

TALES

TO

INSPIRE

**STORIES FROM THE HEART OF
OUR COMINO SCHOOLS 2025**





North West Comino Consortium

The Comino Foundation provides funding to the North West Comino Consortium; a “Community of Practice” bringing together dynamic partnerships of schools, businesses, and charities to deliver projects which aim to enrich and enhance learning and to support the personal, social and cultural development of pupils attending NWCC schools. Central to our work together is the belief that learning experiences developed in partnership with people and places beyond the classroom have the power to motivate and inspire young people, and to help them cultivate the skills necessary to face the future with confidence. This year small groups of pupils from three NWCC schools have had the opportunity to work with ground-breaking Bolton charity

‘Tales to Inspire’ on their flagship ‘This is Us’ project. The idea behind ‘This is Us’ is a simple but powerful one; to give young people a space to be seen, heard and valued through the lens of their own experience.

The three schools involved in this project; Falinge Park High School, Pioneer House High School and The East Manchester Academy, are notable for their diverse pupil populations and their strongly pupil centred approach to learning and development. Through intensive small group workshops drawn from their own experiences of personal growth and ambition, the young social leaders from Tales to Inspire have mentored each of the young people on the programme to connect with the power of their own stories, and to tell those stories within the pages of this book.

Through sharing their stories pupils on the project have begun to understand how life experience impacts on identity and sense of self, and to understand and to empathise with those from different cultures and

backgrounds. The project has offered a platform for all pupils to feel proud of their own journey and for some to re-imagine how they can fit into a world which has not always seemed to have a space for them.

How wonderful that we are now able to hear those myriad voices, and celebrate their unique place in the world, through the power of personal storytelling.

Deborah Davidson

North West Comino Consortium

Falinge Park High School

Falinge Park High School

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The 'Tales To Inspire' project explored personal experiences and stories that often get overlooked in a busy school setting. Getting students to recall and reflect on powerful idiosyncratic memories and experiences felt courageous and empowering; highlighting the importance of recognising the complexity of young people's lives and applauding the way students often deal with pivotal moments in incredible ways. I feel privileged to have been part of a process that has enabled young people to draw strength and motivation from articulating their own individual odyssey.

Simon De Courcey

Director of Cultural Capital – Falinge Park High School

From Cadiz to the Classroom: My Football Journey

Ahmed

My name is Ahmed and I am in Year 9.

My earliest memory is when me and my friends went to Blackpool to play in a football tournament. We got to the semi finals but were beaten in the final on penalties. It felt so bad, we drew in the last minute of the game as well, and it was cold and raining in Blackpool!

In my family I have my two brothers and my mum and dad. One of my brothers plays football and my older brother is studying to be a doctor at Bristol University. When I lived in Spain, we had a nice house and it was sunny all the time. I would play football on the pitch right near my house. I used to play for our local team but then one day Cadiz FC called my mum asking for me to go for a trial. Then, the next day they called saying they wanted to sign me. I was signed and I played there for one year. They planned on training me to play for the first team when I turned 18. Then, my family moved here for better work opportunities and for our education. It was hard because I had to leave all my friends but it was good moving here in the end. We go back to visit too and I might go back because Cadiz still wants me to play for them.

My dad taught me how to play football and ever since then it has been my dream to be a footballer. In Nigeria he played at a good level. I have visited Nigeria too. I got to meet more people in my family there. In Nigeria my dad is from a tribe called Yoruba. Food is important to Nigerian people. It is hard to explain what the food is like but I guess I could say it is good, and spicy. I have been shown how to cook many things and I am a very good cook, I think. Overall, Nigeria is good, I enjoyed it but I don't think I want to live there when I am older because I like European countries more and the opportunities aren't the same.

Both of my parents are nice people, they taught me to be respectful throughout my life. We are Muslim so we do Ramadan and afterwards we have a party. It can either be at our house or someone else's. This year we are going to one of my uncle's houses and everyone gets together to pray and thank God that we made it to another Ramadan.

My biggest challenge in my life so far was moving to the UK. It took me a long time to understand why we actually moved here. My parents told me it was because of work but I didn't care because I wanted to be with my friends from Spain. Now that I am here though, I am happy like I used to be. I have also faced racism in my life, here and in Spain. I have experienced it in school and whilst playing football. In the UK, sometimes the way people treat each other here isn't good, although I never let it lower my confidence. However, I do see racism often and sometimes I am able to leave it but other times it just makes me angry. I think we should speak more about it in school.

If football doesn't work out, I will run a business with my friends so I can make money. Money is important for living but I don't care too much about it now.

I speak Spanish at home with my family and learnt English a little bit before I came here in Year 6.

I would advise whoever is moving to a new place to take it slow, with time you will become comfortable in the country. On the other hand, for people in the country where people are moving to, they should understand that it is the person's life and they are coming from a place where they might be struggling and they really need to be here so they should make them feel welcome. Really, life is for living, so we should allow others to do whatever makes them happy.



Chapters of Me: From France to Fantasy

Bethel

My name is Bethel. I'm 14 years old, and I was born in France. I moved to the UK when I was eight, around Year 3. Honestly, I still remember one of the few memories from back then. We went on this school trip to the mountains. I don't really know where it was exactly, maybe an hour's drive from home. I just remember being little, maybe my sister was still a baby, and I cried the whole way. But still, it was fun. It stuck with me for some reason.

When people ask me what I like doing, it's hard to pick one thing. I love drawing, painting, and cooking. Last night, I made spaghetti with sausages in it. I cook with my mum quite often. It's one of the things we do together. With my dad, it's more like watching shows. He works nights, and my mum works days, so we get different bits of time with each of them.

I also write books. Mainly fantasy. I read a lot of fantasy too. One of my favourite books, *Twisted*, was about this friend group, four boys and four girls, and by the end of the story, each boy ended up with one of the girls. I thought that was sweet. Right now, I'm writing a story that starts mid-action. The main character says goodbye to her mum, heading off to a boarding school. She gets on the train, meets her friends, and there's this new kid that everyone's talking about. That's how I start, just jump right in. Then, for each chapter, I plan out a headline or a topic so I don't go off track. I aim to finish ten chapters. When I do, I'll start publishing them online. That's the goal. One chapter a week. Sometimes even two.

When I go out, I like to walk. There's a park near me where I just walk around, usually by myself. It helps with writing ideas. Actually, I carry a notebook in my school bag. So if I've finished my classwork and I've got nothing to do, I write down ideas for the book I'm working on.

I'm the oldest in my family, so I get quite a few responsibilities. I've got a brother and a sister. My sister and I play a lot. She's outgoing and wants to be everyone's friend. My brother is the opposite, really quiet and calm. We bond over games, like *Sims 4*. We even did a house-building competition once. I finished mine, a mega mansion, and he never got around to starting his. We do things like go into town together. Like for my dad's birthday last week, we went and picked out presents. I like it when we do things like that. It's just nice being together.

My mum is kind, always gentle. My dad has so much energy, and he makes things fun. And my siblings, I've already said, but I think the mix of personalities in our house works. I guess I'm in the middle. Not in age, but in personality. I'm not as outgoing as my sister, but not as quiet as my brother.

My family is originally from Africa. My grandparents still live there, but I've only met one of them, my dad's mum. We don't talk often, just sometimes on birthdays. I wish I had a closer relationship with them, but since they're far away and they're getting older, it's hard.

One of the biggest lessons I've learned is from my parents on how to cook and how to build things. My dad taught me a bit of DIY. Like building furniture. I think that's useful.

When it comes to traditions, we celebrate Christmas. Everyone brings food, and if you're coming to the party, you have to cook something. It's like a rule! It makes it more of a shared thing, you know?

In my spare time, apart from reading and writing, I love watching movies, especially horror. I know, people always say, "How can you watch that?" but I'm not even scared. Like Terrifier, that movie wasn't scary at all to me. It was just... interesting. Though, jumpscare still make me go, "What are you doing there?" But overall, horror is fun.

My favourite seasons are summer and winter. Summer, because you can go out and do things. Winter because of the coziness and Christmas. But summer can be too hot sometimes, especially if you're somewhere like France. I went last year and it was 40 degrees! It was unbearable. I'm looking forward to maybe going to Italy this year. My mum mentioned it, and I'm already planning what I'll pack, and it's months away. If I could travel more, I'd definitely go to warmer countries, but not too hot. Maybe France again.

The hardest time in my life is probably moving to the UK. Not because of the language, I already knew some English, French, and Dutch from school in France. But making friends was tough. I remember, on the first day of school here, everyone was nice because I was new. Some people came up to me, introduced themselves, and that helped. But over time, you lose touch. Especially moving from primary to secondary. Some friends stayed, but a lot didn't. Still, I learned that it's okay to be scared. It's okay to be new somewhere. You'll be fine. You just have to let yourself adapt.

School here is different. In France, we didn't have school on Wednesdays. So we had midweek breaks, which were so helpful. You could revise, rest, and catch up. Here, it's five full days, and you barely get time to breathe between school, homework, extracurriculars, and going to bed early. I'd change that if I could. Just one day off in the middle of the week would make such a big difference.

If I had to sum up my childhood so far, I'd say it's been full of ups and downs. Like, starting primary was scary. But then I made friends, so it was okay. Then came another big primary school, and that was scary again. Then I made more friends. It's like a wave. Ups and downs.

People sometimes try to bully you, but then your friends back you up. Then high school uniforms, new rules, big changes. But I made friends there, too. And now, as I get closer to GCSES, it feels stressful. But I know once it's over, and I'll have done my best.



Reset and Rise: A Defender's Second Chance

Cuthbert

My name is Cuthbert. I'm from Spain, and I'm 15 years old. I'm in Year 10 now, and I live here in the UK. My family moved here about two or three years ago, mostly for better education and opportunities. Back in Spain, things were a bit different, more relaxed, more peaceful. You don't see fights or problems like you do here. Life there was slower, calmer. Even the way people connect is different. In Spain, people talk, they vibe quickly. But here, I had to show who I was, show I was funny, before people started to want to be friends.

I remember some things from when I was younger, like riding my bike all around the city in Spain. That was freedom. My dad used to let me stay outside for a long time, and I'd just cycle around everywhere. I never got tired. I'd ride up and down, just feeling the breeze and watching the city move around me.

At home here, I live with my mum, dad, and my three younger siblings. I'm the oldest. My dad works as a delivery driver, and my mum stays home, looking after the house and us kids. We've got a proper routine in our house. Every Friday, we clean the whole place together as a family. It's just how it is. In the morning, we've got to tidy our rooms, make the bed, and keep things clean. It's strict, but it's also good. My mum and dad love music too, so when we clean, they'll put on music and we all sort of vibe while we clean. I like that it brings us together.

After 8 pm, when my dad gets home from work, we all eat dinner together. That's something we always do. We sit, talk, laugh, and eat. It feels like home. We also go to church every Sunday, and my whole family goes. It's part of our life. I'd say I'm pretty religious, or spiritual. Church keeps us grounded.

My parents are always busy, but they always find time for us. My dad gives me advice all the time. He tells me to stay focused, to read my books, and to finish school. "After that," he says, "you can do anything you want." My mum tells me to follow what I love. She's like, "Don't just do something because you have to do what you enjoy."

As a kid, I always wanted to be a footballer. I used to play striker, but now I play centre-back. That switch going from attacking to defending was a big change, but I've learned to enjoy it. Back in Spain, I never joined a club. I'd just go to the park and play with older kids. My mindset was that if I played with people better than me, I'd improve quicker. And people always told me I was good. When I moved here to the UK, I finally joined a club. We play matches, we've got leagues, tournaments, all that. I love it.

