

## INTERVIEW WITH SHAJEEV WANIGASEKARA

INTERVIEWERS: ABI OBENE, SHARYN HEDGE and MARK LANGWORTHY  
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00:00.10 **Abi Obene:** We are here today on the 3rd of June 2024 for the first of the interviews for the *Telling Our Stories, Finding Our Roots* project, the Ilfracombe branch of the project. Today we have here Shajeev Wanigasekara, who has kindly agreed to be interviewed by us. We also have Mark Langworthy, one of our volunteers and Sharyn Hedge, another of our volunteers. My name's Abi Obene, I'm the project coordinator for the Ilfracombe branch of the project, and the project itself is run by Devon Development Education, or DDE, and funded by the National Lottery. We are here today in the Ilfracombe Centre along the Ilfracombe High Street. So without further ado I'll let everyone get started.

00:00.58 **Sharyn Hedge:** Hello Shajeev, thank you very much for coming to talk with us. We were wondering if to start with you could tell us a little bit about yourself, where you were born and where you grew up?

00:01.11 **Shajeev:** Yes, so I was born in Sri Lanka, which was where I grew up, up to the age of 19. I spent all of my childhood there, obviously I travelled abroad for holidays and things like that, but that was home for that period of time.

00:01.29 **Sharyn:** About your schooling maybe, impressions, early memories, significant events in your schooling?

00:01.36 **Shajeev:** Well, I know this interview is about a sense of identity and in a bizarre way a big part of my identity is the school I went to and, sometimes quite arrogantly I might identify that I was formed at school first before being from a particular country or something like that. So it obviously had a very powerful impression. The school I went to was called St Thomas' College, I went to the prep school first and then to the college. It's a very, coming up to 170 years old, founded by the colonial British Bishop of Colombo at the time and so it's obviously very steeped in tradition and history. And so my grandfather went there, my father went there, I went there, my younger brother went there. You know, and a lot of my classmates, their fathers were at school with my father and so on and so forth, so there's a real sense of identity around the school in that sense, so a lot of tradition, a lot of culture, a lot of education beyond book learning if you like. Very much about being a person and what that means as well. It was an all boys school, so being a man I suppose in some ways as well.

00:02.58 **Sharyn:** So was there a big religious element?

00:03.00 **Shajeev:** Yes, and no, because essentially it's a Church of England school. And so one of my classmates is now the head of that school and he's a priest, he's an Anglican priest, as so were several, so the head when my dad was there was an Anglican priest, and that head of the school was

classmates with my grandfather and so on and so forth, so yes there was quite a strong Church of England, Anglican element to it. But it's multi-faith as well. I mean, you know, in any given year you would have students from Buddhist backgrounds or Islamic backgrounds as well as Christian backgrounds and one of the main features of the campus is the chapel, which is a beautiful building, but there were religious assembly sites on campus for Buddhist assemblies and Islamic assemblies as well. So very inclusive as well as being a Christian school.

**00:04.08 Sharyn: So the school was very important to you. Do you still have contact with it as an alumnus?**

00:04.12 Shajeev: Yes and no in the sense that I don't get involved in the Old Boys Associations or anything like that, it's just not for me. But obviously my classmate's the head of the school, so I keep in touch with him. I'm very much in contact with a lot of friends from those days and somewhat sadly the sort of main event of the year for a lot of us who went to that school is the annual cricket match between our school and our rival school - which is actually the oldest unbroken cricket match in history because it didn't stop for either of the world wars, it didn't stop for the pandemic and it's been unbroken for 140 something years that cricket match. So that's, you know, that's the event of the year. It's, it's, it's broadcast on an internet sports channel now. I mean the fact that this year, almost every one of my classmates who are somewhere abroad, apart from me, flew in so they could all go to the cricket match together.

People revert to being naughty teenagers, you know, I mean drinking starts at 10 in the morning, I'm not sure [*an unheard aside*], and the really lovely thing is, again I know it's, I know this might sound very pompous, but it's the sort of Eton and Harrow of Sri Lanka, the school I went to and the rival school. And the cricket match is like that as well, and a lot of us who went to the two schools have become friends over the years having played each other in sport or, you know, debating or whatever and I've remained friends that way as well.

**00:06.02 Sharyn: And so most importantly, who usually wins?**

00:06.04 Shajeev: It's a dead heat at the moment overall [*laughing*]. Yes!

