

INTERVIEW WITH CHERIF BENKANOUN

INTERVIEWERS: ABI OBENE and SHARYN HEDGE

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PART 1

0:00:03.8 Abi Obene: So, we are here on 6th June 2024 for a *Telling Our Stories, Finding Our Roots* interview, with Cherif Benkanoun, who has very kindly agreed to have a chat with us. So, here today we have Sharyn Hedge, who's one of our project volunteers, and myself, Abi Obene, the project coordinator for the Ilfracombe branch of this project. We are here in Cherif's house. He's very kindly invited us over. So without further ado, we will pop right into it.

0:00:39.3 Sharyn Hedge: Cherif, would you like to tell us a little bit about yourself, perhaps starting with your childhood - oh, it doesn't have to be a little bit - as much as you like about yourself - perhaps starting with your childhood, where you were born, and where you grew up?

0:00:52.1 Cherif Benkanoun: Well, I was born in Algiers in 1976. I had a beautiful childhood there. I lived by the sea, so that's why I'm here. Algiers and the sea is about 200 metres. The thing I remember is just the good things. Our childhood is completely different to these young people's childhood, basically. We used to disappear from 8:00 in the morning and don't come back until 7:00, 8:00 in the evening. We've been down the beach, and no one is looking after you, so you look after yourself. There's some nice stories. We used to get half a baguette put in the - so you'd go and buy a baguette for the house, basically, and then you'd put half a baguette in the post box, and then you go and take everything out, come back down, pick up the half baguette, go and steal some tomatoes from the market, and that is your lunch. Breakfast and lunch is everything together, so it was quite nice. Then we just disappeared down the sea. So it's full of those memories, basically. The holidays - by now, they are on holiday, back home - so mid-May is holidays, so after mid-May there's nothing to do, so you don't go to school, so you just hang about the beaches, do something, and that's it, really.

0:02:28.1 Sometimes we used to go to holiday camps, and things like that. Then we started growing up, so when we hit our teenage years, life started becoming a bit difficult. We weren't as able

to do what we were supposed to do, basically, as the freedom. We weren't enjoying the freedom, because in 1992, when I was 16 - when I was 14, 16 - the civil war started, so we were living in fear all the time, basically. What kept us sane, basically, me and my mates, we used to play handball, and we went through all the childhood together doing sports. That takes your mind off things. Then, after that, I went to uni, sports, and all that stuff. At the age of 22 I was here in London.

0:03:39.8 Sharyn: It sounds like a tremendously free childhood, but what about the non-free bit, when you actually had to go to school? What was school like?

0:03:46.7 Cherif: School was school, basically. They still teach in a primitive way, basically, so, for me, the way I look at it, it is really stressful. School back home is really stressful. We do have free education, free healthcare. There are a lot of good things in that side of it, back in the country, when you look at it, that positive note. So, yes, it is quite interesting, basically. You enjoy school, and then suddenly you stop enjoying it. It's because there is a lot of stress on it. It's not like here, you start in Reception, Year 1 until Year 11, and then you're going to have your exams, and you're going to have your GCSEs to go to A Level, or do something. It's a completely different thing. Every term you're going to have an exam, and then they take the total of your exams every term, and then they can see if you passed or not. If you pass, you go to the next year. If you don't, you just redo the year. So it wasn't that great. I was at college, and then one year I just let it go, and then they just put me somewhere else, and then I just hated school after that, but I knew that I was going to go to uni, because I was an elite, basically. If you are an athlete and you are an elite, you've got a chance to go to uni.

0:05:30.7 Sharyn: What did you study at uni?

0:05:32.4 Cherif: Sports.

0:05:34.4 Abi: Then, did you do handball at uni as well?

0:05:37.0 Cherif: No, I didn't do handball at uni. I did handball since I was 11, 12. I played various categories, national teams, and internationally, everything. That's why my passion is for handball. That's the thing; when I came into this country, I chose this country because it didn't have handball.

0:06:01.9 Sharyn: Really?

0:06:02.9 Abi: So you're a pioneer of handball...

0:06:03.7 Cherif: Because I couldn't not play, and my mates are still playing, if you know what I mean, because I had a bad injury, so I could not carry on playing at the level I used to play, professionally.

0:06:24.6 Sharyn: May I ask a question which is going to reveal total ignorance?

0:06:26.8 Cherif: Yes.

0:06:28.5 Sharyn: What exactly is handball?