On the weekends, I usually have a match on Saturday. My coach takes us. After a match, I'm usually shattered. I just go home, sleep, then maybe watch YouTube or play PS5. I don't like going outside unless it's summer. If it's not warm, I stay indoors.

My siblings are alright now. I've got a younger sister whom I used to fight with a lot. We used to snitch on each other all the time. But one day, we had this chat, like, "Let's stop. Let's team up instead." Since then, things have been good. The younger ones? They're chilled. They just sit and watch TV.

When I think about the food I love, it's Nigerian food, for sure. Jollof rice with tomato sauce and butter. That's my favourite.

I've been to three schools since I came to the UK. The first one, I had no friends. I'd just play football alone. The second school was better; people came up to me, talked to me, and I made friends. But I started messing around, acting silly. I thought, "This is different from Spain." In Spain, you can't talk back to teachers. Here, I saw people doing it all the time, and nothing happened. So I joined in. It didn't go well, I got kicked out.

I missed all of Year 9. But that's when I got diagnosed with ADHD. Before that, no one knew what was going on with me; they just thought I was naughty. Once I got the diagnosis, things started making sense. They gave me a second chance, and I went back to mainstream school. Since then, I've changed. I've focused more. I've done what I needed to do. I'm proud of myself for coming back from that.

People ask me what I want to do in the future. I used to say footballer, and I still love football, but now I think, what if I don't make it? What's the backup plan? I don't really know yet. I'm still thinking. I just know I want to wake up and enjoy my job. Not being miserable every morning like some people. Maybe I'll start my own business one day or maybe even coach football.

Finding Strength Through Change

Daniel

I am Daniel and I am 15 years old.

My family immigrated from Portugal five years ago. My mum and dad were born in Angola and they moved to Lisbon, Portugal after that. They chose to go to Portugal to give me a better education. In Portugal my mum was a doctor. Our life in Portugal was a big community, we all knew each other and we all supported one another.

Moving from Portugal to the UK was hard because it was a whole new life. I had no friends but now I have friends and I have managed to create a life here. I have learnt English over the last five years but we speak Portuguese at home. I do find the weather so difficult here, I miss the weather in Portugal. I think it should be a rule that we can wear coats in school because it is so cold! Other than that, everything about moving here has been positive for me.

My biggest challenge was, unfortunately, when my dad went to Portugal and passed away there. It was only a couple of months ago. The day I found out that he had passed my mum was calling him for the entire day but he didn't answer so she became worried. She told my auntie to go to my dad's house to see what was going on. My dad didn't answer and the ambulance had to knock the door down to open it. My auntie told my mum and she had to tell me. It happened randomly because he wasn't ill. At the start it was hard but now I have accepted it and I am living my life. My mum feels the same but we both have to keep going. I miss everything about him. Our strength comes with time, I think that is the key. It doesn't get better with time but time gives you the ability to deal with it.

My parents taught me to never give up and if things are hard then to believe in God. They taught me this by showing me how they live. My mum personally is kind. My dad was funny and a good guy. As a family, on the weekend we go to my grandma's house to have lunch together. We eat and enjoy each other's company. My auntie and my mum cook. They are good cooks; we have Portuguese food like cachupa.

My friends are like my siblings here. I have found people who are good for me to be with. I have found the same type of community here like I had in Portugal. I am part of the football team here too so I have made connections with people that way. I was proud of us when we beat the rival school.

I used to want to be a footballer because I watched football a lot. I support Benfica but my English team is Manchester City. My hobbies are going out with my friends and playing football. My favourite memories are playing football at night on summer evenings. I've been to both the Everton and Liverpool stadiums with my mum, auntie, uncle and three cousins. I preferred the Liverpool stadium to Everton. Having my family around is important to me so we can talk about life because family are the people you trust.

Five years ago, I visited Angola. I don't remember much of it because I was a kid but I do remember being on the beach. It was really warm. We ate a lot of Angolan food too. I would like to go to Angola again soon so I can see what it is like now that I am older and hopefully remember a bit more. My heritage is important to me because it is my background and I need to know where my family comes from. Although I would like to visit Angola again, I think I will stay living in England when I am older.

I haven't experienced racism personally but I am aware that it happens. I think people just need to remember everyone is human. I've got bones, you've got bones, I have a face, you have a face; we're all the same.

I think so far, my life sometimes has been good, and sometimes it has been bad but that's just life. It's not always perfect. For my future, I want to make my mum proud and make money with my friends. I don't think money is really that important but I understand I need it for life.

If I could speak to my younger self, I would tell him to enjoy his dad. But for me now, life is about keeping on living.

Faith, Family and Finding My Place

Davies

My name is Davies and I am 13 years old. I was born in Nigeria and lived there until I was 9.

The house I lived in in Nigeria was good because my dad paid for someone to install taps so we could drink in our home. The front of our house was large and we would just run around it all the time. The community there was nice. We had good neighbours because we did each other favours and we all knew each other. I really didn't like the school I went to in Nigeria as the outside of the school was not good. The teachers were nice but we didn't have any computers. They said they were getting them just before I left to come here! You would get hit at school in Nigeria for stuff like forgetting to do your homework or if your uniform was dirty. Obviously, I didn't like it because I was the one feeling the pain but I couldn't do anything about it because I was not the one in power. I was happy I left because of that.

We learnt maths and English and a language called Yoruba because they wanted us to learn our culture but we weren't allowed to speak it at school. My mum always wanted us to learn English. She even gave us English names. I think she knew she was always going to be able to bring us here. Also, in the Bible there is someone called David and people in our culture love that name and so she named me Davies hoping that if she ever could bring us to the UK, people would be able to pronounce my name well. She did the same for my sisters too. My mum's name means glory and my dad's name means bring joy. I like my name. My family means everything to me.

We learnt a lot about our culture in Nigeria. As we are Christian, we do Christmas parties and festivals. We read from the Bible and pray. My religion is very important to me. My favourite thing about Nigeria was my friends but I like being here too. In the UK, we actually have things to do like going to school, learning or revising.

My mum came to the UK a year before us to get things ready. When we were doing the visas, my eldest sister's got declined so we had to leave without her but finally, she got accepted. I think because we had been praying for the entire year. I missed my mum so bad that year because my dad's cooking isn't so good. When we first landed in Manchester, we went to the house my mum had found for us and ate good food. For that first week we were so happy but it was during Covid so we had to stay indoors for a while.

I didn't like starting school here at first. I didn't like my teacher but I had Mr Walker in my primary school who I could go to and he would sort it out for me. I got to use a computer for the first time here too. I had one teacher who was a little racist and would pick on my language in primary school. I think that is the biggest challenge I have faced. Students say racist words in their language, which makes me feel annoyed and angry, but I know I have the same rights as they have so I don't let it change how I think about myself.

When I was younger, I dreamed of being a doctor. My mum has always wanted me to do that. I am not sure which type of doctor but I think I would like to do surgery. It is a good job because you save lives too. For my plan B, I want to be an actor to earn £1 million at the end of the year. I want a job where I can make the most money. Hopefully, I can find something that I am passionate about as well as earn lots of money but I know I am good at acting because I can fake cry.

I get on with my sisters and we play together. In the evenings, we all go into the sitting room and talk about how our day has been. My parents have taught me everything they know, particularly to learn to plan forward. I think it is important to know what I am going to do with my day so that I am ready for whatever. I like playing football and games, and I like eating. Burgers and meats are my favourite. In Nigeria my favourite thing to eat was rice.

I think life is about making good decisions and I would say to my younger self that I did a good job surviving.



Dreaming Through the Discomfort

Fuad

My name is Fuad and I am in Year 8 at Falinge Park High School. I am a two-way person, which means I am up and down. I can be sad and angry but I can be very kind too. My life began in Nigeria. I don't remember much about Nigeria because it has been a long time since I lived there but I do remember on weekends we would go and play football in the streets. My school in Nigeria was really good, they taught me well and everyone was really nice. We didn't have much, I wouldn't say it was as advanced as here, like we didn't have interactive white boards, but we had all the basics. I felt like I learnt a lot at school there. During playtimes and lunchtimes, we ate and had games to play. I had loads of friends too.

When I was small my mum passed away but my aunties and grandma raised me. Finding out things about my mum makes me sad. It's difficult not having a mum but I have my auntie and I see her as a mum. My family takes care of me very well by making sure I have food and clothes and treating me as their own child.

My dad lived in the UK before I was born. He came back when me and my sister were born in Nigeria and then came back to the UK. Eventually, me and my sister got to come here too. When I first came here, I was so cold. I was not used to the weather here at all. My dad had to take me shopping to buy extra clothes! My sister is so nice. She gives me and my dad gifts. She is going to university in September. I think the most important thing my dad has taught me is to be kind and clean. I think he has a lot of stress with paying bills and trying to look after us.

I had way more freedom in Nigeria to go play football but here I am not allowed to go out as much for some reason. This makes me feel lonely and bored sometimes. I would just like a bit more freedom.

My first school here was good and I had loads of friends. Some of the older kids thought they were bigger and stronger than me so they bullied me. They used racist language towards me. It made me feel really disgusted because why would people know the meaning of words and still say them to me. I had heard the words in Nigeria before but not in that way because everyone in Nigeria said it as a joke. Unless we can control people's mouths, I don't think there is much we can do about it. I think people who use racist language don't understand the hardships people face. Back in the day, in terms of slavery, people thought it was normal what white people did to black people but it's actually not good at all. People try to be funny with their friends by saying things but it is just not right. I don't think we all need to understand each other as individuals, we just need to stop being racist. I am not racist so others shouldn't be racist to me.

When I was younger and still now, I hope to be a footballer because people tell me I am good at it. I love playing football so I guess why don't I just work towards becoming a footballer because it is what I like doing. I don't mind what team I play for and I don't support any particular team, I just enjoy playing. My dad wants me to become a doctor or engineer though. He said becoming a footballer depends on luck but I don't agree with him so I am going to carry on working towards becoming one. I think I would like my dad to support me more in trying to become a footballer because I don't want it to not happen and it would be easier if he tried to help me. I think everyone should always try to achieve their dreams and keep going.

Another challenge in life so far for me, has been not having much money. Not having much money is not good because in life you need money no matter what. It makes life more difficult without it. My government rule would be that everyone is given at least £10 every week to help them. My plan B is to go and live in the countryside and be a farmer. I would like to live peacefully and have no one disturb me.

My favourite memories are playing football. Football is very important to me. It makes me feel happy. When I feel sad, I go play football and forget everything about life that is getting me down. I don't know what it is about it but I just love it. Gaming is my second favourite thing to do, even though my dad takes my phone off me when I am on it.

Gaming is good because whenever I am bored, especially in winter when I can't go out and I have nothing to do, I can play my games. I like Free Fire because I play it with my friends and we can all chat together.

I think life is about living it to the fullest and enjoying it because you don't know when you're going to die.

From Exclusion to Aspiration

Ison

I'm Ison, my name means illuminating light, I'm 15 and I go to Falinge Park High School.

My family is fun, we always have fun with each other, and we all care for each other too. My mum is a hard worker, and she cares a lot for us all. My dad is the same. I have three brothers at home. I am the second youngest, but there's seven of us siblings altogether. My home has just been renovated and I like how it has turned out, it looks good. My mum did it all by herself. She made it a nice house again. I don't know where she got the skills to do it but it's nice. I've got the second biggest room in the house but that's good because I've got a lot of stuff in there, like for my gaming and room for when my brothers want to come stay.