**00:06.7 Sharyn: So, this environment, which had many British influences clearly, could you explain a bit more about what that means to you? That, sort of, British influence, growing up, and how it affected your future life.**

00:06.20 Shajeev: Yeah, so obviously Sri Lanka has a colonial hangover if you like from having been colonised by, well the Portugese, the Dutch and the British in that order, the British being the most recent and so I think that's probably the influence that's lasted the longest as well. The school as I mentioned was very much modelled on a British public school for example, you know prefects and this, that and the other and obviously, cricket looms very large. The school I went to and a lot of similar schools had a lot of rugby, so again a lot of British influence there, obviously a Church of England influence as well. In Sri Lanka the educational curriculum is modelled on the British system, so it's A Levels when you leave school, it's what used to be O Levels here, it's now GCSEs, so you do O Levels then you do A Levels - very much modelled on the British system.

The legal system is modelled on the British system as well, so the colonial influence, the British influence particularly is very prevalent in Sri Lanka. There is, the colonial hangover I think affects people differently, to a certain extent, to which level of society you come from, and that's not necessarily about wealth, I didn't grow up in a wealthy family, we didn't have money, they were solidly middle class, but from certain backgrounds, and so just to give you an example, English is pretty much my first language. I mean I speak English better than I speak Sinhalese, which is the native Sri Lankan language that's supposed to be my first language - I'm not actually that fluent in it, you know I'm far more, English is my first language, it's the language we spoke at home, it's the language we spoke amongst friends, it's the language my family members speak to each other in the first instance as well. So the British influence is quite heavily steeped in, certainly from the background I came from. I think what that also meant was that if you were looking at higher education outside Sri Lanka for many of us, and certainly for me, England was the first choice, you know by and large the only choice. I did apply to some American universities as well, but didn't really want to go there. I wanted to come here.

00:09.06 **Sharyn: So you came over here to, what were you studying as an undergraduate?**

00:09.08 Shajeev: Law. So I'm a barrister. I did a law degree in London and did my bar qualification in London as well.

00:09.23 **Sharyn: Right. So what was university like for you here? Being at a British university.**

00:09.25 Shajeev: Loved it. So I wanted to go to London particularly and wanted to go to King's College in London specifically. It's a great law school, but also a family friend who was, this friend's mother and my mother had gone to school together from the age of five, so they knew each other. He was my hero at the time, they'd moved to the UK in the late 60s, he'd grown up here, he was, you know brilliant academically, he was great at sport, and you know he was my hero, and he went to King's so I wanted to go to King's and I wouldn't go anywhere else, and I was very lucky to get in. I absolutely loved it. I mean I possibly loved it for the wrong reasons, because I didn't do that well academically at all. Having been used to being quite a high flyer at school level, having to work for it here when I was too busy enjoying all the other aspects of university life, you know, was a bit of a wake-up call but I loved it and, I mean, I felt very much at home in London, very much at home, and in fact I have lived in different parts of the world - and Sri Lanka will always be home, you know deep deeply engrained - [but] England is where I feel most at home and I always have done so. It was being a duck to water really, living in London.

00:10.51 **Sharyn: So you came over here to go to university. Did it meet your expectations? Did the country as a whole meet your expectations?**

00:11.01 Shajeev: Yeah, yeah absolutely. It wasn't my first time in England, because we'd done, in 1986 when I was 14 we did a big family trip, a large part of which was in England. My dad used to work for a British tea company and so he'd come here you know as an apprentice in the 60s and he'd done his apprenticeship in tea at the head office here, and he had a lot of business obviously regularly so he used to travel up and down and we had this big family trip in 1986. And so that was

my first proper exposure to England if you like and it was wonderful because so many friends and family, you know my dad's sisters were married to English men and living here, one in the Cotswolds and the other in Warminster near Bath, so we went there and we went to family friends in Newcastle as well as London, so we had a real, my Dad knew England really well. So my mum had a sister in Somerset at the time so we travelled quite the length and breadth of the country then, and had a taste of, and so it was very, very easy to fit in and assimilate when I came to university here.

**00:12.22 Sharyn: So even though you were coming to university on your own you already had this community of people that you knew here?**

00:12.24 Shajeev: Yeah, absolutely. So certainly in the first year, holiday you know, summer break or whatever, I would go to my aunt's or to the family friends up in Wyeland [CHECK] up in Newcastle. So yes, there was a big support network already in that sense.

**00:12.48 Sharyn: So basically you got what you expected. You had high expectations and they were met.**

00:12.54 Shajeev: Yeah, you know at the end of my three years of degree and one year at bar school you know I was left with the sense that this is where I wanted to live.

**00:13.05 Sharyn: But you did go back to Sri Lanka to practise as a barrister?**

00:13.10 Shajeev: I never practised. I had to go back because I didn't have a right to live here or work here. I'm a barrister here and a member of the bar council of England and Wales, but it didn't qualify me to practice in this country at the time so I really didn't have any choice but to go back. I didn't really want to practise law in Sri Lanka. [sighs] It's quite an old boy's club there. Very hierarchical, like it would have been very hierarchical here in the early 1900s, you know and I'm quite independent minded - I don't like being told what to do necessarily - and I didn't like the idea of that, so I didn't want to practise there. So I went back a little bit aimlessly and my mother saw an advert in the newspaper for HSBC the bank, hiring graduate hires and I applied for that for want of anything better to do, and that you know, so my life took on a completely different direction from there.