0:06:29.5 Cherif: Handball is football with your hands, and it's seven-a-side. It's like, if you touch the ball with your foot, it's a foul. It's an Olympic sport. It's seven-a-side. It's very well known all over Europe. It's huge. It's a very fast sport, so you don't have time to celebrate goals. It's really enjoyable, basically. Fitness-wise, it's just like you need to be really fit to play it. Not like me. [Laughs]

0:07:10.9 Sharyn: So the handball kind of determined, in a way, the direction of your life, because you wanted to go with the handball.

0:07:19.2 Cherif: It was. I think that's the thing; it was an escape for us, because you've got your mates who are your mates, and then the next thing you've got to choose. In Algiers - I remember the word - it's what we call a quartier populaire. It's like the Bronx; you can find everyone living there. It's an amazing - I call it a town - it's part of Algiers, but it's not Algiers. It is Algiers, but it's well known. We had philosophers from there, we had big names from there. I don't know if you know Sofia Boutella. Do you know her? Have you seen *The Last Mummy*?

0:08:08.7 Abi: Yes.

0:08:12.0 Cherif: The one who played with Tom Cruise.

0:08:13.3 Abi: Oh, really?

0:08:13.8 Cherif: She was born in there, Sofia Boutella. Her dad used to live there. Her dad is a great musician, so that's one of the names out of the hat, and there are a lot of people. So, basically, you will know someone that will do something. Then, at the same time, you can see the other side. So we lived within the terrorists. The terrorists were living with us, so you've got a mate who was going to be a terrorist, a mate who was going to be [chuckles]...

0:08:46.7 Abi: A film star.

0:08:47.6 Cherif: ...a film star, or a mate who's going to be a normal person, and then a policeman. That crucial time, let's say, from 1992 to 2000, those eight years were bloody, basically, so you don't know who to trust. I've lost so many friends. I've lost girlfriends, I've got friends who lost...

0:09:17.8 Sharyn: Did you have any siblings?

0:09:20.1 Cherif: Yes, I do.

0:09:21.5 Sharyn: Are they still in Algeria?

0:09:25.4 Cherif: My sister passed away last February. She fought about two years of cancer, breast cancer, and then time came in and she's gone, she left us. She was 41 only. The sad bit for us is she left two kids. They still live with their dad there. Mum lived there. Dad used to live there. Dad passed away 2019. My brother lives there, and I've got two other siblings living here, one in Cambridge, one in London.

0:10:08.5 Sharyn: Are they younger? Did you come over first?

0:10:10.3 Cherif: Yes, I was the first one.

0:10:12.2 Sharyn: They came because you had come, or were they going to come anyway?

0:10:14.1 Cherif: No, they just hated - that's the thing, you hate. It's all different times, if you know what I mean? For example, the one who lives in Cambridge didn't come until Yamna was born, which is 16 years ago. My other brother was 23 years ago, so that's a big gap. The one who came 16 years ago - that's the thing, it's completely different to us. It was life back home, but it wasn't life really, if you

know what I mean? So you need to be - the way people were living is just like are off, like theft, and things like that. It's immoral to me, and to my family. It's all about morality, basically, the way you've been brought up, grown up as, and how you're going to be taking things. Yes, of course, maybe Islam plays a part of it, but it's not all about Islam. It's all about how can we be as a human being, basically.

0:11:28.6 Sharyn: Are you and your two brothers who are over here, do you see each other? Is it important to you to maintain that link?

0:11:36.4 Cherif: Yes, it is important, but sometimes we don't see each other. The one in Cambridge, we don't see him much, really. The one in London, I see him, because I'll go down more often to London, so I'll stay with him sometimes, and all his kids are really close to me. He's got an autistic child, so he just loves me, so you get that unconditional love, if you know what I mean? I don't know. Yes, it is important to keep in touch with family, but you have to make your life, and that's it. Lives move on.

0:12:17.9 Sharyn: You did move on; you moved over here. The impetus was to keep playing the handball?

0:12:23.6 Cherif: No, stop playing handball, because I had an injury.

0:12:27.4 Sharyn: So what was the impetus? What was the main thing that either pushed or pulled you here?

0:12:35.2 Cherif: Like I said, it was literally not having handball here. I could not play.

0:12:43.2 Sharyn: It would have been too painful to live somewhere...

0:12:44.2 Cherif: Yes.

0:12:45.8 Sharyn: Oh, right.

0:12:46.3 Cherif: Painful to see my mates still playing at the age of 22. They're just starting their career, and then you've just stopped your career, so it's really depressing, and really holding you back, but you just have to make peace with yourself in the end. Like, yes, of course, after I think 15

years later, then I started again, because it's something that I loved, but I couldn't do it because of this.