My dreams have changed from when I was younger. I wanted to be a successful footballer, which I still hope to achieve, but I think I want to go into the army now. My cousins are professional footballers. One used to play for United, but he's switched now, and one plays for Coventry. I support Liverpool and always have since I was a kid, even though my dad tried to put me onto United. Mané is my favourite player. My dad was also a professional footballer at Sporting in Lisbon, Portugal before he got injured. When he got injured, he had to change everything, he had to move jobs – everything - because football was his career. When he lost football, he didn't know what to do but he works hard now for us all here.

I think the most important thing my parents have taught me is to not be the one to cause problems but to help when there are problems. My mum is a missionary in church which means she goes around helping others. In our family, every two weeks on a Thursday we meet up with my auntie, uncles and cousins and have a family meeting. We pray and catch up with each other on what has been going on in our lives. This is important to me

because I get to hear what is happening with my family and what has happened in the past, stuff they haven't always opened up about. I tend to talk about how I am doing in school. I find this supportive.

The biggest challenge that I, and my whole family, have faced was me being permanently excluded from my old school. There was a lot of racial activity. People would be racist and I would fight with them so I got kicked out for it. Every time they used certain words, I would just get angry and fight them. I didn't talk to anyone about it, not even my family, I just got angry instead. But coming to this school, I haven't faced any racism and I feel happier here. I have people who speak my language, Portuguese, here too. Racism is wrong. We should like each other for the way we are and I think we should consider that if someone is a different colour, then that is something special, not something to hate against. If I could have a government rule, I would want them to enforce more awareness around racism to stop it.

My precious memory was when my whole family went to France. The weather was nice, we went to the beach, Disneyland, and to the top of the Eiffel Tower and even though I am scared of heights, it was worth it. I was 5 when we went and the only thing I can remember from Disney is shaking Mickey's hand. I've also been to Portugal many times because I have family there. I actually prefer Portugal to the UK because it is just a vibe. Everyone is chill, the weather is nice and we can just hang outside as a family.

My childhood so far has been a bumpy road, there's good and bad stuff, but I do think it is smooth sailing now. I am happy now.

My future dream is to go into the army to protect people. I saw people on TikTok saving others in different countries and it has encouraged me to do the same ever since. I want to help people like that. Helping people gives me warmth inside.

For me, life is about enjoying and learning from your mistakes, and I believe our dreams should never be broken.



Middle Child, Mighty Heart

Monisola

My name is Monisola, I'm 14 years old, and I'm originally from London, but my ethnicity is Nigerian. I live in Falinge, Rochdale, now, and I'm currently in Year 9.

I guess I'd say I'm someone who likes to keep things fun. I love dancing, like proper dancing, not that I'm on a team or anything, but when I go to parties or just mess around with my sister and friends, it's always something I enjoy. Mostly to afrobeats or hip-hop, that kind of thing. I also love netball, and honestly, I just enjoy sleeping and eating. I know everyone loves sleep, but seriously, it's top tier.

Netball's been part of my life since Year 5. It was actually my sister who dragged me into it. There was this netball practice at school and she didn't want to go alone, so I went with her even though I wasn't interested at first. I kind of got forced into it, but after a while, I started to like it, and before I knew it, we were both on the school team. I kept going into Year 7 and Year 8, and I've played in tournaments against other schools too. That can be intense; some of those schools are stacked with people who play outside school, so there's a bit of intimidation, but I've learned to hold my own. I'm a defender, Goal Defence. If someone's getting cocky or if I feel like they're underestimating me, I go harder. Even if they're better, I'm not scared. I'm like, "We can play at the same level." That's the energy I carry into a match, bold, like I'm not backing down for anyone.

I'm a big fan of my culture's food. We mostly eat Nigerian dishes at home, jollof rice, dodo gizzards, and yam porridge. My favourite is yam porridge, it's made from yam, which kind of looks like a log, and when you cut it open, it's white inside. You cook it in a pepper paste, and it's just so nice. We don't eat fast food too much unless I'm out. But if I'm being real, I also love pizza, chicken wings and typical English food as well.

My first memory is probably from reception, when I “got married” in a class play. I was the bride, and there was music and everything “duh duh duh” wedding vibes. Everyone in the class was a guest, and I walked down the aisle with my best friend. Another early memory is from when I was in nursery, my dad would push my sister in a buggy and I’d hold onto the strap, walking beside them on the way to school.

My family is made up of six of us: my mum, dad, older brother (he’s 19), me, my little sister who’s in Year 7, and my little brother who’s 7. So, yeah, I’m the middle child. And even though I’m not the oldest, I feel like I get a lot of the responsibility, especially because I’m the oldest girl. My parents expect me to help out, to look after my siblings. But I do think the oldest has it the hardest, they really have to watch all of us when our parents are busy.

My dad works as a security officer, and my mum is a nurse. She works in a hospital, which is hard work, looking after people, seeing people when they’re sick. I used to spend more time with my parents when I was younger, but as I’ve gotten older, the attention shifts to the younger ones. You’re expected to become more independent, especially in a big family. You’ve got to help out wherever you can.

We celebrate Eid, and when I lived in London, Eid was so fun. We used to go to Burgess Park, a huge park where everyone would gather to pray, get henna, and eat funfair food. But when I moved to Middleton, it was very different. It’s a predominantly white area, and Eid became more of a quiet thing at home. Now in Rochdale, we celebrate with cousins who live nearby. Either they come to ours or we go to theirs.

I’ve been fasting since I was around 10, but when I was younger, I used to cheat, sneak food in the toilet and pretend I was fasting. Now I take it seriously. The hunger gets to me sometimes, but I’ve learned to manage it.

I think one of the best memories we had recently as a family was a trip to Blackpool in 2022. It was the first proper trip we had in a while. We went to the beach, went on rides,

it was just good vibes. I haven’t travelled abroad much, though, not with the whole family. The last time was when I was like three, and I went to Nigeria with my mum and sister to visit family. My parents sometimes go separately now because it’s expensive for all six of us to go.

All of my grandparents live in Nigeria. We call them now and then, but they haven’t visited the UK. My grandpa on my dad’s side doesn’t even want to come, he’s old now, so my dad is planning to visit him this year. I do feel like I’m missing out sometimes. It’s different over there, more traditional, and you’re surrounded by your whole family. Here, it’s more separated. It’s like you’re away from your roots.

If there’s one thing I’ve learned from my family, it’s that our love is unconditional. Even when you mess up, even if it’s the worst thing, they’ll still love you and care for you. It’s that kind of rooted connection that never goes away.

One of the most challenging things I’ve gone through is my mental health. There was a time I just didn’t want to be around anyone. People used to say I was bipolar, one moment I’d be laughing and loud, the next I’d be silent and withdrawn. I didn’t like being around people, I just wanted to be left alone. But I think I’m getting better. I’m learning not to overthink everything, because when you stay stuck in your thoughts, it’s hard to get out. I’m learning to live in the moment more, and that’s something I’m proud of.

Sometimes I think about my younger self, and I miss her. Life felt easier, more fun, no stress, no thinking too hard. Just being a kid. And now, everything feels so serious. There are days when I want to go back to just running around, playing silly games, not caring so much. That’s the part I miss.

As for the future? I don’t know exactly what I want to do yet, but I’ve got dreams. I know I want to do well, make my parents proud, maybe travel more, and connect with where I come from. And I want to be happy, like fully happy, not just the “I’m fine” kind of happy. The kind where you feel at peace with who you are.



Across Continents, Against the Odds

Tiago

My name is Tiago. I'm 15 years old, from Angola. In my first memory, I was three years old, with my mum, in a car on our way to church. I don't know why, but that moment is stuck in my mind. I think I'm a spiritual person. I believe in something bigger than me. That connection to church, to God, maybe it started back then. Maybe that feeling of happiness was something more.

Now, sports are my world. I didn't really play them before I came to the UK, but once I started, I couldn't stop. Football, basketball, anything really. When I'm stressed, anxious, or overthinking, I just grab a ball. Sports calm me down, give me peace. It's not just about winning, it's the thrill and adrenaline rush. I understand now why people say movement heals.

Books are another thing. My mum made me read when I was a kid, and eventually, I started doing it by choice. Reading is like escaping, no one can disturb you, no one can control what's in your mind. It's your own world. I like thrillers mostly, detective stories, stuff that keeps your brain ticking.

Food-wise fufu. You might not know it, but it's a traditional dish from Africa. I've eaten it my whole life. It's hard to explain, but it's soft, usually made from wheat or cassava, and you eat it with sauce. It reminds me of home, of sitting around the table with family.

I was ten when I moved to the UK. Left Angola behind. I didn't come alone, I came with my cousin and my uncle. My cousin and I are the same age, we grew up together, so that made it easier. But still, new language, new school, new everything. It was hard, I won't lie. But we picked up English and adapted. Then our mums came, and slowly we started building something new here.

Angola is different. The people have this energy and joy, even when life's tough. In Angola, you step outside and you feel alive. You talk to your neighbours, you play in the streets, and the smells of the food fill the air. Here in the UK, it's more closed. Everyone's in their houses, heads down. People barely talk to their neighbours unless it's to complain. It feels quieter, a bit colder, not just the weather, but the vibe.

My mum wanted a better education for us. Back home, the school system isn't great. Even if you get high marks, they might knock you down just because. Here, there's more opportunity, even if I sometimes miss the warmth of Angola.

My mum is everything. Strong, dependable. If she asked me to give her my life, I would. She's the one who gave me confidence. I've always had low self-esteem. People say I'm smart, but I never believed it myself. I used to do maths every day, even at three years old, in Portuguese. But if I didn't get 90%, I felt like a failure. That pressure built up. But my mum? She tells me not to let others define me. That I should see myself through my own eyes. If I think I look good in something, that's enough. That message stuck with me.

My dad is different but just as important. He's strong, funny, and obsessed with football. He wanted to go pro once, but life took him a different way. Now he pours that passion into us, always giving advice, encouraging us to play. I think he sees a little bit of himself in me.

I've got two younger brothers. One is nine, the other just three. The nine-year-old? Annoying sometimes, laughing at nonsense. But we get along. We wind each other up like proper siblings. The little one is just discovering the world. I think I'm his favourite after our parents. He follows me everywhere, sits with me, and laughs with me. One day, when he's older, I'm going to start annoying him too, just to carry on the sibling tradition.

I lived in Portugal for two years before coming here. It was for school, the basics. My mum wanted me to have a head start. Portugal's nice, the vibe is good, but you've got to find the right community there. Otherwise, it's full of grumpy old people shouting if you kick a ball near their porch.

Moving around Angola, Portugal, UK it's been a lot. Sometimes I wish I could just stay in one place, have stable friendships. But I get it. We move for growth, for better opportunities. If that means leaving people behind, sacrificing a few friendships I'll do it. I've made peace with that.

One thing that really made me proud was last year, when I won gold in the high jump at school. I'd never won a medal before, even though I'd tried twice. I told myself this is my last chance before I leave school, I have to win. I nearly messed it up, too, hitting the bar once but I came back and nailed it. That medal? It's more than gold. It's proof I can push through fear.

We've got a dog too, Val. She's been with us forever. Might even be older than me! I love animals, even though I get a bit scared of them sometimes.

The most important thing I've learned from my parents? Live without regret. Don't let other people's opinions stop you. Fail if you have to, but get back up and keep going. One day, you'll be at the top, and all those voices that tried to hold you back will be quiet. That's what I carry with me.

I still think about going back to Angola. Not to live, things are rough there now, politically and economically, but just to visit. Smell the food again. See my family. Feel that warmth. I'll go when I finish school. For now, I'm here, building something. And I think I'm going to make something of myself. Not just for me, but for my mum, my family, for the dreams they had when they brought me here.

Quiet Strength: The Art of Being Me

Yasmin

Hi, my name is Yasmin. I'm 13 years old and in Year 9. This is a little window into who I am, what I love, and what I hope for in the future.

