we ate that. Normally it takes just one day but it was longer because many people wanted to escape. During those nine days, we faced some challenges. Bombs were falling every day and every night, so it was hard to sit and relax.

We came across lots of people who were very scared, they were panicking too so we just supported each other.

It was just me, mum and the man who rescued us. His name was Andrii. I'm so glad for him, he's a stranger to us. My mum has friends and one of those has a big company working with trucks so that man was associated with that company, and he was sent to rescue us. He was so brave.

We stayed in Lviv for four days before packing up to move on. Our next journey was easier and took three days. We stayed one night somewhere else and then went to Krosno in Poland. I'm half Polish so we have many friends there and my mum's spent so much time with those friends so they're like family to us. We stayed in Poland for four months while we waited for our UK visas.

I felt happy at this point because we'd escaped but my grandparents were still in Ukraine with no signal, so I was worried about them.

For the first month, we weren't in touch with my grandparents but after a while, we managed to contact them through Elon Musk's Starlink. They couldn't escape because our car had been closed in by Ukrainian tanks and they were caring for my hamster and dog. Without a car, it's not possible to escape so my grandparents didn't try.

When we got our visas, we travelled by bus to the UK, and it took 36 hours but the journey was much easier because there is no war.

During the journey, I was supported by many people that didn't let me give up and I just kept looking ahead. When I arrived here, I felt safe. There was suddenly a whole world of possibilities open to me. So, I want to say thank you to all the people who risked their lives for me.

Since we left the destruction's got worse. The whole city is occupied by the Russian military and 75% of the town has been destroyed including my flat. A bomb exploded about 15 metres away from it. The town has also been poisoned by chemicals which means many people have died.

My friend lived near Russian tanks. There were two streets between their flat, on the right side there were Russian tanks, and on the left side, were Ukrainian tanks. They would throw bombs over their flat so it was completely destroyed.

That friend is alright though and lives in Germany now. But another of my friends passed away because of Russian bombs. It's so bad and it's so scary. I just lost them.

My grandparents are still fine, and I speak to them every day but there are still bombs falling from the sky every night. They aren't trying to leave because they still have a chance to rebuild their lives there, they still have a house and it's not possible to take everything with them.

I've been in the UK for a year now and I started school 5 months ago. Making new friends hasn't been too hard I've got many friends now all over the world.

I have one friend called Valeria who's also from Chernihiv and we even went to the same school. We didn't travel together but I found out she escaped on the same day as me. It's such a coincidence. She's here in Manchester and I met her randomly in Heaton Park one day. It was a bit of a shock.

I'm happy and relieved to be here now. I met so many interesting people travelling all the time.

I have lots of hobbies like playing tennis, hiking and basketball. I also enjoy fishing and spending time with friends outside of school. They're all hobbies I've always had from when I was younger in Ukraine. I started playing tennis when I was five years old and I think sport has helped me through everything, especially tennis.

Five months ago, on my birthday we went to Edinburgh, and I climbed the highest mountain alone while my mum was eating with friends. I think the challenges I've faced have made me really strong.

I'm really good at art and I like drawing towns and houses. It's my hobby but I hope it can be my profession one day and I think why not try and pursue it?

Throughout my life, the most important lesson I've learnt is friends and family are more important than money. A big community is the most important thing. Life can change at any moment so you can't just stand and wait for something to happen, you need to keep moving.



The Derby High School





A Time for Change

Wilbur

I strive for change for the better; shouldn't that be a goal for each and everyone of us?

My name is Wilbur and I am 15 years old. I long for change in our world for the better and as such I am constantly looking for opportunities to improve my community and the wider world.

I was born in Radcliffe and I have lived here my whole life. I live with my mum and I go to my dad's every week. Both my parents accept me and support me very much. They both work in jobs where they need to care for and respect people. My parents' constant care and optimistic mindset has made me the person I am today.

In year 8, I chose to join the Changemaker project at my school. I wanted to make a real difference in our world and to help save our deteriorating environment. I had seen the horrifying events happening in our planet due to the climate crisis and knew I needed to do something to help. The next year I joined my school's charity group to make further positive changes where I could. I have loved taking part in these amazing initiatives which have broadened my horizons and helped to make me the person I am today.

I am part of the LGBTQ+ community. I identify as non-binary (which means that I identify with neither male or female) which has meant I have faced many instances of cruelty and bullying. Being the victim of this behaviour has further incentivised me to help people because I know what it is like to not be accepted for who you are and I believe no one should have to feel this way. Despite this mistreatment, I have risen above my fears and conquered my insecurities and I now fully embrace who I am.