0:13:17.1 Sharyn: So when you first came over, then, what were you doing?

0:13:20.2 Cherif: Oh, I worked everywhere, basically. I started working in a pub washing glasses, and then from the pub I went to work for Pret A Manger, where I worked for a long time. I met my wife there. I've still got friends working there. My son is working there now.

0:13:52.3 Sharyn: It's a family tradition.

0:13:53.6 Cherif: Yes. That's thing with Pret, it's a way of life I think. It's just like, you'll start as a sandwich-maker, but by the end of - when you leave or if you stay, by the end of it you end up working high. You could be a manager, ops manager, and all that stuff, you've got your own shops, and it's just really good progression of life, basically.

0:14:22.5 Sharyn: So, when you first started working here, where were you living?

0:14:26.8 Cherif: London.

0:14:27.5 Sharyn: Then you moved to Ilfracombe?

0:14:30.1 Cherif: Yes. I moved to Ilfracombe in 2004.

0:14:39.5 Sharyn: What made you move to Ilfracombe?

0:14:41.2 Cherif: It was my wife. We moved down here with our son, [Zae], and yes, that was it, basically. We just moved. Then I had to go for my visa back home, and that was a bit rough, if you know what I mean? We exchanged some nice words with a lovely entry clearance officer [sarcastic tone]. He said to me, 'You knew how to choose your target,' and I said to him, well, I hadn't thought of him, really [laughs]. So, because of that, he kept me 16 months in Algeria. He denied my visa.

0:15:28.6 Sharyn: Gosh, that must have been scary.

0:15:29.9 Cherif: It was, but what can you do? I knew that I was going to get it, but it was just a matter of time. Once it goes to tribunal, the tribunal takes ages. Just to get a tribunal date, it took I think nine months, nearly a year, or I think a year. Then when you get it... The worse time was when - basically, the Home Office don't send a representative to the tribunal, so, I don't know, they have to employ racist people I think [chuckles]. That's what I think. I don't think I can do that if my life - you know, working as an entry clearance officer, or working giving visas and things like that. It's not me, and I don't think it's anyone's who's got a conscience I think, because you don't need to feel any guilt, basically. It's a job, at the end of the day. So the hard time was when the court - I mean, the judge said, 'This is a joke. Why have they kept him all that time?' so he said, 'Yes, no worries,' but you have to wait two weeks for them to...

0:17:10.9 Abi: Confirm it.

0:17:11.5 Cherif: Confirm saying, 'Oh, we're not going to do any further things.' So you go two weeks, and if they don't take it - what do you call it, I can't remember, when you're just not happy with the decision of the court?

0:17:26.6 Abi: Oh, you can appeal it.

0:17:27.7 Cherif: Appeal it. So they can appeal it within two weeks, but they didn't appeal, so they run away the clock, and then from that, it takes six weeks for them to take that file from here to the embassy. So you are in limbo. It is a torture, basically. That's what it was. You are in a limbo. Luckily, it was in the summer, so I was enjoying myself down at the beach, so I didn't care. My son was like, 'Yes, Dad, let's live here.' He was a kid. Yes, that's how it was. It was very emotional, if you know what I mean? It's draining. Basically, they do that, because they want to see how the relationship is going. I said to him, 'Listen, there's a lot of people...' - that's the thing; I always spoke my mind. Since I was a kid I always spoke my mind. I'm not someone who can say, 'Yes.' I'm not a sheep. So, yes, that's me.

0:18:40.4 Sharyn: So, eventually, you got through that process, and you were secure in your residency here.

0:18:42.7 Cherif: Yes.

0:18:48.8 Sharyn: Had you moved to Ilfracombe, or were you still in London?

0:18:50.9 Cherif: No, I was here in Ilfracombe.

0:18:53.5 Sharyn: I was just wondering how your experience of living in London compared with your experience of living here.

0:19:00.4 Cherif: It was hard to acclimatise. At the beginning, it was hard to acclimatise, but because I came back from Algeria, I didn't feel it. I was literally working. Young people, they say, 'Oh, there's no jobs around in Ilfracombe,' and all that. I used to work four jobs a day. I used to be a cleaner at the college, I used to be working - now it's Lidl - it used to be a Co-op. I used to work at Pall in the canteen. I had about four jobs, and I was another cleaner with Young Devon. Two jobs I was a cleaner; one job at the Co-op, and one job at Pall in the canteen. So I was filling up all my time, basically. Obviously, I was working hard, but it's low wages. I had to, because I had to - when I came back, I had debts, so I had to pay those debts, and work hard, and support the family, and all that stuff.