When I'm not watching Netflix, I love roller skating, and every year I go ice skating in Manchester. I'm okay at it, not amazing, but I don't fall over too much. And most of the time, I just like hanging out outside with my friends. There's a small park near my area where we just sit around, chill and talk. Nothing fancy, but it's our spot.

My favourite food's probably pizza. My mum does most of the cooking, and she's a great cook. She makes a lot of seafood, especially prawns, and always throws together amazing rice and salad dishes. I don't really cook for myself, but maybe one day.

I come from a big family, there are seven of us altogether. I've got four siblings, three brothers and one sister, and I'm the youngest of them all. It's kind of great, honestly. Being the youngest means I get spoiled a bit. Like, if I want something, I've got six people I can ask! It feels good being looked after, but also, my siblings give me a lot of advice and help out when I need it.

My sister's the oldest, she's married now and lives not too far away, near Matalan in Rotherham. One of my brothers is in Year 11, and the other two already work. I get along with all of them, but I'm closest to the one in Year 11, probably because we're the closest in age.

My mum works in a restaurant and my dad works in a factory. During the week, they're really busy, but on weekends we usually get to spend more time together. That's when we do more as a family, things like watching movies together, usually at home. Sometimes we go out, like to the cinema or for meals. On someone's birthday, we make loads of food and just spend time at home as a family. It's kind of our tradition.

When I was younger, I wanted to be an artist. I've always liked drawing people, and I even picked art as a subject for school. I still want to do something with art and design when I grow up. Maybe something creative, something where I can express myself. I haven't decided exactly what yet, but I'd like to explore different places too, like South Korea, Japan, or somewhere tropical like Hawaii. They just seem fun and exciting, and I want to see how people live over there.

I've never been abroad, though. Most of my extended family lives in Africa, my grandparents, aunts, and cousins, but I've never met most of them. I've never even travelled there, and they haven't come here either. I guess I don't really miss something I've never experienced, but I do wonder what it would be like to meet my grandparents. I think I'd like that. I have visited some cousins in the UK, though they live about two hours away, in a place called Peterborough.

At school, my biggest challenge has been trying to keep up with my work and maintaining good grades. Some subjects are just so packed with stuff to remember, and it can get overwhelming. But I try to just keep going. The more lessons I have, the more it starts to make sense. What I've learned from all that is: you have to work hard if you want to achieve things. The best moments at school are definitely just seeing my friends and spending time with them. That's what I really like.

I guess I'd call myself an introvert. I like being home, just chilling. The good part about being introverted is that you get more quality time with the friends you do have. It's not about having loads of people around you, it's about having the right ones. But yeah, the downside is you don't really meet a lot of new people.

If I think about something kind I've done, I guess it's helping my friends with homework or giving them advice. And when it comes to the planet, I think we all need to stop littering and maybe carpool more or just use less harmful stuff. If I could say one thing to my younger self, it would be: Don't be too stressed.

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**I really enjoyed the project and I feel good that
I was able to share my story.**

Rodrigo

Student – Falinge Park High School

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**The project felt adventurous and exciting. It brought
people together and was educational at the same time.
I hope that people can relate to the experiences shared
and recognise the power of their own
good and bad memories.**

Bethel

Student – Falinge Park High School

Pioneer House High School

Pioneer House High School

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The project has been an amazing opportunity for our students. Having the chance to take part in this project has empowered our students to share important stories that we know will inspire others to share their own stories, embrace their differences and challenge stereotypes. We hope that these stories show others that everyday challenges can be overcome with determination and empowerment.

Fabian Ramos

Assistant Headteacher – Pioneer House High School



Born to Play: A Story of Football, Family and Finding Strength

Aaliyah

I am Aaliyah, I am 14 and I go to Pioneer House High School. I was born in a council house in London. It was just me and my mum in London but I had lots of friends there who made me feel like I could be myself and I could do whatever I wanted.

I came to Manchester when I was 9 or 10 years old. It was hard to move because I was in primary school in Year 4 and I had a lot of friends but I had to make new friends when I moved to Manchester. All of our family lives in Manchester though, so I think that's why we moved here.

I wish school would let us play more football because I like playing and watching football. I support Manchester United. I play Fifa on my Nintendo Switch. I have six cousins who are all different ages that I hang out with on weekends. We all chill together and play games. We all get along but sometimes there can be some arguments. Ella and Dylan are the same age as me, Ella's younger brother is 13 years old, Hallie is 7 or 8 and Dylan's other younger sibling is 5 years old. My family is really important to me. I also have a 1 year old cousin called Orla.

I also love dogs because they are friendly and play with you. I am definitely a dog person over a cat one! Me and my mum have two miniature dachshunds who are called Minnie and Max. Minnie is a good kid but Max is not. When we go on walks, they always get tangled up around each other because they fight to be the one in front. My mum is kind and I like both of the dogs because they make me laugh. I love lions too because my hair is so puffy like theirs. My favourite film is "United". It is about a plane that claims the lives of eight young players.

Another thing I enjoy doing is cooking but sometimes I eat all the stuff as I am cooking and end up with nothing much left at the end. I love pizza, spicy food and curry. School should also have an ice cream van and a swimming pool for if it ever gets hot enough. My favourite trips were going to Spain and Benidorm. We ate so much ice cream but I found it a little too hot and sweaty. We had a pool to swim in though. I definitely prefer the sun over bad weather. Summer is my favourite season of the year too. I get to have my birthday in the sun because it is in June too.

I was proud of myself when I got my confidence back. I used to not stick up for myself and be quiet because of certain people in my class who weren't nice to me. To get my confidence back, I had a conversation with my teacher and my mum where we made a plan to grow my confidence. The plan made sure that I remembered everything I needed for school. For example, I have cochlear implants so I need spare batteries which I need to make sure I have ready for school. When I was younger, I had to go into surgery to get an implant fitted so I could hear properly. I was born early because my mum had a condition which meant I was born 100% deaf when they did a hearing test.

A big problem I have is being able to count money because I find it really hard. I find maths hard but I am good at English. I like writing and learning about writing stories. When I am older, I want to be a footballer for United. I want to be a striker. In 2023 I got a ticket to go on the Man United pitch at Old Trafford. It was all us fans playing football against each other. I think if the world were built for me, I would make it so I am better at football, meet famous people and have lots of money. I would probably give all the money to my mum and she would save it for us.

To take care of our planet, we should recycle more. As well as being a funny person, I am kind. I like to help other people because in the future if I help someone, they might then help me. My message to someone who is struggling is to never give up on your dreams, keep going and one day you will make it. Just because I am deaf, it doesn't mean I can't achieve anything I want and don't let anyone put you down.



From Chaos to Calm: My Journey with ADHD

Adim

I am Adim. I am 16 but turn 17 soon. My earliest memory was being back in my old house in a little shed that we had in the front garden. I remember my little sister sitting in there too. Another fun memory I had in that house was just with me and my sister and we were messing around and the Christmas tree just fell straight on me.

In my family there are five children. I have three sisters and one brother and my mum. My dad is not in the picture. He was a very angry man but he could be nice. I've accepted not seeing him anymore. My older sister is very chill. She is studying in college but she doesn't do much housework. I like that my sister is very trustworthy, she makes me feel like I can go to her for anything and she also makes great noodles! Michael is my youngest brother and he's a bit of a nightmare but he is adorable. Layla is a bit of a troublemaker and gets annoyed easily which makes her fun to tease. She is fun and energetic though. Isabella is kind but she just needs to learn to stop lying sometimes. My mum is a stay-at-home mum looking after us all. We have a cat called Cinnamon too. She's adorable but she gets in the way sometimes when I'm trying to do something my mum has asked me to do. I used to feel close to my nanna, my mum's mum, but she died just as my younger sibling was born, which was sad. My family has taught me to always be there for one another and to always be kind and thoughtful.

I like eating curry, burgers, fish and chips, noodles, prawns, mince and rice and spaghetti Bolognese. I've even had lobster and mussels. I used to work in the school café making the staff school lunches. I found the job quite fun and chill.

My favourite things to do are play games, go to the gym one day a week or airsoft if I have the money for it. I like doing active things. I play World of Warcraft which is like a World War II type game. I want to do more airsoft and try paintballing and rock climbing. I've tried skateboarding before. I can stand on the board and move around but I'm nowhere near the pros. On a weekend, if I have the money, I like to go to the gym and get some food from KFC with my friends.

When I was younger, I wanted to be a soldier or YouTuber. I used to post gaming videos on YouTube. My biggest challenge so far has been education. I was so far behind when I was younger because I never read anything. I really struggled coming to this school. I have ADHD which I take medication for. I think ADHD can be seen in different ways, such as being disinterested, interested in their own things and losing concentration easily. I think my ADHD made me feel misunderstood from an educational standpoint which resulted in me never doing any work or feeling encouraged. However, I managed to change my life and I thank Fabian, Declan and Josh for being there for me. It seemed to just change one day. I no longer get physical when I get angry, instead now I know to walk away and I can eventually calm down. My biggest motivation to change myself was when I realised I couldn't read. I just wanted to start reading and now I've got to the point where I can read a good amount.

I am proud of the steps I have taken to improve my behaviour and education. I used to go to a course at Manchester United and I would go early to my sessions which meant I was able to help with the younger people, which I enjoyed doing. I liked helping them.

In school, I like the staff and interactive stuff they offer like the trips. The trips are really fun. They taught us how to travel and see different parts of town and learn about going around. Hopefully, they are going to build a gym here if they get the budget. It would be good if they could get a grass football pitch and I would like to go to an editing college.

In the future I want to have a wife and kids and be middle class. I don't want to be amazingly rich, just the average family.



Older by One Minute, Stronger Every Day

Alex

My name is Alex and I am 12.

I was born in Wythenshawe Hospital. I've got my dad, two brothers, two sisters and a dog. My big brother is 19. Me and my twin brother are the youngest but I am the older one of us two by one minute. He was born at 7:36pm and I was born at 7:35pm. My dad makes me laugh all the time but I get along with my dog, Roxy Rainbow, the best out of them all. I like cuddling her at night and playing with her. I remember the day we got her in 2015 when I was 3 years old. I was so happy.

I like playing and watching football. I support Manchester City. I have been doing gymnastics for years and I enjoy riding my bike. I fell off one time but it didn't hurt. I also enjoy cooking, specifically pancakes. I have chocolate, syrup, squirty cream and strawberries. My favourite things to eat are lasagne, fish, fruit, Sunday dinner and dry mangoes. I like street dancing and gaming too. I play Fortnite, GTA and Minecraft. We have a family PS5 that we got for Christmas one time. Finally, I enjoy sleeping too! I went to Wales in a caravan when I was younger with my nanna and grandad. On the weekend, I enjoy sleeping, riding my bike and gaming. I will ride my bike in any weather but my favourite season is summer. My birthday is in summer and last year I got a Stitch blanket, colouring stuff and pyjamas.

I was proud of myself when I started playing girls football and going to dance sessions. I think I prefer football because it's an after-school club. I enjoy coming to school to see my friends and favourite teachers. I have loads of friends at this school. My favourite lessons are maths, PE and English. If I could change school, I would make it so we could do more gymnastics, have an ice cream van every day in the summer and build a swimming pool. At the moment, if we want to swim, we have to go outside of school but we are going next term which I am looking forward to. We also don't do any gymnastics in PE, which I wish we would.

The biggest challenge I have been through was when my mum died when I was in Year 6. My primary school helped me through this time.