I am also autistic. I see the world differently to neurotypical people which makes it very difficult for me in social situations and life in general. I have had to overcome many challenges such as sensory difficulties and coping with change and pressure. Despite the many challenges that come from being autistic, I also feel many benefits. I have a very strong sense of justice which encourages me to strive for change for the better and I also have an excellent memory and capability to learn complex ideas easily.

I am highly interested in music, history, and drama. I adore music; it is my passion. I take every opportunity to get involved with this subject and I play multiple instruments, my primary one being drums. History has been an interest of mine since age 5 and I am constantly yearning to learn more. History teaches me more about my daily life and the wider society around me. I love drama because it allows me to express myself in an extremely enjoyable and creative way. Being autistic, expressing myself in a coherent way can be difficult and drama has aided me immensely to become more emotionally aware and capable of expressing myself. I balance every aspect of my life which is sometimes hard as things can get very busy with such a wide range of commitments but, with a set schedule and a pre-prepared plan, I can easily manage my time wisely.

I hope that soon we see a real change in attitudes towards climate change and unfairness in our society. I hope that we can all live in peace and that everyone has the freedom to be themselves without fear.



Doing What You Love and Dedicating Time to Helping Others

Areeba

“The beginning is always hard but once you get going, once you’re running, you can’t stop.”

My name is Areeba Malik and I’m 14 years old. I’ve always wanted to help others and make a change so over the past couple of years I’ve dedicated my time to many different causes.

I’m originally from London but I don’t have many memories there because after three years, I moved to Bury.

My parents are originally from Pakistan. My dad came here young, got an IT degree, and now does a lot of work to do with that.

My mum moved over when they married and now, she works in NHS interpreting. I get my love of languages from her. I can speak five languages myself: English, Urdu, Punjabi, French and I’ve started learning Spanish too but I’m not fluent yet.

I’m lucky because my parents make sure I’m connected to both my English and Pakistani culture. Kids these days are forgetting their history and I love history, so I want to make sure I’m keeping both my cultures intact.

I’ve only got a small family, just me, my parents, and my little sister who’s in Year 7. Our whole family is close and we’re always travelling together.

I’ve visited my grandparents in Pakistan, and I have some extended family here in Manchester. I don’t have loads of family nearby but I’m not that worried because family doesn’t always have to be by blood, and I have two fantastic best friends.

My lifelong dream is to become a doctor because I want to help people and find a use for all my natural empathy. It also helps that I love science.

When we were in Year 6, we started learning about the heart and that’s where my medical interest began. As I did more research, I decided I wanted to be a cardiologist. It just clicked.

Before high school, I was a very shy person, so I kept myself to myself- I felt like I was very different to other people. But just before COVID the Australian bushfires were going on and I desperately wanted to do something to help. Not necessarily the people but the animals because I felt they were suffering and getting no support.

So, I came up with the idea to start a campaign. I chatted with the librarian and for two days I did a book sale of old books in the hallway. I managed to raise over £200 in total and I was incredibly proud. At that moment, I realised there was something I could actually do as a young person to help others.

When I came to high school, we started a little group which supports different charities. In Year 8, we were in lockdown, but I led the charity anyway. We campaigned for Children in Need, Comic Relief and Forever Manchester who were supporting COVID patients at the time.

The pandemic made things difficult because we were constrained to just our year groups, but we still managed to raise about £100 for Forever Manchester.

In Year 9, we chose to support Cystic Fibrosis Trust because someone in our year group has a personal connection to the illness. Cystic fibrosis is a

genetic disease which fills a person's lungs with mucus, making it difficult to breathe and people who suffer from the condition also have a shorter life expectancy.

We wanted to raise money and awareness, so we held a stall at the school Winter Wonderland, and we did a Wear Yellow Day, where everyone brought in a pound for the cause.

There are so many things happening in this world I feel a connection to and I want to be supporting and helping people.

I am very passionate about the environment, so we started a new project to make our school zero waste. Not everyone wants to make a change, they just think 'it's not affecting us so what's the problem?'.

But things all over the world can affect us and COVID is a great example. It was incredibly difficult; I missed the first year of high school because of the pandemic. But I had my whole family supporting me and I'm a very optimistic person, so I tried to keep positive. I knew if we started losing hope the country wouldn't be able to keep going.

I joined Bury Youth Cabinet, in the hope of making changes. At first, I was very nervous but I'm still in that group now and I've had some unbelievable opportunities. I've interviewed important people, like our MP for Bury and have attended some Net Zero conferences.

I've been involved with the zero-waste project in school, but I've faced some significant challenges coordinating that. We needed to source some funding and rally support from the school and wider community. I had to interview officials and experts to get them on board, but we finally secured some funding from an elderly man who wanted to give back to the community.

We used the £30,000 he donated to create a carbon-neutral space in a decommissioned yellow school bus with solar panels installed. It's now a student hub and we use the space to teach young people life skills.