0:20:10.5 Sharyn: When you were doing all of those jobs, did you feel you were becoming part of Ilfracombe?

0:20:16.9 Cherif: Yes. Yes, that's the thing. After that, it developed. Basically, 2009, like three years later, I started working for a quango. It's not a quango; it's just... Do you know a quango?

0:20:34.6 Abi: No.

0:20:35.7 Cherif: It's a government fund company. It used to be called Transform.

0:20:45.5 Abi: I think I've heard of Transform, yes.

0:20:47.7 Cherif: So now we've got Transform 4 Work. That project came from Transform. Transform is the Labour Government chose the five poorest towns in the country and put those - it's a kind of - it's not a charity, but it's not - then they pumped money through us, but what we were doing is more like - or what Transform was doing is work that no one can do, basically. 2009 I started working for them as a neighbourhood warden, so then Ilfracombe became my life, basically.

0:21:41.4 Sharyn: What made you want to do that job?

0:21:45.6 Cherif: I just wanted a full-time job in the beginning, to start with, but once I started working there and seeing the community, that's it, you know the community. I knew the community. I started knowing the community well. I used to go to the - favourite day was Tuesday morning, going to open doors in a church. All the clients are from that. They just come for a free cup of tea. So I'll go - Ruth, I haven't heard from her for ages - she used to open it, offer tea, biscuits, and people used to come and say, 'Oh, yes, Cherif, this happened, this happened, this happened,' and we were always like the link in between the authority and people. So I was the bridge in between the community and the authority. I helped so many people with their housing. So, basically, I used work from nought to that, basically. I've worked with the police. I used to go to the police station just to see them. They were working alongside the PCSOs. We used to do walks. Some days you end up walking 30 miles by just not realising, going up all the way to behind The Torrs, the reservoir, and then walking back.

0:23:24.4 Sometimes up to Woolacombe and then back. We used to do cleaning graffiti, projects with young people. Then I moved on to young people, so, basically, done a lot of projects with young people. Have you seen the board down the seafront, that big board?

0:23:46.5 Abi: Which one? Is that the one...?

0:23:49.0 Cherif: Where there always used to be an arcade.

0:23:51.9 Abi: Yes.

0:23:53.9 Cherif: We were the first people who - we bought the board and painted it with the young people. We did a lot of design. Oxford Park, I did it with a group of young people. They were called junior citizens, so they applied - represented to Prince Edward. I nearly said the other one. [Laughter] Prince Edward, yes. Eddie. It was quite funny. I can't say...

0:24:30.8 Sharyn: Yes, tell us funny stories.

0:24:34.0 Cherif: No, but I can't. Just pause it there.

0:24:36.5 Abi: Well, we could.

0:24:37.2 Cherif: Yes, pause it. Pause it, and I'll tell you the story.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT PART 1]

PART 2

0:00:01.4 Sharyn: So you're still working with the young people, yes?

0:00:04.3 Cherif: Yes. Then I moved, after that, because come the Tory party, 14 years of lovely time of cutting left, right, and centre have hit young people a lot really. So yes, basically when, Transform has finished, all the funding ran out basically, so I had to find a new job. So I started working for children's centre as a family practitioner. It wasn't my cup of tea. It was not. It was a nightmare for me, basically. By the end of it, it was just, I can't, you know. Before that, I was already doing some [sic] lot of work with young people, like I said. So, yes, my focus is all of young people. So I've got experience of about 20 years of working with young people basically.

0:01:18.1 Sharyn: So I don't know if this is an appropriate question to ask or not.

0:01:18.3 Cherif: Yes, go ahead.

0:01:21.8 Sharyn: Your passion for working with young people, does that arise from your own experiences when you were growing up in Nigeria?

0:01:27.1 Cherif: Yes, definitely. It literally is the nurturing, you know, how those coaches nurtured us and didn't let us go and do things that we were not supposed to do. Obviously we were naughty. We smoked, drink, even if it wasn't allowed, and things like that, do things that you're not allowed. That's as part of a human being basically. We are all like that. If you tell us not to do, we will do. It's a normal, plain human being. But they stopped us from engaging either with both sides basically. It was the war, civil war, so both sides stopped us engaging with the police or engaging with the terrorists, you know. That's the thing, there is a book out there saying who killed who. You know what I mean? We were both brothers and sisters and the killing was literally, it was barbaric that it was done between families basically. The son killed dad because he was a policeman and all that stuff. Just literally it was messy, really messy. So, yes, I always, I just want to give to those young people. Like I said, I was just literally, well, I had a lot of issues with them because young people don't understand.