When I am older, I want to be a maths teacher, dancer and doctor. I want to be a doctor to help people in hospital. To help our planet I think we should look after animals. I think I am a kind person because I hold the doors for teachers when they are coming. I also helped my friend when her cat died by calming her down. Me and my friend have known each other for 10 years so I knew how to help her.

If I could change the world so it was built for me, I would have a birthday every day of the year and be a millionaire. I would buy so many animals with all the money I had, specifically a rabbit because ours passed away and a snail to scare my sister. I would also buy a house for my family that has 10 bedrooms so I can have all my friends over. After school, I might go to college and see what happens next.



Spring Blossoms and Belarusian Roots

Alisa

My name is Alisa, I am 17 years old and I moved to the UK from Belarus.

Moving from Belarus made me feel happy although I do miss Belarus so much. I miss my music there especially because I played piano, drums and guitar. When I was young, I wanted to be a musician. I found it difficult when I stopped having music lessons with Brooke because she moved to a different school. Music really helps me, but I should be getting a new teacher soon, which I am excited for. I have learnt to be patient and wait for my new teacher to start. I think I still want to be a musician like the Beatles.

I enjoy working with my mother and spending sunny days with her. I help my mum by cleaning, tidying and using the vacuum. My mum is very kind and nice. In my family it is just me, my mum and dad. I am an only child but I have four cousins. I like it just being us so I haven't ever wished for any siblings. I do wish we could have a cat like Luna from an anime show. My dad works in an office and my mum is a chef.

We went on a great trip as a family to a castle one time. I also enjoy going to the beach. We once went with school. We played in the water but didn't go too far. I am excited for the Easter holidays so I can give my family presents. I like all of the holidays, such as Valentine's, St Patrick's Day, Chinese New Year and International Women's Day. Spring is the best season for me because all of the trees blossom, animals are born and flowers bloom. I love Christmas too! For Christmas we open presents and we eat Christmas dinner and fruits. In Russia, we celebrate Victory Day for Belarus, Russia and Ukraine.

My favourite food is soup. I like Belarusian and Ukrainian soups. They usually have vegetables like cabbage, beetroot, potatoes and onions in them. I also love pancakes. I like fruits too, like pears, watermelons and strawberries. I like healthy foods and I think we should learn more about nutrition.

I like Anime and Disney shows like Zootopia. I went to a Comicon convention and I dressed up as Miku. I wore a long blue wig. My mum said we are going to go again when it is in Manchester. This time I am going to dress up as Daxas the Wolf.

I also enjoy going shopping for toys and books. My favourite books are Mr Men books. I am proud of my spring poem that I wrote. I entered it into a competition and received a certificate. I am able to speak both Russian and English which I am also proud of myself for being able to do. At home I speak Russian and at school I speak English. I like learning English in school and writing poems. We recently wrote poems about daffodils. I am also really good at maths. In class I help tidy the desk, do the visual timetable, hand out diaries and change the date.

Moving from Belarus to the UK was easy. I managed to make a lot of friends. In Belarus we would go to the park and on bike rides. We lived in the countryside there. I think I prefer living in the countryside rather than a big city because there is more room and in the Belarusian countryside there was a big park and I could relax there.

My vision is not so good which means I have to sit at the front of the classroom and I wear glasses. I have a writing frame to help me to see better. I do feel a little different from everyone else but I am happy to be different. I also calm myself by doing yoga and meditation. It helps me to relax. Nature and the colour green make me feel calm.

If I were the leader of the world, I would change food and nutrition by cooking in class and I would be able to dress up as an anime character every day.

A World of My Own: Music, Sight and Finding My Voice

Ella

I am Ella, I am 14 years old and right now I am living in Knutsford. I like living there because it is sunny. There's a farm near my house and on a weekend, I sometimes go to help them.

I enjoy listening to old music, like from the 60s and 70s. I like the style of music from that era. It's so hard to choose a favourite artist, I like all of them. David Bowie is good. Queen with Freddie Mercury is cool and I like Cyndi Lauper too. I also like watching 90s TV shows – I'm all about the 90s! I like Biker Grove. Because I like stuff from other times, I find it hard to talk to other children my age because I don't know what to talk to them about. Sometimes I find making friends hard because I don't know what to say to them at first. It makes me feel nervous and I become awkward. I have learnt to just be myself when making friends though.

I've been at Pioneer House for three years and I think it is a good school. If I was given the chance, I don't think I would change anything about the school. The staff are wonderful here and I like everything. The reason I am at this school is because I have learning difficulties. I'm fine with having learning difficulties because I know I can get on with it.

My earliest memory was probably on my fourth or fifth birthday when I got this big card with a birthday badge on it from my dad. In my family I have my mum, stepdad and step brother. We like to go out as a family to places to eat like restaurants or on walks. I love a good chicken curry. I like cheesy garlic bread and halloumi fries too. I get on with my family all the time. My stepdad is pretty funny and my mum is really nice and caring towards us all. My stepbrother is also just nice to be around. We've been on special trips to Wales. We played bingo there which was fun. As a family we celebrate Christmas too.

We have a nice meal, open presents and have my family round. My grandma comes round which is nice.

I am really close to my mum. She does a lot for me like making sure I am happy and healthy. She is really kind too. She's probably taught me loads of important things but I just can't remember one specific thing. I tell my mum when I am feeling different from others and she reassures me that I am normal and I am the same.

When I am going round to busy places, I get a bit overwhelmed sometimes. I have sensory problems and have issues with loud noises. I tackle this by carrying my white symbol cane. I also have a vision impairment meaning that I can't see distances as well as other people. I've had this since I was a baby. It can be quite tricky sometimes for me. If I am struggling to see something, I can use my phone to take a photo and then look at it so I don't miss out. In society, most people are nice but sometimes people just don't get it, so if there was someone feeling down, I would try to make them feel better by asking them if they're okay.

My favourite seasons are autumn and winter. I like autumn because my birthday is around that time. On my birthday I enjoy being around my family. I like walking in the leaves in autumn too. I've been able to go on holidays each year since I was 2 years old. We have mainly been to Dalaman in Turkey. My grandparents are from the UK but they live in Turkey now so we go to see them.

I've sponsored a guide dog, which I think is a good cause because they help people with visual impairments like me and make their lives easier. I think it is important for people to have the option of having a guide dog. I would love to be a guide dog trainer as a career when I grow up. I want to help people who have the same problems as I do. I could relate to the people and use my struggle with sight to help others. I'm always kind to people.

If the world was built for me, I think I would change it so people stop littering and be aware of people's disabilities. To my younger self, I would tell her to not give up on her dreams and stay strong.



Faith, Football and Finding My Way

Harrison

My name is Harrison, I go to Pioneer House High School and I am 15.

I was born in Wythenshawe Hospital in South Manchester. I have moved around a few times, though. I have a brother and sister. My brother has twin daughters and he is 27 years old. My sister is 25 years old. At home, it is me, my mum, my dad and our dog. When I was younger, my brother used to tease me and mess around with me. We used to argue a lot but not so much anymore. My nieces are so funny and my dad sings in the kitchen all the time but I have to say his voice is not good!

I plan to have a car, spread the word of God and have a two-bedroom house when I am older. I think I want to be a forklift operative for my job too, and if that doesn't work out, I will be a photographer. I always take photos of loads of random stuff.

I have good memories of going on special family trips to Wales. One time my cousin jumped into an ice cream van and he got stuck. He tried to get some free ice cream but got caught, it was really funny! I enjoy going on holiday but I like coming home and don't like to be away for too long. I like looking at the sky in summertime and we get to have barbecues. I am looking forward to going to Cyprus this year for my friend's wedding.

My favourite things to do are play with my dog, which is a mix between a shih tzu and emperor shih tzu, talk with my friends, play football and jog. My dog, Poppy, is a rescue dog who had a troubled life before living with me because she used to live in a cage and was malnourished due to her previous owners not looking after her very well at all. The RSPCA had to take all the dogs away from that house so we ended up with Poppy.

To help our world, I think we should recycle and reduce oil use by 30%. I might not be the one to help the world but I do care and I think others will be able to do it. I am a helpful person though, like when I was there for my friend when he lost a family member. I was able to be there for him because I lost my grandma in 2023 so I could relate to him.

When I was growing up, like in primary school, I found it really hard because I had to go into a special classroom for SEN children called the Beehive. Some kids were in there because they had anger issues but I have lost contact with a lot of them now and they have gone different ways to me. I found it challenging in primary school but in high school I found it fine at first but now I am struggling again. Sometimes I can do the work but I find it difficult to explain things which gets me frustrated. I have been trying to improve my handwriting as I am left-handed and in primary school everyone always used to rush me, but if I have time, I am able to write properly.

Apart from playing with my dog, I enjoy jogging but at the moment my street has a little tension because everyone is arguing. Where I live is not the easiest place to live. When I can't go out, I play online games. I change my games really quickly so sometimes I play Minecraft to get some anger out and sometimes I play Fortnite so I can talk to my mate Jack. Jack's phone doesn't work anymore for some reason so we talk through the game. On a weekend I enjoy playing games and talking to my mates. I have a small group of friends which I prefer. To get over stressful situations, I put my head out of the window and breathe.

I love Chinese and Indian food, but mostly Chinese food. I like ice cream too.

Me and my dad went on a fishing trip once and I caught a fish. The fish had all black bits coming out of it, I didn't know which type of fish it was. My dad used to go all the time when I was younger. My dad likes going metal detecting too. I've not been with him but I do let him borrow my bike when he wants to go.

During school I like playing football with my mates. I like Jackie in our school because she grew up with my dad. If I could change something at school, I would build a gaming room, have bigger and better football nets and be able to have phones out at breaktime because our school is super strict on phones. I also want AstroTurf on the football pitches and for the food to be better.

One time I had to climb a tower which was really high. I kept going even though it was slippery because it had been raining and my hand slipped and I fell. I came second highest out of the group.

I enjoy spreading the word of Jesus. A lot of people are turning away from him despite it being one of the largest religions. I have been practising my religion for a long time. I remember feeling mad in class over a quiz one day and I felt something touch my shoulder but there was nothing there. It left me wondering why and something whispered in my ear saying that they were there, which I believe was Jesus. I believe I was born believing but had just been separated from him and needed to find him again, which I have now. I think if people are struggling, they should believe in God and they will be able to carry on.

If I could rebuild the world, I would take away crime and make sure everyone knows that Jesus loves them.



Two Languages, One Big Heart

Lucas

I am Lucas and I was born in Lisbon, Portugal. I live with my mum who is so funny, my Dad and I also have one sister who is nine years younger than me. My sister finds it difficult to go to school so I have to support her a lot. I have been told I am a helpful person.

My favourite foods are pizza, pasta and cake. I enjoy art, drama, fencing, my family and anime. I am 17 years old now but when I was younger, I saw a television show about firefighters, and since then I have always wanted to act like those people. I also like every type of music and dancing to any type too. I also like Anime, which is from China, and I watch it every day. On the weekend, I go to the supermarket, play with my sister or go to see a movie. I like Mario, Spiderman and basically every type of film. It's good because there are other people in my school who like arts and Anime like me too.

I like Pioneer House School because I have friends here. I like English and maths too. Every teacher is nice but if I could change something at school, I would like to go on a school trip to Chinatown, be able to do yoga in school and to be able to cook more.

When I am older, I would like to work in films, maybe even Disney. I would like to be an actor. My favourite films are Marvel films so hopefully I can be in one of those one day. I wouldn't want to live in America so hopefully they film one here in Manchester.

Me and my family went to Brazil to see my grandma and family. Brazil is similar to Portugal but there are some differences. Some of my family moved to Portugal and some live in Brazil. We moved to England to learn new languages and my parents wanted to move here because in Portugal it was hard to make enough money to pay the bills. I miss everyone in Portugal. When I lived in Portugal, I thought it was good. There was a lot of sun and the people were nice.