School isn't always about history, maths, and science, it needs to prepare you for the real world. It's really beneficial that The Derby prepares you for that here, I want to pass those lessons on to other young people.

We did a talk to little kids at the Science and Industry Museum and encouraged them to do things to help the environment. A five-year-old excitedly told me he litter picks and that just made me feel so happy and proud- I want to inspire the next generation.

I've also been working hard to gain experience before I apply for medicine. I managed to secure a three-day work experience placement on a stroke ward, and they took me down to A&E as well. We saw a patient who'd been waiting all night in pain, and it was horrible seeing her in that position but when I saw the doctor helping her it reminded me that that's exactly what I want to do.

My main goal is to become a doctor, but I also have a dream that once I become a consultant or a surgeon, I will be able to start a foundation for children living in countries with extreme poverty. I want to be able to give those children an education and teach them about sustainability so that they can make a change.

A lot of people ask me how I balance everything. Studying, a social life, my family, religion, and commitments outside of school. I think my secret is that I don't like to plan ahead too much. I just wake up every morning and get on with it, embracing the present moment. I also firmly believe that God is always watching me and taking care of me.

I've learnt that being in your comfort zone will disadvantage you. Being successful and being happy is actually a very uncomfortable thing to do.

Overall, I'm very grateful for the life I have. Grateful for teachers and friends being there for me, my parents who work day in day out and my sister who always listens to me. I'm also grateful for every single person who surrounds me in school for giving their time to help our causes. I really hope I continue to live this good life.



Accepting Uncertainty About the Future and Exploring lots of Hobbies Along the Way

Elizabeth

“It’s the little, small steps that count.”

My name is Elizabeth Hinze and I’m 13 years old. I’ve learnt life is about enjoying yourself so it’s important to explore lots of hobbies before choosing your path.

I was born in Wythenshawe but now I live in Bury. I have my mum and dad, an older brother who’s 15 and a younger sister who’s 11.

My parents got married when I was four, but they divorced a few years later. My brother lives with my mum full time and my sister and I go to my dad’s on the weekends.

My brother doesn’t talk to me much because he’s busy with his mates but otherwise we get along well. I think my sister hates me- just hates the sound of my voice really. We used to share a bedroom which was rough but Mum always says we’ll get along in the future and I’m looking forward to that.

I have loads of happy memories from my younger childhood. My first sort-of memory is from when I was two holding my mum’s hand on the way to playgroup. They say any memory formed before five likely isn’t a real memory, so my first proper memory is being woken up by my dad on my fifth birthday. I had a tractor birthday party and we got to ride a tractor at a farm, it was a dream come true.

As a little kid, I wanted to be a doctor like lots of other kids in my class. But as I took up different hobbies like art, guitar, and violin I considered each of those for the future.

I have a passion for music now and I’m considering a career as a sound technician. My music taste has definitely been heavily influenced by my parents. My mum loves rock and my dad likes Jamie T. My favourite band is Gorillaz.

Growing up, I didn’t really have any challenging experiences and I was always considered quite a clever kid. But in primary school, I moved around quite a bit. When we moved to Bury, I joined one school I hated so much that I only went there for two days. I have a late birthday, so they put me in the lower set of Year 2 just because I was on the younger side.

My mum let me look around three different high schools. Out of all the schools, I’d say The Derby felt the most like what a school should be. I just wanted somewhere with nice teachers and a good learning environment.

COVID was quite difficult because none of my friends from primary school came here, I didn’t know anyone, and we had to stay in our own little bubbles. We had to stay in one room and teachers would come to us rather than moving to different classrooms. But we did have fun at times, and I had a nice group of friends that I’m still friendly with today.

I’d say my favourite ‘core’ subject is maths but otherwise, I love music and technology. I like making stuff. I’m involved in a lot of clubs at school. I go to concert band on Mondays and media club on Tuesdays and I do production rehearsals most lunchtimes.

In our French lessons, we’ve been discussing our future and I’ve realised I have no idea what I want to do but I know I love experimenting with sounds.

I’ve been on some fantastic holidays. We went to Mallorca a couple of years ago and before that my dad surprised us with a trip to Greece.

Some of my favourite memories are going to a water park in Mallorca and having a volcano barbecue in Lanzarote.

I'd like to travel even more when I'm older and sound engineering would let me do that. I think my French GCSE will be useful too.

We had to do a research task this year and I learnt about Manchester College's A-Level in music production. I feel like right now the options process is difficult because you have so many different choices.

One of my main hopes for the future is to have some pets- guinea pigs or rabbits would be ideal. I already have a pet rabbit called Andrew who was formerly named Bubbles. He originally belonged to my auntie, but we decided to take him in. He's an indoor caged rabbit but we can't resist letting him out sometimes- he gets quite cheeky.