0:03:03.5 They're ignorant basically. You find out because you are for them stranger is danger, basically. I'm a stranger. I am someone who's not from this country and the Tories came in and then you hear all those stereotypes. Yes, all these immigrants, what they doing here, why they're here, we don't want them. It's a cycle really. Here is remote. You don't see them. You don't see my kind. You don't see your kind. Literally, my son is black, yes. When he was Year 1 he just came and said, 'Oh, yes, you know why I don't run that fast? Because my skin colour is different to the others.' Yes, it's because he thought that is what it was, because he was the only black in here, within the kids. They're all white. He's only black. Yes, now we're getting better. It's not 100 per cent, but we're getting better. We've got a bit of cosmopolitan now! But yes, that's what it is. So it was like, for me, I felt like it's my duty to educate those young people to actually... Because it's education, yes, of course. Like I said earlier, yes, education. You learn a lot and what you do in life is just, I am more a person I believe, on practical learning than, you know.

0:04:45.7 You can read 100 books, but it's not what is the reality, I think. So yes, hands-on learning and then you get those people... I remember once, it was in Combe Martin, and I was a youth worker. As a youth worker, you just always prepare things and all that, and then sometimes you just think, oh, hold on, I'll just challenge them. Why not? So I challenged them. I said, 'Yes, let's do a presentation today.' I did a presentation about Islam and all that, and then before starting I said, 'Is there any Muslim around here now?' 'No.' I said, 'Are you sure?' 'Yes.' I said, 'Well, if I tell you I am...' 'No, you're not.' They were telling me I was not. See what I mean? 'Oh, but you dress normal. You don't...' Then literally, one of them just said to me, 'Oh, can you teach me how to make bombs then?' Yes, that's the ignorance. But it's not - that's what they've been fed by the media. We might say, oh, yes, this and that, but no, literally that has been fed to them through parents, through them, you know, that's how it is, you know.

0:06:03.9 Sharyn: Do you feel it's an uphill struggle for you and that you're pioneering something that needs to be done?

0:06:09.2 Cherif: I'll tell you what, it's not an uphill struggle. That's the thing. I always think of it as a challenge, because if you look at it as an uphill struggle, I don't want to go that hill. I don't want to run that hill. But if it's a challenge, if you challenge me, oh, if you go up that hill, can I challenge you to go that hill, I will take it. That's the difference, because there is a lot of, if you say uphill struggle, for me, it's more like you're making yourself vulnerable, you're making yourself poor me, and I don't want to be poor me.

0:06:55.1 Sharyn: So do you feel as you do your work, frequently, a sense of achievement? Even if it's a small achievement with just one person.

0:07:03.9 Cherif: Oh yes, honestly, my work is all about achievement. Well, if you go and speak to young people out there, they're in their late 20s now, the one I first worked with. It's funny to see them with kids. One of them recently said, 'Oh, yes, I've got four kids Cherif.' It's like, oh my God, four. She was like, 'Oh, they're all girls.' I said, 'Yes, they're all going to be like you?' 'Yes.' I said, 'I'm going to stop working with young people.' She was like, 'Oh, no no no.' I've done things like tribute to my friend and colleague who, she passed away in Kenya. That girl, I worked with her when she was 14, and she'd become a youth worker, and I was working with her as a colleague. I sent her to Borneo for Raleigh International. So she did ten weeks volunteering. I think she built a nursery there and all that, happy. Then when she came back, she said, 'I'm not going to stay here. I'm just going to go and do some volunteering work in Africa.' Then she applied for a job up in Scotland. Within six months she went to Africa and then recently, it was her ten years, she passed away. So yes, Belle. So the youth club down the road is Belle's Place. It's Belle's.

0:08:53.4 Abi: Yes, that's for her.

0:08:54.6 Cherif: Yes. So when the Tories were shutting down all the youth clubs and things like that, Devon County Council, they said, 'Yes, you can keep that open,' run by volunteers, and her mum, and things like that. So, yes.

0:09:15.5 Sharyn: I think one of the things you told Abi when you first agreed was your concern about the effects of technology and the internet on young people.