I like Christmas and the festive season because we give presents and see friends and family, and even though it is quite cold, I like the time of year.

For my work experience I go to work in a charity shop every Wednesday. It can be both quiet and busy at times. I arrange the clothes and books sections. I am proud of myself for doing this every week. Also, I am proud that I can speak two languages. At home we speak Portuguese but at school I speak English. I find speaking English quite easy. When I do find things hard, like when learning a language, I know to keep going and not give up.

To help the world and support animals I believe we should stop using plastics and plant more trees. I like our planet so looking after it is quite important to me. If I could change the world, I would have more word maps to help me with my writing and I would make sure everyone could have their friends together.



From Silence to Sound: How Music Saved Me

Noah

Hi, I am Noah Reece Gabriel Bogart. I am 12 years old, I go to Pioneer House and I was born in Burnage.

My favourite things to do are to play my guitar and bass at home. I think I am better at bass than guitar. I teach myself using YouTube videos. It's a free way to learn! People think Nirvana is a sad band but I really think we can learn a lot from Kurt Cobain's message. John Lennon's message of loving each other is a good message too. I also like watching The Inbetweeners. My favourite foods to eat have probably got to be buttered chicken or Jamaican jerk chicken and rice.

My mum told me about one time when I was younger my uncle was holding me and I banged my head on a metal lamp. My nanna still has the lamp and you can still see the dent in the lamp from my head.

In my family there are four of us. There's me, my brother and mum and dad. My mum is a sweetheart. She cares for us and puts good food on the table. She's always been there when my dad is at work. My dad got me into Oasis, which I will always thank him for. He works for Manchester United now even though I support Manchester City. Then there's my little brother, Ted, who can be a pain sometimes but I still love him all the same. Ted is pretty soft and gentle though. Not too long ago we went on a trip to Weston-Super-Mare. We went to Cheddar Gorge and I watched The Book of Eli for the first time which was good. I think A Quiet Place is probably my favourite world-ending movie though. It's more of a thriller that puts you on the edge of your seat than it is scary.

If I could change the world, I would change the unfairness poor people deal with. I would make sure homeless people have shelters to go to. I would also get rid of the trams in town and build an underground in the centre.

When I was younger, I dreamed of being a musician or a presenter on TV. I think it all started from watching The Inbetweeners because I always saw myself as Will who started off shy and miserable but then he got more sociable, which I would say is how I grew too. I was shy beyond belief when I was in primary school. I never wanted to go to school and there were some kids who were awful. They made my life miserable and like I wanted to crawl up into a ball but I am better now. I would say I am the talk of the class now. Pioneer House has really helped me with my social skills and getting myself out there.

I have been diagnosed with autism. I did a PowerPoint on it in Year 5. I explained how autism was for me by using two roads. One road was straight to represent a normal kid's brain and then one with loads of roundabouts and zigzags to show how my brain feels. I think it went down well. If I had to say anything to someone else who had autism, I would say try being nice and if you're nervous and you can't put a sentence together, just try to be yourself. You are one of a kind and don't let the mainstream make you think you're not right. Many amazing people have autism, and you can be like them.

Recently, I went to Parliament with school. I was chosen out of only a few to talk about stuff going on with schools. I also support UNICEF. When I was in primary school, I used to go into nursery and help them out. I was like a little TA working there.

I think my happiest memory was discovering music. I don't really like rap like everyone else my age but I like rock, alternative rock, grunge, metal and Britpop. I like System of a Down, Oasis and Blur. I've got a signed Blur poster in my room. Music gets me excited

and motivated. A song to describe my time in primary school would be Iron Man by Black Sabbath, Something In the Way by Nirvana and Acquiesce by Oasis. Music has helped me get through everything in my life so far. I want to be a musician when I grow up. I use GarageBand to make music now and hopefully I can get my tunes out there.

I used to hate life and I didn't tell anyone. Deep, deep down I just wanted to disappear but then in Year 6 I realised that this was my last year in primary school so why not just go for it. I wish I would have asked for help sooner and then I could have been more social sooner. I used to leave school and try to forget everything that happened in school but now I have friends and have group chats with kids from school. I'm also in the school band playing bass. I am so much happier now that I have social skills and I can talk to whoever. I think from primary school to now, I've basically begun to shine and be who I truly am.

The East Manchester Academy

The East Manchester Academy

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I was incredibly moved by the students' inspirational testimonies. We are so proud to have such remarkable and inspiring young people at The East Manchester Academy.

Hana Ingram

Assistant Headteacher SENDco – The East Manchester Academy



Blood Doesn't Define Love

Alexandra

My name is Alexandra, I am 13 years old and I am from Portugal.

I was born in Portugal but my parents separated. Back then, money was tight and it was hard to raise a child so we moved here when I was a couple of months old. From then, I was raised here in Manchester. I went back and forth to Portugal during my childhood, so I remember bits of it. I have a lot of aunties, uncles and cousins there. We go to visit every year. When we moved from Portugal, we struggled to find a place to live so I didn't go to school at the same time as other children. So, when we eventually did find a place to settle in the UK, I got to go to school but I didn't know English very well. Portuguese is still my first language but I think I am good at English now. I am proud of myself for learning English at a young age.

My earliest memory was me being very stubborn. I was such a stubborn child. I always tried to prove everyone wrong. My first memory is from when me and my mum went to Portugal to sort some things out with my passport and we were at a family gathering on the beach but there was an inside area with a big pool. I think I was about 7 or 8 years old. So, me and my cousins thought it would be fun to take off our floaties and see how long we could sit under the water. I ended up on my own in one end of the pool and some older kids had to help me out. My mum went mad at me! But we did go get ice cream afterwards, so I guess it is a kind of good first memory in the end.

My favourite things to do are going out with my family, braiding my hair, playing football and going out to eat. My life is just chill. I have a brother and sister. We are all half siblings. My stepdad works in a warehouse and my older brother works at Vodafone.

He's all grown up now though so it tends to just be me and my sister at home. We have two parks in different directions close to my house so we play football a lot there. When my mum was younger, she was really sporty. She went on trips all over the world playing professional handball. She was amazing at it. I don't know much about my biological dad but I know he was sporty too when he was younger. He never really bothered to be in my life so I don't feel like I am missing out on anything with him. I chose not to see him because he wasn't ready to be a dad when I was younger, but I call my stepdad my dad. My family has taught me that blood doesn't define love.

I like eating pizza and lasagne. My mum cooks a lot of traditional Portuguese food at home.

Apart from going to Portugal every year, I've been to France, Spain and apparently, I've been to Germany but I don't remember that at all. My parents want to go to a lot more places and we are planning on going to Italy this year. Italy is my mum's absolute favourite place. There's a really big church in Barcelona in Spain that has taken them years and years to build. Every time we've been there, they still haven't finished it.

My parents have always been Christian and gone to church. My mum used to work all the time so she would leave me with her friends who I call my aunties and they used to take me to church. As I got older, I stopped going as much until my neighbour died. She was like my mum's best friend and when we went to say our condolences, I became interested in religion. My mum gave me a Bible on my birthday and pushed me into reading it and explained I needed to take what I was reading and apply it to my life. I stopped swearing and being around people who did negative things and I started seeing a change in myself. I feel like I am close to God now and he always helps me. I try to remember that every time something goes wrong, I can't blame God because although I can't see it, something bigger is happening.

I have a very diverse friendship group. One of us is a Buddhist, another is a Muslim and others struggle with their relationship with God but what I love is that we can all talk about it together. If I want to know something about being a Muslim, I feel completely free to ask. There are a lot of similarities across religions so we bond through that. I've learnt to always ask for help and be vulnerable to ask questions. At the moment, there are difficulties in staying away from sin as a teenager but I know I need to keep close to my religion.

I used to play netball at school with my friends. We wanted something a bit more competitive than dance to play together. One time, we went to Birmingham for a competition and we won together as a team. That made me so proud of myself and my team. One thing I really like about this school is that they are big on trips and obviously my friends are here too. I've been through struggles but I am strong now. If I could add anything to school, I would add more things for girls' sports. The boys get to go out and do more than we are able to.

My mum is always sending money back to Africa to support my grandma. Every year we gather up all the stuff we don't need anymore, like clothes, and we put it in a nice parcel and send it to my cousins and family there. If I was in charge, I would try to minimise the type of poverty in places like where my family lives. My parents always remind me to be humble because I have family members who don't get food every day and have new things.

My childhood so far has been one big rollercoaster but in a good way. When I was younger, I had big, curly hair and my mum was not too great at doing my hair so I learnt how to do it myself. At first, my hair was crazy for a few years but now I love doing it. I want to do a cosmetology course in college and carry it on to make serious money. I know I definitely want to travel a lot too.



Turning It Around, One Step at a Time

Alicia

I'm Alicia and I'm in Year 8 at The East Manchester Academy.

My first memory was with my grandad, nanna, older sister and brother when we went to Blackpool. We took lots of pictures playing on the beach and going up the Blackpool Tower. We went into photobooths and took funny pictures. I've been on holiday to Blackpool loads of times but that memory is special to me because it was the last time we got to go with my grandad before he passed. My grandad was such a helpful person. Each year, we go on loads of arcade games and rides too. Going on holiday with family is important because often it's the only quality time I get with my siblings where we don't argue. I love going to Blackpool because I like seeing all the lights and it makes me feel calm. It's like a home away from home.

I remember when I was younger I was obsessed with Frozen and I used to bring my huge Elsa doll to primary school every day. I liked that in primary school there was barely any drama compared to high school. I liked climbing and chilling behind this certain tree. I used to feel calm sitting there. I had a couple of friends there but I don't like big crowds, so I prefer hanging out in small groups. The tree was thick and old. I liked that it would never leave and I could go to a place that would never change. I struggle sometimes with change and I like to know what is going to happen next so that was a good place for me.

I also remember we did a Roald Dahl play in Year 3 and I was cast as Miss Trunchbull from Matilda. It was such a funny part and I had the most lines out of everyone in the entire play. I like acting and learning about the era and culture of where the play is set.

Coming to The East Manchester Academy at first I started hanging around with the wrong type of people and my behaviour was not good. I was in detention every night and my mum had to come into a meeting but now I have a mentor. My mentor, Courtney, has tried to stop me having conflicts with others and to sort my attitude out. I realised that although I found it funny winding people up, I was making them feel uncomfortable and when I realised I was doing that, I decided to change my ways. I feel proud of myself for changing. If I could give advice to those that are being peer pressured, I would tell them to try their hardest. Obviously, I know that it is hard not to follow the crowd, but try to turn around and walk away because starting to do things, such as drugs, is not good and you could literally just be throwing your life away.

Outside of school, I used to go kickboxing but I quit because it annoyed me. I've been thinking about going to play rugby. My family is so competitive. There're always competitions, from dancing and singing competitions to fighting ones. They just play fight and see who can win. My mum is one of the sweetest people ever but she can sometimes lose her temper but that's only because she cared about me doing well at school. My dad is a gamer. He used to ride motorbikes but someone tried to steal his bike one night and they shattered his knee so now he can't do his job. My mum is a carer for my little sister who is deaf and my older brother who has ADHD and autism. I help her by cooking sometimes. My dad taught me to bake too and I think I might even be better than him.

I've just finished my counselling with Remedy. I received support because sometimes I can be happy and then I just switch and I'm angry. I think it's important to help people who struggle with their mental health because you never know what people will do if they don't get support. I've learnt to combat my anger by walking away or going to talk to teachers who can help. It's also important to have friends who hold you accountable so they tell you what you're doing wrong and encourage you to do what's right.