I'm unsure about my main hopes for the future but I've seen a lot of stuff going on in the news recently that I'd like to make a positive change in. I'm especially interested in reversing climate change. As I get older, I hope to reduce my electricity and greenhouse gas consumption. It's the little, small steps that count.

Although choosing your future path can be daunting it's important to reflect on what you enjoy doing and go with that. True happiness is about doing anything you enjoy, and life is truly about enjoying yourself.



Advocating that Everyone Deserves Kindness Even Those Who May Not Seem Kind Themselves

Jack

"A real education should teach everyone not only what one plus one is but that everybody is unique and sees the world in different ways."

My name is Jack Tomlinson and I'm 14 years old. I've struggled a bit with making friends throughout a lot of my time at school, but I haven't let that take away from my belief that no one is automatically bad- there's good and bad in everyone.

I'm from Bolton- well the border of Bury and Bolton. I have a mum, dad and two older sisters, one's 19 and the other is 25.

My favourite animals are cats, and my sister has four - Rory, Boba, Ciabatta and Mop. I definitely prefer cats to dogs.

I get along with my family well, one of my sisters still lives at home, and I have a good relationship with my mum. My parents got divorced when I was five but I'm happy I still see my dad, even if it's not very often.

I went to a great primary school called Greenhill, but I was quite uninspired as a younger kid. At the time I wanted to be a firefighter and I find that quite embarrassing now. I don't think I had any chance.

In my early school years, my attention span wasn't very good, and I often didn't listen to authority. But in Year 1, I had a fantastic teacher who opened my eyes to all the opportunities around me. Before then I'd struggled with self-belief.

I had another great teacher in Year 4 who changed everything again- she made me realise how important I actually am.

In primary school, I fell in love with English. That love has only grown since I started drama club in Year 7 and now, I'm excited to take drama for GCSE.

Moving from primary to secondary school was strange, especially because of COVID. I missed the last day of school before lockdown because I was ill which threw me off even more.

In honesty, this high school wasn't my first choice, and a lot of children in my class went to different schools but now I'm happy to be here.

I had mixed feelings coming to high school. I have more freedom now, but I don't know if that's a good thing because others take advantage of freedom, especially children who don't always understand the wider world...

Since the start of Year 7 I've found it hard to "fit in" at high school. I also experienced this in primary school but not as bad.

Sometimes it felt like everyone in school is against me. I always got the feeling that I'm being talked about behind my back, and everyone calls me weird.

I was starting to think being unique isn't a good thing anymore because it seems some people choose to use your differences against you as an excuse to hurt you.

I didn't have any friends at school, and I knew I'd be happier if I had friends because I felt lonely a lot. I tried really hard to change that and started to join in with a group of people when I went on the school trip to New York.

After all the rejection I've endured it's hard to let people into my life because I'm worried they might hurt me but I'm starting to make friends in the group and I'm enjoying spending time with other people like me.

In the future, I'd like to start some sort of support group to promote acceptance of kids like me. I think it's important to talk to both the victims and the teasers to work out what's going on. There's a reason why it's happening so listening is important.

But the main thing I want to do in the future is work in media - radio, TV, podcast, or something like that.

Although I love England, I would like to see the world and I'm looking forward to my next school trip to France!

I'm in a better place now. I believe life is about discovering your purpose and no one is just good or bad. It's important that nobody should be automatically punished for their behaviour and instead are spoken to, in order to learn and understand that everyone is unique, and that's okay.



Highlighting the Dangers of Ignorance and Stressing that Racism Should Never be Normal

Jerome

“If someone is racist, they must be taught about how powerful it is. One person can just give a couple of comments but eventually that comment could be someone’s final straw.”

My name is Jerome Nixon-Bell and I’m 13 years old. During my life, I’ve had to endure a lot of racism, so much that I started to think what was happening to me was normal. I hope through sharing my story I will help emphasise just how badly people’s words can hurt and highlight that racism is never normal.

I’m originally from London but I now live here in Radcliffe, with my mum and little sister.

When I was seven, we had to move from London to Devon. We had nothing but a small bag and the clothes on our backs. My sister had just turned one.

We moved to a picture-perfect seaside town. I started school there at the end of Year 2 but things turned sour quickly.

I’m mixed race and we’d moved to a predominantly white town. I started getting called racist names and getting hit by the other kids- so I started fighting back.

When I moved into the bigger years, I got beaten up badly. In Year 3 I was attacked by Year 6s. I was fighting to survive just because of the colour of my skin.

As a result of fighting back, I was suspended and threatened with expulsion constantly. My mum moved me to another school and the abuse was more manageable, less physical, and back to the name-calling.