0:09:29.2 Cherif: Oh, yes. Like I said earlier on about I feel sorry for young people sometimes. They will not have the childhood we had. Everything now is just sit behind the screen and play and that's it. They can sit there for hours and not see anyone. It's not that not just that, because, you know, I work with young people, and I know what they do. Basically the argument is all started behind the screen and if you argue with someone behind the screen it's completely different than face-to-face. If you are face-to-face, you get all that anger out and they get their anger out and that's it. Hopefully, that will sort it out. You know, don't talk to each other anymore and that's it. But over the internet, they're just bitching and tagging someone else. Sexting! Just name it. Then when they start going out together, her pictures or his pictures are all on social media. Sorry, I don't want to see that, as I always tell

them. That's the thing, I feel my duty is to teach these young people it's okay to be angry. It's okay to say things, but when you calm down, you just have to bounce things back and just rectify things if you can, and that's it.

0:11:17.9 Sharyn: Do you worry about the really malign influences there are on the internet?

0:11:21.4 Cherif: Pardon?

0:11:22.1 Sharyn: The really bad influences there are.

0:11:25.5 Cherif: Well, obviously. I mean, now it's unbelievable with, like, TikTok. You know, people making money out of being silly, being... I don't know. Really, it's scary sometimes. I think we give a platform to people who are ignorant, to stupid people. We give a platform to stupid people. Yes, of course, I'm not saying that it was all wrong and all danger and all... You can find nice people in there on TikTok, and via Facebook, or WhatsApp, or YouTube, but the platform is there. Then if you're silly, people will follow you, and that's how you get money. Then you'll be sillier and sillier and challenge things like, oh yes, this and that. It's hard to actually control the kids nowadays because they have too much freedom. It's not just here, it's all over the world. So now I can be here talking to someone in China right now, or here and we were talking to someone in America, the same thing they do. There is all different, it's not one way only. It used to be just maybe just maybe Viber, or it used to be Facebook and then you moved on to Messenger, and it moved on to WhatsApp, and you move on to Zoom.

0:13:05.8 Especially, what made it really obvious, it was the time, the year, COVID-19 time. It was like, oh, yes, we can do anything we want now with technology. That was a hard time, and we must say, these young people had it hard. I would not be at home for nine months. That's how they had it, nine months at home doing nothing really. Even if you get all the lessons and all that, it's different. They don't have that friendship, fraternity that is all about human contact. The virtuality kills things.

0:13:58.9 Sharyn: Yes. I think we've covered most - what do you think I haven't covered in the questions?

0:14:07.4 Abi: I mean, that dipped into, I think, quite a lot, but one of the things that I would quite like to talk to you about, because we talked about it on the phone, was could you tell us a bit more about your work nowadays with youths in handball and you as a coach?

0:14:23.7 Cherif: Well, me as a coach, it's fun. I do love it. I do coach the handball and [?Bideford Blacks 0:14:33.8]. That's my team. It's not me who created it. It's [?Em 0:14:41.6], another French guy. So I salute him. So I work with a lovely group of people, like, Dorothy, which is Do. She is the second coach. We work, me and her are coaches there, so we are basically contributing to young people's life. We taught them since, like, especially the one that they're 19 now, we taught them since they were 8 or 9, same age as my daughter. They used to come and have fun, just being silly and all that. Now they're women, literally, and I feel overprotective sometimes and just think, oh my God, what have we created here? [Laughter] [Unclear word 0:15:39.3] beast.

0:15:41.9 Sharyn: You've created strong, independent women!

0:15:45.5 Cherif: Oh yes, definitely. That's the thing, I'm a great believer of promoting that independence. So basically, I've worked around a big range of young people. So I work with the hard one to reach, drug, alcohol, just name anything you would think of from running away from home because they've been brought up when they were born, they've been under heroin. So, you know, you have withdrawal symptoms. So they had to inject them when they were babies. The one that I said to you have a great future, you could see, and it's nice to see that. So looking at I, when you were talking about job satisfaction, all that, my job now, I work for DCC as a [unclear word 0:16:54.5]. So I've still got two or three jobs. That's me. I like keeping busy. So with DCC, I work with vulnerable young people, ASD, autism, and Down's syndrome and all that, especially post-16. When they're 16 and over, transport would not be offered to them, like, taxis would not be offered to them automatically. So I have to come in and check their ability basically because some of them, they can do it. If they want, they can do it.