When I am older, I want to be either a hairdresser or a social worker. I really like doing hair, coming up with hairstyles and dyeing my hair. My inspiration to become a social worker came because I like working with kids and I like helping others. I think I was born to help people and it's my place in life. My goals in school now are to get my head down and remember that whatever problem I am having right now probably won't matter three years from now.

For whoever is reading this book right now, remember to try to turn yourself around. I know not everyone can do it and even if you end up in the wrong crowd at first, try and turn it around because the last thing you want is to not even be able to work at Maccies.



From Loss to Light

Atlanta

Hi, my name is Atlanta and I am in Year 9 at The East Manchester Academy.

I think my first memory was when I stopped having a dummy around 2 years old. I remember waking up without it for the first time just screaming but my mum never gave me it back. I enjoyed primary school when I was younger too. I had such good friends and teachers there.

My house is so full all the time because I've got so many siblings. Out of all my siblings, I get on with my older sister the most because we are the two oldest so we have that connection. I get on with Ava because she is funny and has the same weird sense of humour as me. Me and Lucas both like football so I like him for that. I don't have anything to do with my biological dad but my mum's boyfriend, Jordan, was who I considered my dad to be. Unfortunately, he passed away when I was in Year 4. It was shocking. I didn't know what to do. I remember he liked football too. He liked Liverpool and Manchester United the best. I like to think of him up in heaven watching over us all.

It was hard after he passed, especially on my mum because she had to look after us all on her own. I think I respect her more now having seen her go through all this. The impact on our family was just that there was something missing, like there was a big dent in the road of our lives. We let off balloons on his birthday every year and we talk about it to each other to get it off our chests. We are all there for each other.

When I came to this school, I was good at first but then in Year 8 things started to slip. I began to hate school because I didn't know what was going on in class. It used to make me want to not go to school and because I skipped days, it meant the next day, I wouldn't know what we were doing which made me not want to go again. I felt like I was being left out of friendships too so I didn't want to come into school because I felt as though people didn't like me. I don't like maths at all either but I do like English. I like that we have a bit of creativity in that lesson.

Outside of school I like drumming. I go to my friend's house and learn on her drumkit. I find that when I am drumming, I can let all my feelings out on the drumkit playing a beat. I don't like playing in front of people but it is good for me to play and let things out. I also like going on walks with my friends, listening to music, playing football and drawing. It's annoying where I live because there are people who chase you on quads or set off fireworks. I know to ignore them and they won't do anything to me but I just get on with it.

For my future, I want to be a social worker and help families who are struggling. Our family has had social workers but I didn't feel like they always helped us, so I want to be someone who can go and actually support families. I want to live with my best friends in our own house too. I have even imagined what it's going to look like. I'd like to go to Portugal because I like football and obviously Ronaldo. I can't wait to travel when I am older and do what I want. I'm a bit scared of planes right now because I don't know what I'd do if it just fell out of the sky but I think I'll get over it before I go travelling, hopefully.

We also have a cat in our family. She's called Biscuit and she's my favourite pet we've ever had. She comforts me. I like that I can lay there and talk to her and she obviously doesn't say anything but her just being there in my room and lying with me helps me feel better.

So far in my life I've learnt that family is important. We stick together through anything.



War, Words and New Worlds

Emar

I'm Emar and I am in Year 9.

My first memory was reading a book when I was 5 years old in Syria in our old apartment. My mum, dad, sister and our cat lived there. The area where we lived was a long street with tall buildings on either side. Each family would have a building for them and the building would be called the family's name. From the window of our living room, I could see my friend in her house and then next to her house was our school. Our neighbours were nice and people were very kind in Syria through the hard times. Where we lived it was pretty safe but the war was starting to break out. I didn't really know much about it at the time but when we moved away to Turkey, I began to realise what was happening from the news. Moving to Turkey, I missed my friends and I worried about whether they were ok. I enjoyed school in Syria because all the teachers were nice.

When I first moved to Turkey, it was really interesting because it was the first place I saw traffic lights like in movies. The language was pretty difficult to learn but some words were similar to Arabic so I got used to it pretty quickly. It was interesting to see how people spoke and what they ate. I went to a summer camp while I was in Turkey where we would get picked up, eat breakfast, have a swim and go inside, have lunch, watch a movie and play games then one last swim before it was home time. School there was pretty fun too. I was introduced to other children from Syria so they could help me talk to others and translate Turkish for me. It was hard at first in school because I would struggle to understand what they were saying so I would switch off but I overcame it and managed to settle in.

My dad was a journalist and my mum worked for a company helping protect children. My dad would write about the news, so about the freedom of people or when someone had been kidnapped or gone missing. My family is very important to me and I enjoy spending time with them. My parents are inspiring because they have helped people and they try to make other people's lives better, which is something I want to do too.

I have also been to Iraq, where we went to visit my grandma. We stayed in a big hotel room. I got to see my uncle and my cousins there too. We would go out to the mall every day and see something new. I remember it being pretty hot. I found the language a bit difficult there too but many people did speak Arabic so we managed to figure it out.

My family then moved to the UK when I would have been in Year 6. We first moved to Coventry because my mum got accepted to go university there. We lived in another apartment which was part of that university campus. She studied there and then we moved to Manchester. She studied to be a child protection officer. When I arrived in the UK, there was a lot of technology that I had never seen before and cars that I had only seen in movies. Because we had watched TV to try to understand the language, it felt a bit more familiar than when we moved to Turkey.

At The East Manchester Academy, I was introduced to someone who also spoke Arabic. It was a bigger environment than what I was used to and everyone was generally quite nice. It was nice that some teachers gave me two exam sheets. One was in English and one was in Arabic, which was good because I could participate in the class then. I think schools are different in Syria and Turkey compared to here because in the UK there is a wide range of subjects whereas before I would learn one specific thing for a year and then move on to the next thing.

I like reading and ice skating. I also used to go to a football club after school. I stopped going because I lost interest but I may pick it up again, I'm not sure. I also like listening to music while I am painting. I find it very calming. I like thinking and planning things ahead in my head so I don't panic about them in the future.



Everything Will Be Fine: A Young Carer's Story

Eshaal

It has been difficult having to move to all the different places and meet new people. I think it is pretty exciting meeting new people. Now, we live in a house in Gorton. I like the people here, even an old man said hi to me this morning. Outside of school, sometimes I go to the library or play with kids in my area. I like going to parks with my family and having a picnic too.

When I grow up, I want to travel but have a stable home to come back to here. I want to go to Dubai, America and Canada. I plan to have a business with stable money coming in so I can have the money to travel anywhere I want. I'm not sure what type of business I am going to open but I know I want to do that. Being successful and making my parents proud are important to me.

My name is Eshaal, I'm from Manchester and I am 15 years old.

In general, I like being at home, usually having a nap or eating noodles, as they are my favourite. I am a young carer so I've got to take care of my two little sisters, my four younger brothers and my mum. I technically have seven siblings and my cousin living with us but I like to class my cousin as my sibling too. I have two older sisters. One of them lives in Leicester. My mum has severe mental health so I take care of her. She has bipolar, schizophrenia, ADHD and OCD and unfortunately, my dad is ill at the moment because of something to do with his intestine. My mum has three horses that she has to help her with her mental health. She takes my sister with her because they are similar and get on well. I look after my younger siblings every day by cooking for them, cleaning, showering them, all that kind of stuff. Taking care of everything is what it is. I get on with it.

My earliest memory was when I was on a windowsill. Me and my two older sisters were playing and I thought I could fly so I jumped off the windowsill. I ended up breaking my arm because, obviously, I could not fly!

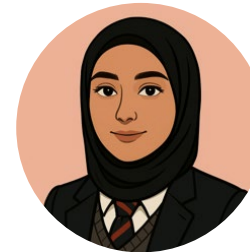
On the weekend, I have my GCSEs coming up so I try to revise as much as I can. I was proud of myself when I passed my recent maths mock test. I used to love reading and was so focused on school but then I went through a stage where I hated coming to school. I struggled for a while with friendship groups because people didn't understand my home situation. I've managed to get past all that now though, and I have one friend who gets what is going on with my home life. I've also started caring about my schoolwork and I quite like coming to The East Manchester Academy. For my friend's birthday last year, I got her a 100-rose bouquet of flowers. I have no idea how I'm going to top that for her birthday this year!

I also like playing with my cat. I love my cat. When we got Simba, I was so unbelievably happy. I am so glad summer is coming because it is my birthday in the summer. I can't stand the cold. It makes my life easier being able to put my siblings out in the garden to play too.

When I was younger, I wanted to be a primary school teacher but I have recently changed my mind because now I want to be a social worker. When I've had social workers in the past, some of them did not care at all. It's not nice being able to see that they don't care when they're meant to be there to help because you don't know what to do next, so I want to be a good social worker that actually supports families. I want to be a family social worker advocating for young kids.

Every summer when I was younger, me, my dad and my brother used to go to Pakistan. We went every year until I was 8 years old but now my dad has to go alone because his parents are very old. My family is from Islamabad. We used to drive to Holland to visit my uncle who lived there at the time. It was so annoying to be in the car for so many hours.

My biggest lesson I've learnt in my life so far is that I will get over it. Anybody can get over anything, no matter what it is. People can get over whatever. With time, everything gets better. If I could speak to my younger self, I would tell her that it's alright, man. Everything will be fine. To me, my life as a carer is normal and I don't even see it as hard work. Looking after everyone is normal for me. I can't really complain about my life. Some kids are starving or in pain but I've got so much compared to them.



Kuwait to Kindness: Learning to Be Heard

Fatemah

I'm Fatemah. I am from Kuwait and I am 16 years old.

Kuwait is in the Middle East and I moved to the UK on 10 October 2021. My life in Kuwait was normal. I used to go out and see friends and family a lot. I would try lots of new things. I was used to my life there because that's where I had always lived. I knew the language, people, school, rules and everything. I preferred school in my country because I went to an all girls' school and the teachers were like our friends. The teachers helped me a lot there too. I had friends all the way through primary school and into secondary school so we all knew each other very well, but here it is very different. In Kuwait, my English was particularly bad but when I came here, I started to learn English and do better with it. I have made good friends here too but it's not the same.

Overall, there are five people in my family. I have one sister, one brother and my parents. I get along well with my siblings because the age gap between us is small. I like reading and I love writing. Sometimes I write so much that I can't move my hand. I like writing things about my feelings or making up quotes. To improve my writing in both Arabic and English, I copy things from the internet. Also, I watch YouTube stories and documentaries about crime. My favourite foods are mostly Arabic dishes, like rice and seafood. I definitely prefer Arabic food compared to English food.

My first memory is going to primary school. There were people from my city who went there. The school was amazing. I used to go to the shop every day after school with my grandma. My extended family is still back home but we moved here to get a better education. We went back in December and we are going back in the summertime. It is so

hot there but we've got AC so we are good! I love the sun. The sun makes me feel calm. I've been to London, Leeds and Liverpool. I really want to go to France and Italy but with my friends, not my family. During weekends, I honestly just sleep. Sometimes I study, read or go into Manchester city centre. I enjoy celebrating Eid, even though it is not as fun here, because I get given lots of money. Most of the time I ended up spending the money on food but there were good restaurants back home so it was fine.