But then, when I was on the brink of moving to high school, I was jumped by five people, the youngest of which was 13 and the oldest was 16. I was only 10. Four held me down whilst the oldest stamped all over me.

They broke four of my ribs, cracked my collar bone and kicked me in the head. All those physical wounds healed but the mental scars didn’t.

After the attack, my mum rang the police and they had a ‘boys will be boys’ attitude, even though throughout the attack they were calling me racial slurs. It was evidently much deeper than that.

Those boys started waiting outside my house and shouting at my family. They constantly harassed us, throwing bottles and threatening to burn our home down.

Thankfully, my relationship with my mum has always been strong but it frayed a bit after the attack because I became so angry and withdrawn. I just didn’t want to show how truly sad I was. It reached a point where my life had become unbearable.

It wasn’t just the students who treated me like that, it was the teachers as well. They racially abused me, calling me slurs and kicking me out of lessons. My learning became extremely stunted as a result.

I moved schools again and the same cycle restarted. The name calling, then getting kicked out of lessons and then students following me home. They started spray painting racist abuse directed at me all around the town. It was just horrible.

I truly thought what I was going through was normal. I believed I was less than them and that's just how every black person is treated.

Even people who I thought treated me well would be racist behind my back. But I still chose to hang around with them because the alternative was people who blatantly abused me.

The kids were ignorant, and they'd learnt the behaviour from their parents. Their parents abused me too; swerving cars to pretend to hit me, throwing bottles. Bus drivers wouldn't let me on their buses after school and I'd be left in the dark until my mum came to pick me up.

As a young kid, my mum walked in on me trying to wash the black off my skin many times. Growing up, I didn't have huge aspirations or career goals like some people. All I dreamed of was being treated like everyone else. I wanted a normal life like people on TV.

We eventually decided that we should move to Manchester to be with my mum's fiancé after life had deteriorated further. My little sister, who is also mixed race but lighter skinned than me, started experiencing some of the abuse I had suffered. She was only five and it was mainly adults talking about her. We didn't want her to experience the same torment as me. We just couldn't take it anymore.

In the beginning, life was still tricky as the house just wasn't big enough for our family. We lived in two studio flats above a pub. We didn't have anything sorted when we moved up, no school or house but we just needed to get out.

The pandemic was still raging and even though it was a break from school I'd still get abused online. When we moved to Manchester my mum looked for a school for me but because of all the trouble in my previous schools I had to go to a PRU for six months.

Whilst at the PRU, I quickly realised I didn't want to be angry, or fight and they started getting me better work to make my integration into

mainstream school easier. It caused a few issues with the other kids because they were jealous, but it wasn't that bad.

I stayed there for the minimum time and then I moved here. It took ages to find another school during the pandemic. I just lay on my bed playing games for days at a time.

When I joined The Derby in Year 8, I was expecting racism on my first day. But I was so happy because no one was racist towards me, the worst problem I had was being called posh because of my accent. I managed to make friends and I've never had a big group of mates like this before.

I used to get crippling anxiety before school, I could feel it in my stomach. But now I'm starting to like school much more.

My dream now is to become a stockbroker. I want to make lots of money so that I am financially independent and can support my family, so they don't have to stress anymore.

My family love it up here. My sister is seven and is having a great time. I saw where her life could have gone but luckily, she got away from it all fast.

I think racism stems from uneducated people spreading their hate to everyone. Maybe people don't feel good about themselves so putting other people down makes them happy.

In the future, I hope racism stops but I know that's a big dream. I used to think words can't hurt you, but I've learnt they definitely can.



Creating a Positive Mindset and Asking, ‘What if I can Achieve My Dreams?’

Matthew

“Take it day by day if you’re feeling down just keep going another day and you’ll keep pushing and then you’ll see the end of the tunnel.”

My name is Matthew Blears and I’m 14 years old. I’ve had some negative experiences in my life so far, but I’m dedicated to maintaining a positive attitude because that will help me pursue my dreams.

I’ve lived with my big family of six in Radcliffe, Bury, all my life. My eldest sister moved out recently with her fiancé and my brother is also looking at houses, so I think he’ll move very soon. My other sister still lives at home and has Rett syndrome, an autistic spectrum disorder.

It’s been very lively growing up with a big family. My eldest sister has given me a little niece who comes around all the time so it’s dead fun.

My dad’s a firefighter, retiring this year and my mum works with families across the local area helping people with disabilities. Mum has her own business called First Point Support and she specifically helps families struggling with taking care of loved ones with autism.

My mum’s funny at times, she’s nice and caring. My dad’s just the comedian of the house and he gives stellar advice on sports. I’d say I’m closest to my brother, we play-fight and annoy each other around the house all the time.