0:17:33.5 So I'll come in and then put a programme of two weeks where just take them, first week is door-to-door, pick them up from home, walk together to the bus stop, take the bus to school, get them to school, pick them up. Same thing, that's the journey for the whole week. Second week I start shadowing them. By the end of second week, that's it, they know it. That's what we do, cover just this area. Then over the summer sometimes I'm training some young people to use the public transport and then I saw them all over Northern Devon, everywhere. That's a release. I worked with someone, his mum just phoned me, said, 'Oh, Cherif, what have you done to my son?' I said, 'I've

done nothing.' 'Oh, you done something big.' 'What do you mean?' So yes, her son is non-verbal, and then the year before, he spend eight weeks in his bedroom. He has not walked out from his bedroom. Just playing game and that's it. Last year I saw them everywhere. He had a girlfriend. Literally 9:30 he wakes up, wait for her on the bus stop. So she gets on the bus, pick him up, and they went everywhere in Devon.

0:18:58.9 When I say everywhere, I saw them in Croyde. I saw them in Westward Ho! Everywhere. She said, 'I can't have him home now anymore.' I said, 'Is that good or bad.' Thank you! That's the thing, all those things, it's just nice to actually see the reward.

0:19:22.7 Sharyn: Yes, it must give you such a sense of achievement doing that.

0:19:24.9 Cherif: Oh definitely, yes. You see it and you just think, oh my God, this is better than getting paid.

0:19:33.4 Sharyn: But you still want to be paid!

0:19:34.6 Cherif: Obviously, I want more money. That's the thing. You find me today we were talking about pay rise. Oh, yes, we need more. But the satisfaction is just like, you can't... That's what I said to my colleagues and my manager. I said they cannot pay us enough because that change someone's life. The change you're going to put in their life, everything is small to pay us, basically.

0:20:06.9 Sharyn: Yes. I mean, giving people that freedom that's...

0:20:09.6 Abi: And young people they all carry on...

0:20:09.9 Cherif: Honestly, we're talking about really vulnerable young people. Like, autistic, non-verbal, Down's syndrome. They don't process the same as we do and then giving them the opportunity... Last year, I actually, they had a group, because they used to go to college Monday to Thursday. A group of them they used to meet on Friday. They go to McDonald's, and then from McDonald's they go to cinema. So I used to go to McDonald's on Friday especially to see them. 'Are you buying me something?' 'Cherif, you can buy yourself anything.' Just to tease them, because I know where to find them. If I walk in, there is an area at Petroc where they go all together there. When I go there, they're all like, 'Hi Cherif, can you train me?' Then you see some of them they're not able, you cannot train them, but I always say, 'Oh yes, we will do it.' I'll take them out. I'll take them

out just for them to experience that. Why not? Yes, you can't do it, I know that you can't do it, but I'll take you out because I want to give you that feel and think, oh yes, well done, you improved on this and this and this. So you're always trying to make them... I like making people feel important basically.

0:21:49.1 I done an [?LP 0:21:49.3] course and one of the things the tutor there said to us, which is brilliant, that you wouldn't think about, 'You don't make your candle light brighter by turning someone else's candle off.' If you want yours to be bright, with the one, between you two, the light will be brighter. Because if you turn someone's candle off, basically killing them. So it's hard. Have we covered everything?

0:22:36.8 Sharyn: Could I just ask one last thing?

0:22:38.0 Cherif: Yes, of course.

0:22:41.2 Sharyn: Clearly, it's very important to your identity as you that you're doing these things, but does it in any way relate to your identity as an immigrant to this country, that you have achieved all these things with all these young people? Or is it just because it's you?

0:23:00.3 Cherif: I'll tell you what, I don't see it as an immigrant. Well, I live here more than I lived in back home. So, yes, I see myself... Yes, I still call it home no matter what. Yes, if I had, not choice, but if I had it, I can't live there because I can't get on with the mentality. I moved on from that mentality and I moved on from the taboos. I don't care - when you live somewhere where they are conservative, they just stick to the religions, stick to... It's primitive. Most of it is not just a religion, it's more those traditions, they're primitive. I don't care. I moved on from that. That's it. My life is completely different. I'm not that person who came in here 25/26 years ago. That person, I had an open mind anyway because of the way education, sports, and I always been the rebel. As I said, I've always been a rebel. So, yes, I challenge people just for the sake of it sometimes. I know that they're right, but I just challenge them...

0:24:30.4 Abi: Just to see. Start a conversation, yes.