My parents taught me to never judge anyone, no matter what they do, and that only God can judge because he is perfect. My mum and grandma always told me not to speak bad about people. They said not to judge someone because God will see that and put you in the same position. When I moved here, people would think that because I was wearing a headscarf that I was unable to speak. I used to live in Bradford where most people were Pakistani and Muslim and I never felt any racism but when I moved to Manchester it was hard. The hardest thing I have been through so far in life has to be moving to the UK. When I first came here, everything was different, such as the language, schools, food, people, everything. I wasn't able to go out with friends or see my family like I could back home in Kuwait. I would sit alone and not go out when I first moved here, which I wasn't used to. To get through this I had to remember what my parents taught me about when people are judging you in that it's really a reflection of themselves and to try to remember not to judge them back.

My favourite times are when I get to go back to Kuwait. It makes me so excited to see everyone and I never want to come back. There's nothing wrong with the UK, many people have made wonderful lives here but I just want to live back in Kuwait because I want to see my family and friends.

When I first came here, I got a U in English because I wasn't too good at it and I kind of gave up. Then, before my exam, I decided to watch a few videos and I ended up going from a U to a grade 3. I even got a 2 in literature. For people like me who have English

as their second language, getting a grade 2 in literature is really good so I was proud of myself for improving. When I was younger, I wanted to be a lawyer but my grades are not good enough at the moment so I think I want to be an English teacher back in Kuwait in a high school.

I always try to be kind to everyone. My mum even talks to me about her personal problems because she knows I won't tell anyone. It's nice that my mum sees me as a woman, not as a child. I think kindness should be everywhere. I think schools, churches and mosques should teach kindness.

If the world was built for me, I would change racism, judgement and gossiping. I would put equality in everyone's heads so that we all treat each other the same. I would tell my younger self that she's close to her dream and to not give up.



Survivor of Silence: A Syrian Boy's Story

Hesham

I am Hesham, I am from Damascus, Syria and I am 14 years old.

I moved from Syria on 8 August 2022, or 2021, I am not so sure. I found moving here pretty nice and I don't find it hard living here. I lived in Syria with my grandma and grandpa, who were my dad's parents. My mum lived in my grandpa's house but my dad was killed in 2013 by Bashar al-Assad. My dad and uncles were against him. I was only 2 or 3 years old when he died so I feel like I have missed out on getting to know my dad. One night the Police came and took all the men who lived in one house but my grandpa was allowed back because he was too old. They destroyed my grandpa's house. The government destroyed Syria because people were fighting against them. I feel sad for Syria and the people there.

In 2014 or 2015, I went to Egypt for seven years. I have one brother from my dad and then I now have another brother and sister from my stepdad. Egypt was nice. They all loved us Syrian guys and they helped us with everything. They gave us a house for free and my grandpa worked there to make money for us. The thing I found difficult about living in Egypt was that we had to move around a lot, I think it was around every two months.

In 2019, we went back to Syria before Covid-19 but we had nothing to come back to because everything had been destroyed. We stayed in a house for about six months until we could rebuild our old house. We stayed there for about two years. My mum got married in 2021 and went to Lebanon and stayed there with her husband for about six months. I would have to wake me and my brothers up to go to school every day and

make our lunches. Then, they went to the UK for two months and then they came back and brought us too.

In the UK, we stayed in a hotel for around three months until we got a house. We couldn't cook food in the hotel room, which my mum did not like because she doesn't like eating at restaurants. In Syria we like eating kibbeh, which is meat in a type of bread. My mum cooks Syrian food at home and I think I prefer Syrian food to English food, but I love Italian food the best. We moved to a house in M40 in Manchester but now we have a nice house in M9.

School in Syria was bad because the teachers were not good and I couldn't understand anything. I found that the teachers didn't care whether we passed or failed. In Egypt, however, the teachers cared and it was much better. I find school in the UK difficult because for the first two years I was here, I didn't understand English so I had a lot of problems with learning. I can now speak Arabic and English though. At first, I couldn't form friends but now I have found a friendship group with some pupils who speak Arabic and are also from Syria, which is good. Now that I am more comfortable with English, I translate for my new friend and help them to learn and communicate with others. When I struggled with my English, I always wanted someone to translate for me so I am glad I can be that person for them. If I could change school to make it better, I would have more PE lessons and we would have a shorter school day like in Egypt.

My life in the UK is full of the same routine but in Syria or Egypt I would do more things that were different. In the summer, we went to London and Blackpool for holidays though. I preferred Blackpool because I like the beach. On the weekend, I like playing football. My favourite team is Real Madrid. It is my dream to play football professionally. Summer is my favourite season because it is the best time to play football and I like the sun. If I can't become a footballer, I would like to be a pilot so I can travel all around the world.

My life so far has been full of challenges and travelling. If I could change the world in any way, I would like to make sure everyone is safe and that they are able to have a safe place to call home, and for those who are struggling right now, I would tell them not to give up.



The Things That Matter

Rosie

I'm Rosie Louise. I'm 13 years old, turning 14 in September. I'm from Clayton, but I've lived in a few places. I spent a year in London, then lived with my aunt in Blackpool before coming back to Manchester.

There are 11 of us in my family. I have five sisters and three brothers, and I'm the one bang in the middle. The youngest is 2, and the oldest is nearly in her thirties. There's a lot of fighting in our house, especially between my sister and me and the older brothers. I beef everyone in the family, honestly. But even with all the chaos, they're always there when I need them. I live with my mum and sister now since my brother just moved out.

When I was younger, I wanted to be a vet. My dad and I used to go out and look after animals together. He loves animals. At his place, there's a six-foot-two corn snake called Ginger. We got Ginger for a tenner at the pub! Ginger's going to get a friend soon, though they'll live in separate habitats.

really love reptiles most of all. I've got a dog, two cats, and a snake. They don't exactly get along, but they know how to keep their distance. If they didn't, I'd be worried, my dog's called Tank, after all. The cats are called Tiger and Jasmine, so they can hold their own.

Fashion is one of my biggest passions. I love it so much, that I even make my own clothes. When I'm not working on clothes, I love going out with my mates and spending time with my boyfriend, we've been together for two months. I also love dramas, but not the TV kind.

The last time I cooked, I set the pan on fire, so I'm on a temporary ban from cooking! Baking's a different story, I bake all the time, especially brownies. They've got to be gluten-free. My favourite foods are sweet and sour chicken, my mum's curry, and steak—medium rare, always. I need the iron because I have ammonia.

I went on holiday to Turkey last year, and it was amazing. I love all-inclusive holidays. I definitely want to go back when I'm older. I'd also love to travel more, but I hate heights and I can't stand flying. My only strategy is downloading loads of films to distract me during the flight.

My favourite time of year is from autumn into winter, it's not too cold at that time, and it's close to my birthday. I love getting cosy with a blanket, a hot coffee, and a good movie. If it's Halloween, I'll watch The Nightmare Before Christmas. Otherwise, it's usually Rick and Morty.

I'm proud of a few things. Once, I did a drawing and showed it to my mum, she was really impressed, and I've kept drawing since. I also did well on my SATs. Even though I failed reading and spelling, I did really well overall, and my mum was proud of me. I also once won a horse race!

I take part in something called 0161, which has loads of fun activities like boxing, skateboarding, yoga, and guitar lessons. Boxing is definitely my favourite. 0161 has been a big support. I also got help from our school counsellor, Jodie. The first meeting was weird because she didn't know me, so it felt a bit awkward, but she really helped me. I've learned that with help, you can get through anything.

My brother's death was one of the hardest things I've been through. I was only five, but I remember it clearly. We didn't really talk about it, it kind of just got swept under the carpet, but I've had to learn to deal with it in my own way.

If I could change school, I'd let us wear our own clothes, uniforms are so uncomfortable. I feel like I'm getting choked when I have to button up to the top! A pyjama day would be fun too.

In the future, I want to work for myself as a fashion advisor. I also want kids and would love to marry "Blue" (can't reveal who that really is—it's a code name).

One thing I really care about is reducing waste. We all need to do better for the future. I've also tried to do my part in helping people. I helped a friend get away from her abusive mum, we didn't call the police, we texted them and met them at Asda. I didn't get home until 2 a.m. that night. I also once helped an older lady cross the road with my cousin.

If I could change the world, I'd make people more peaceful. Even though I like a bit of beef, there's way too much of it and a lot of it is unnecessary.

I'm better than I used to be, but I've still got quite a few behavioural points. I crash out once in a while, but I know I can do better.



From Shelter to Strength: A Ukrainian Voice

Sofiia

I am Sofiia. I go to The East Manchester Academy and I study in a Ukrainian school too.

I grew up in Ukraine. We moved to many different houses. The first house I can remember was my grandma's house, which was very nice and comfortable. My dad used to come over to the UK to work here when we were little because the wages are better here. Me and my sister lived with my grandparents for a while as our parents were working away. The house was quite big and we had a little dog. In the summer, my grandma would put up the pool and we would all swim together. Sometimes we would sing too. My grandma would say that I had a lovely voice.

In Ukraine, we don't really have primary school. The age groups are together. I struggled with school at first but I did make a friend in Year 5 who was nice. We moved house when I was 10 years old because my parents got their own apartment with two rooms. There were other children who would play in the area too.

My first memory is of my third birthday. I remember my parents woke me up by singing and all I could see was so many presents. They had a cake and they told me to make a wish. We took a few photos and I think it was one of the most incredible moments of my life so far.

However, a couple of years after moving into our apartment, the war broke out. At first, I thought the war would only last a couple of days and we would go back to normal but now I am here, I have realised that it is going to last a long time. To me, the war doesn't really make much sense. My mum was so worried when it broke out because my dad

was working away in England. She took us in the car to our grandparents' house and we saw our president announced that Russia was attacking us. We would have to go underground and take shelter. The room was so cold and it was uncomfortable because it was small. My mum decided to take us out of Ukraine with our family friends about a week after the war broke out. It was such a scary time. We had to leave everything we had, we didn't know when we would be back and we didn't have a plan. I didn't want to leave our family, friends and pets.

We drove all day and night to Poland. So many people were trying to get out of Ukraine like us. We then went to Germany for about a week. My aunt lived there with her German husband. We had to wait in Germany for a visa to come to the UK. My dad flew to Germany to be with us. We were so happy to see him. Then, we went to another city, I can't remember the name of it, to wait for my grandparents to come too and afterwards we travelled by boat to the UK.

We came to Manchester first, where my dad had a house because he worked as a builder here. The house was so dirty because all the guys who worked with my dad didn't clean it. We moved to a different house after that. I was so shy when I first came here. I was scared to speak out loud because I was worried people would think I was stupid. Even though we learnt English in Ukraine, we didn't learn how to have conversations in English. I think that was the hardest part for me. They are stricter on phones in schools here and there are less breaks but I found it easier to make friends. I've made friends from all different places, such as Hong Kong, China. I see my future here in the UK because people care about getting good grades, whereas in Ukraine schools didn't care as much.

When I am older, I want to be an interior designer because I like drawing and creating. When the war is over, I want to go back to Ukraine with my family to visit and see everyone but I think I will stay living here in the UK.

I still feel sad about the war going on in my country. It is so upsetting that people are dying and being targeted. Now that we are all living together in one country because of leaving the war, we spend more time together as a family and I feel like I understand them. I feel like I have grown up a lot since moving from Ukraine. I think we need to make sure people are still listening and are aware that war is still happening. At first, people were engaged with what was going on but now people seem to have forgotten. We try to go around Manchester and raise awareness. I would say to people if you can, please do help. Talk with your friends about it or donate a little bit of money if you can. You can even come to meetings and speak with us.

I think the war has impacted how Ukrainians see themselves. We've started being proud of being Ukrainian. We talk more in our language, celebrate traditions and are proud of our culture. We've started accepting help from others too. On an individual level, I have learnt I am a strong person. Even with everything that is happening in Ukraine and although I am here, I can still support my people and tell everyone what is going on. We're a stronger nation and I am a stronger person because we are trying to save our culture and country.



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