I went to two different primary schools. The first one was around the corner from the house, but we had some issues there because the teachers weren’t consistent, and they were strict about strange things. My parents moved me to another school, and I stayed there all throughout primary school.

In Year 7, it was kind of difficult because we were in lockdown, and we’d been taken straight out of the middle of Year 6. We were only taught in person for about a quarter of the year.

I think we managed COVID pretty well as a family. Towards the end of the first lockdown, we added a big extension to the house because my sister needed a new space, and she has her own bathroom and stuff now. We also used to have to go straight through the front room to get to the kitchen but with the new extension, we have a hallway. Being able to help out with painting and stuff kept me busy during that long lockdown.

But my world came crashing down when my Nan passed away. The pandemic meant I didn’t even get to say goodbye. My dad wasn’t even able to see his mum because only two or three of the same immediate family members were allowed to visit. I think outwardly my dad handled the loss really well, he seemed to just get on with it.

But for me, I felt sad all the time and I started overeating. I was so close to my Nan. I used to go around to hers all the time, I’d have sleepovers and stay for tea which was like a full buffet every time. We used to watch our favourite movie together- Lilo and Stitch- I’ve not watched it since she passed away.

I didn’t really speak out to anyone, and I just kept it all in. Everyone expected me to be a bit sad but they didn’t know the actual extent of how I felt. Even now, I miss her every day. I’d say her passing was the biggest challenge I’ve ever faced.

More recently, I've struggled a bit with heartbreak. I had a friend growing up who used to live at the end of my street. We'd always climb the big trees in her garden, and I'd stay at hers for tea. But she moved away to Bury.

We reconnected a little while ago, but she wasn't interested in properly rekindling things which is quite frustrating. But I just want to move past that- I have other things to focus on.

In my spare time, I enjoy playing on the Xbox. My favourite games are Minecraft, FIFA, and Fortnite, it's a great way to reconnect with friends from primary school.

But my absolute dream has always been to play football professionally. I've been kicking a ball around since the age of three and I'm a big Manchester United fan.

At the moment, I'm playing in school, but I'm set to join a team outside soon so we're just waiting to hear back from them.

My strongest positions are probably left-back and right-wing but I'm debating whether to go centre. I love attacking and scoring goals, but I also love defending as well.

But if football doesn't work out, I do enjoy basketball, so the NBA kind of thing looks very cool especially because I'd love to go to America.

One of the biggest lessons I've learnt so far is how important a positive mindset is. Whenever I'm going through something I look back at all the things I've struggled with before and remind myself that I got through it.

TikTok's been a great tool while developing a positive mindset. I've created a folder of motivational videos to help pick me up when I'm down. I need to start thinking, 'what if my dreams are meant to be?' rather than questioning, 'what if I don't make it?'.

Another important thing I've learnt is actions always have consequences and you must always be respectful and kind. You never know what someone is going through so don't let things out on other people.



Leading a Balanced Life and Protecting Your Mental Health Whilst Grabbing Every Opportunity With Both Hands

Mia

“If you’re having fun in life then you’re having a great life.”

My name is Mia Clarke and I’m 13 years old. During my childhood, I’ve learnt the importance of self-love and throwing yourself at every opportunity.

I’m from Radcliffe, born in some hospital somewhere in Manchester. I have one brother who’s 19, a mum, dad and two sets of grandparents. We have two dogs and a hamster which gets especially chaotic as the dog sometimes sees the hamster as a snack. Our beagle is nine now, so she doesn’t move much but our new dachshund is almost as quick as the hamster.

My brother’s moved out and is studying criminal psychology and sociology in Derbyshire, but we video call him every week, just to check he’s eating and stuff. We think he’s almost there- he cooked a whole chicken the other week.

I think he misses us more than he cares to admit. He likes to be ‘Mr Strong Boy’ but really, I know he misses us.

My dad’s a university lecturer in teaching and my mum’s also a teacher but at a primary school. Our family jokes that teaching is genetic, especially as I also teach dance and gymnastics.

It’s quite good having teachers in the family. My parents are fantastic at separating their work and home lives, so we get to cosy up in blankets and watch TV when they get back from work.

My parents are incredible. My dad is the joker, and he has such a bubbly personality. My mum is awesome, she just flows with life and rolls with the punches. She’s got a fabulous ‘we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it’ attitude and both my parents have always been there for me. I feel very lucky.

The most important thing I’ve learnt from my parents is to love myself. If you love and look after yourself, you can create your own happiness. You don’t need to strive for success because happiness itself is a success.

Outside of school, I’m incredibly busy. I have two jobs at the moment. I teach gymnastics and dance at the school where I’ve been a student for the past 12 and a half years.

I especially enjoy teaching the younger kids. It’s lovely that they can just have fun. They run around like crazy but at the end of the day, they listen to me which is great.