0:24:31.4 Cherif: Exactly. Oh yes, definitely. I challenge something because I just want the challenge. Simple as that. Yes, that's just like that. I don't see myself as an immigrant. I feel at home here as I feel at home back home. I know so many people they're just, yes, yes, it's racist and all that, blah blah

blah. Yes, of course. Aren't we all racist? We all get one day, and we be racist. We've got something that we don't like, and it might be in the racism side of it. But you don't have to, like I said, to blow someone else's candle so yours can be bright, if you know what I mean. Even if you don't like him or you've been racist about that thing, you don't need to be mean to them. Still, there is that humanity that we have to work on. It's always the white man wins! You like it or not, that's what they say to us. The thing is just like, it's silly, but it is what it is. So the Tories, they played with the ball, played with it, played with it, all the white people played with it, oh, hold on. Yes! Pass it on to the Indians, sorry. That's what they did.

0:26:15.3 Boris Johnson, all the lies and then nothing happened to him. There is the injustice. I do feel the injustice. The injustice is worse here. Sometimes I feel like, we have what's happening in Palestine, and all those innocent people, because we're blind, because Israel is an ally and if you say something, they just turn around and say you're anti-Semitic.

0:26:55.7 Abi: Do you find with those sorts of experiences, whether it's in reference to something like Israel and Palestine or whether it's in reference to just close things to home, do you find that people you talk to have a different response to governments? How do you think they...?

0:27:20.9 Cherif: The way I look at it, as a human being, if you're not with me you're against me. That's what it is. That's what I feel like. There is no common ground. We can't agree for a common ground. Jeremy Corbyn, the way they pictured him to us is he was like the nastiest man in the world, yes? Which, Boris Johnson, they went on the same election. You can't compare the two. There is no comparison there. That's what I'm trying to say to you. It's all about if you're with me, it's all right. If not, you're against me. So if you're against me, that's it. If you disagree with me, that's you against me simple as that. It's hard to come forward. That's the thing. They're doing it to Jews now. Jews are against Israel, and they think he's an [unclear word 0:28:25.9]. That's the Orthodox down in Bethlehem, they just get beaten by the army and things like that because of that. It's sad to see. We are living the thing that we always heard about the genocide. We always heard about what happened in Auschwitz. I feel sorry for those people. Hitler was, you can't describe him as a human being. To do that.

0:29:19.7 But what we live in, I think, is even worse, the way I look at it. Because it's an ally, we're allowing the ally to kill innocent children. It's because he's an ally. It's a sad time. Really sad time. A sad time that we are witnessing that and that we're not saying anything. That's the hardest bit for me. They just muzzled us. There's nothing to do with Islam or Muslim or... It's because, yes,

Palestinians have been living there for ages. You can identify as Palestinian and a Jew, as you can identify as Palestinian and a Christian, or you can be a Muslim. So the three religions, the Abrahamic religions, they're all from there. They all share the same land. So I don't see why not. Why do you have to create a state to eradicate another state? It's hard. No matter what you try and go around it, it's not feasible. So we are allowing that to happen. That's my only regret is basically we as people are allowing children to die. That's the thing, the Palestinian life doesn't count as a life basically. Their life is cheaper than Ukrainian life.

0:31:33.0 Abi: Well, I think that possibly in the hopes of ending on a slightly more positive note, I think the final thing, it's a very small question.

0:31:46.5 Cherif: Go ahead.

0:31:47.3 Abi: Not at all a huge question. What is the thing you most want to be remembered for or remembered by?

0:31:58.4 Cherif: Just Cherif. Simple as that. Just Cherif. Yes. That silly man who just wears shorts all year round.

0:32:08.1 Abi: Even in the cold!

0:32:08.8 Cherif: Yes.

0:32:09.8 Sharyn: Oh, are you one of those men? All through the winter you wear shorts.

0:32:13.1 Cherif: Yes. Sweden, minus four, shorts. Yes, I wear shorts all year round, and I have so many people... I went to the Algerian embassy with shorts, and I was kicked out of it!

0:32:29.1 Sharyn: Really? What did they expect you to wear? A suit and tie.

0:32:31.9 Cherif: No, they said no. Trousers but not shorts. I was like, 'If I was a woman, should I wear a miniskirt and come in?' They just thought that was just, they're in the shit! Sorry! Like I said, I am someone, I like challenging people and I like people to challenge me. That's what it's all about. I think life without challenges, I don't think is nice. I don't think so.

0:33:09.4 Abi: Well then in that case, thank you ever so much.

0:33:13.0 Cherif: You're welcome.

0:33:13.2 Sharyn: Yes, thank you. It's been really, really interesting but I've also really enjoyed it.

0:33:18.4 Abi: Yes, lovely to speak to you. I will just finish the recording.

[END OF TRANSCRIPTION PART 2]

Transcribed by: McGowan