I also like having extra income so I can spend money on socialising. I make time to hang out with my friends on weekends, we usually go to McDonald’s- the place to be!

Other than that, I don’t have time for many hobbies, but I do enjoy art. Art is my way of releasing everything. I have tons of sketchbooks, even one full of just sketches of hands. But some are just random doodles as well, I put the pencil on paper and see what happens.

Thankfully, balancing things comes naturally to me. I have a chalkboard where I write my weekly schedule that helps me identify evenings or break-times I have free to finish all my schoolwork.

But after COVID, I went through a massive rough patch, and I wasn't very open about my emotions. Whenever anyone asked if I was okay, I'd just reply that I was fine.

Inside, I felt lost, and I needed to talk to someone. Originally, I turned to a friend, and they told me it was really important I spoke to an adult or a professional. A friend told a teacher they were concerned, and the school chatted with me and my parents.

Although it was a horrible time, I think that was when I first started to properly find myself. I'd made the decision by myself to change my behaviour and speak to someone. Now, whenever somebody asks me if I'm okay I answer honestly rather than immediately brushing them off.

It also made me realise that no one's going to spoon-feed you your whole life and you must start taking care of yourself at some point.

To be honest, our whole year group has struggled to adjust after lockdown. We just couldn't socialise at all while we were learning online. We were snatched from Year 6 and dumped in the middle of Year 7. It threw everything at us all at once.

But now I have a great group of friends and I'm enjoying my extracurricular activities. I've always enjoyed having hobbies and being involved in clubs.

One of my most precious childhood memories is probably my last ever day at guides. Our group had to close, and it was really sad because we'd gone from rainbows to brownies to guides together. On that last day, we played games and had presents and a mini banquet of cake- it was bittersweet.

A lot of my other special memories come from the holidays I've been on. Before COVID we used to go away a lot. I've been to Portugal, Spain, and Croatia but I wouldn't say I experienced much of any of their cuisines because I'm quite a picky eater. I mainly stuck to the classics like pizza.

Overall, I'd sum up my childhood so far as very happy, very busy and bursting with opportunities. Many of those opportunities have come directly from The Derby. We've been to ITV in Media City, met Kevin the Carrot, been to cybersecurity GCHQ and I'm going to London in March. I'd say I've grasped the opportunities with both hands.

In the future, I'm hoping to go down the path of creative media production. I'm conscious that I don't want to narrow myself down too much. I mainly just want to make sure I'm having fun no matter what I do.



Being Resilient in the Face of Challenges and Learning the Importance of Having Fun

Ryan

“Happiness is having fun.”

My name is Ryan Morris and I'm 14 years old. I'm not sure what I want to do in the future, but I've already overcome many challenges and learnt a lot about resilience.

I'm from Radcliffe and I live with my mum, dad, and brother, who's 11. I enjoy chatting with my parents, but I find my brother difficult because we have very different personalities. He doesn't talk to me much and mainly just sits in his room playing Xbox, whenever I go in, he just shouts at me to get out.

But as a child, my most precious memory was probably when my brother was born. I didn't know what was going on but then the next day he was suddenly there. We played together a lot when we were little.

My mum works as a solicitor and my dad's a gas engineer. They're usually around when I get home from school which is nice but occasionally my dad has to go out on jobs.

My mum and I often go out on walks with our dog Nell. We have a few other pets as well- some rabbits and a cat. We used to have two cats but

the other one was so naughty we had to give him to a friend. He used to swipe at us if we wanted to climb the stairs and block our path.

I have all four grandparents. My dad's parents live close but my mum's live in Lincoln. I also have a lot of cousins in Lincoln that I play with on the Xbox. We like playing FIFA - I just got the new one. Sometimes, I wish we'd move there so I could be close to my cousins because I love that they're a similar age to me.

I've always wanted to be a sportsman of some sort, maybe a footballer or a professional motorcyclist. But I left my old football team, and my dad broke his leg on the motorbike he bought me so that's put me off slightly.

My earliest memory is from when I was just a toddler. I tried to climb up the highchair and ended up splitting my head open, they had to glue it back together and now I have a bald spot.

I had an even worse accident when I was about six or seven. I was on my bike, cycling down my street and suddenly, I was on the floor. From the accident, I ended up with a bleed on the brain.

The food in hospital was surprisingly pretty good but that was the only good thing about the stay. I hated the constant MRI scans, one day I was in and out of the scanner for four hours. The scans made me really anxious because I was worried they'd show something bad and I'd have to stay in hospital even longer.

My mum was my rock. She stayed in the hospital with me the entire time and even slept there. Thankfully, after seven or eight weeks I was allowed to go home.

Although I do not feel that I was bullied in primary school, I feel I did get picked on a lot. My mum was really helpful again then. She taught me how important it is to stick up for myself.

It made me feel sad because I felt like I had no friends, but it was great advice. Once I'd stood up to people, they stopped teasing me.

I found lockdown really confusing. I just didn't understand why we couldn't go into school. I kept asking my parents and they had to explain the situation over and over again. Even though we couldn't go to school in person I loved how good the weather was and we could spend lots of time outside.

Now, in my spare time I enjoy going to the skate park with my friends on our bikes, and I'm not very skilled, but I just enjoy hanging out there. I also enjoy playing football and Minecraft with my friends and going to their houses. Sometimes we get döner kebabs!

I've also had lovely times on our family holidays over the years. We've been to Turkey, Spain, and Egypt. My parents have recently bought a caravan, so we hope to travel around the UK and maybe visit Scotland and Devon.

When we went to Turkey, we took a pirate ship tour, and I was able to jump from the third deck into the water. It was amazing! The food there was delicious too.

We also go away to Lincoln every Christmas. We book a beautiful cottage with a pool and all my cousins, and their friends come over.

I'd probably sum up my childhood as good. I don't feel like I have any majorly bad memories and my family have been really supportive.

I'm still trying to figure things out for the future. I'm interested in football, but I've taken on rugby too, so I feel like I'm at a bit of a crossroads. But whatever I do, I hope I'll be having fun.



Emphasising the Importance of Opening Up and Telling Others How You Feel

Sarah

"I hope that if I tell my story people won't think they're alone."

My name is Sarah Harding and I'm 14 years old. I suffered terrible bullying in primary school and didn't tell anyone, but I hope telling my story will encourage others to speak to a trusted adult if they're in a similar situation.

I live in Radcliffe. I'm the second oldest in my family- the middle child- with two sisters. My parents met at a party almost 20 years ago and they're still together. We also have two cats who are an important part of the family- Ginny and Lola. We all get along well, and my parents are patient which is important.

My first ever memory is from a childhood holiday to Cornwall just after my sister was born. We loved the beach and the indoor pool which had amazing slides.

As a young child, I always dreamed of helping people in the future. The specifics of the dream differed a lot over the years from becoming a scientist to a doctor to a nurse to a policewoman and now I want to become a firefighter.

In primary school, I was relentlessly bullied. From my perspective, the bullying came from absolutely everyone, not a specific person. My whole class made up this thing called the 'Sarah touch' and I had to go through that for six or seven years.

I didn't tell anyone for a long time. I never told my parents or teachers because I was scared something bad would happen or I'd cause unnecessary worry.

The bullying made me feel extremely scared and I hated going to school. As a result, I was a very lonely child, and didn't have many friends.

I never showed how I was feeling on the outside. For the rest of primary school, I spent time with a different class instead of mine because they made me feel more comfortable and were just much nicer towards me.

I'd say at that time English was my favourite subject and reading was my main hobby. My favourite authors were David Walliams and Roald Dahl. I also enjoyed playing computer games.

Before COVID hit, I visited three different potential high schools. At that point, I'd told my parents about the bullying, so they wanted me to choose somewhere that not many people from my primary school were going so I had a fresh opportunity to make friends.

But after primary school, COVID happened, and we were only allowed to stay in one classroom. For PE we were allowed in the girl's gym, and we were allowed in the science room sometimes for a treat but other than that we were confined to the same four walls. It got repetitive quickly, and I didn't like staying in just one room.

My family didn't enjoy lockdown either. We have a big wider family and I even have seven first cousins so we couldn't see any of them which was really difficult.

Nowadays, I still enjoy reading books and playing games, but I hang out with friends when I can too. Thankfully, I don't experience bullying as I did in primary school, but I've also been struggling slightly with my mental health. I think social media has impacted my problems as well as just general overthinking. But my parents are aware, and my dad's been helping me.

When COVID came along, it worsened my mental health because being alone accelerated all my anxiety. But things are better now we're through lockdown.

I recently went abroad for the first time, to Cyprus for my auntie's wedding. I was nervous about being out of the country, but it inspired me and now I'd love to travel more in the future. I'd like to visit Greece or Italy and I'm learning to speak German at the moment.

My favourite subjects are food, PE, tech, and art, but I need to look at what subjects I need to become a firefighter. I can't wait to help people when I'm older and I believe if you help people, then the world will help you back.

The main things I think need to change in the future are online safety and the lack of education on British sign language. I believe the government needs to do more to eliminate predators online and that the education system should also be reformed to become more accessible for people with disabilities.

For the most part, I believe life is about going through journeys and struggles so you can see what you've accomplished along the way and use that to help other people. I'd like to encourage anyone who's experiencing bullying to talk to their parents because I wish I did when I was in primary school.

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***"Tales
to
Inspire."***



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