**00:14.15 Sharyn: So did you enjoy your life in finance?**

00:14.20 Shajeev: Yes and no. [Laughs] I'm saying yes and no a lot! I learnt a lot. I worked for HSBC for 15 years in total. I learnt a lot. I made some lasting friends and it set me up to do what I do now, but banking and finance is not where my heart is. I mean, client relationships, the intellectual aspects of financing a big project, a big corporate project that you see having an impact, a household name, yes, loved all that aspect of it.

**00:15.10 Sharyn: But it did give you the opportunity to travel.**

00:15.12 Shajeev: Yeah, it did. And the reason that happened was because I always wanted to get into learning and development training. Training at HSBC was a really great department to work in,

the trainers got to travel the world all over you know, and made great contacts, learnt a lot, met a lot of people, and that really attracted me. So I got a job in training and got a job at HSBC in Hong Kong. So moved to Hong Kong in 2004 and you know in the next six years I went through four, maybe six passports I think, because you know I literally had a bag packed at all times because I was travelling so much. I will always be grateful for HSBC for that exposure, you know, the opportunity to experience different cultures, yeah different countries.

**00:16.11 Sharyn What about Hong Kong itself? How did you find Hong Kong itself? It sounds that you weren't actually there that much but as another, a third country, in which you were living after the first two. How did that feel?**

00:16.24 Shajeev: So, Hong Kong is the place that I would say I felt I least belonged in. This is my experience, you know, I know other people have had different experiences so I'm not saying it's everybody's experience. I found it not at all inclusive and, I mean, I was debating whether to say this or not, it's the most racist place that I've lived in that I've experienced. I've never felt more of an outsider than living in Hong Kong. But at the same time I consider Hong Kong one of my homes. I mean if I go there now I know my way around, I can walk the streets, I made some wonderful long lasting friends there, you know, but it's somewhere I really struggled with my identity. You know I'm quite a confident person myself in many respects but I wasn't there. I found it very tough there.

**00:17.25 Shajeev: So when you were in Hong Kong which place were you identifying with as the place where you belong? Was it Sri Lanka?**

00:17.43 Shajeev: Sri Lanka, very much so. Escaping home would have been escaping to Sri Lanka from there.

**00:17.57 Mark: Can I just quickly come this way? Hiya. Sorry, I just, before we go on with all these questions, there was just a couple of things I just wanted to pick up on. I've just been taking some notes. Going back to the school bit, you said earlier, it was a big part of your ID?**

00:17.58 Shajeev: Yes.

**00:17.59 Mark: St Thomas' College, was that where you went to? You said it was a two part school?**

00:18.02 Shajeev: Ah yes, I went to the prep school first, and then to the main school afterwards.

**00:18.11 Mark: What age do you start prep school?**

00:18.04 Shajeev: Six

00:18.05 **Mark: Six**



00:18.07 Shajeev: I got in a year early. Everyone else was seven. There was something about the school year there, is January to December rather than how it is here, so there was something to do with me being born in March, anyway, for whatever reason me and a few others, we all got in a year early, there were four of us a whole year younger than our classmates, yes so I started at 6 in 1978.

00:18.45 **Mark: So was that an ordinary school or a boarding school?**

00:18.44 Shajeev: Both. The prep school and the main school had main scholars as well as boarders. My dad's family were from down south in the country so he was a boarder from the age of 5 basically and he spent his entire life in the boarding, and well, we lived in Colombo itself, and I don't think my mother would have stood for it.

00:19.14 **Mark: So you were basically, you didn't board. So you started a year before everyone else. How did you feel about about that? Obviously being one of the youngest there, did that have any effect?**

00:19.29 Shajeev: I don't think it had any effect. You know at that age, you know, you're just starting at 6 and they're just turned 7, some of them turning 7 in the course of the year, and everyone's starting out net zero, right, at that point. It's your first exposure to secondary school *[sic]*, and that didn't have any impact at all to be honest. It only ever became significant, I mean I'm 52 now, so a couple of years ago I turned 50 and a lot of my classmates had already turned 50 the year before that, and that's the only time we really notice it.

00:20.03 **Mark: Right OK. So when you first started this school, you mentioned earlier on that it was a Church of England school and it was also multi faith. Was this the same for the pre-school?**

00:20.14 Shajeev: Yeah

00:20.16 **Mark: And how did you feel going into a multi faith school? I mean it must have been interesting with all the different religions there.**

00:20.26 Shajeev: Yeah, so I started life as a Buddhist. My dad was a Buddhist, my mum was a Christian. I started life as a Bhuddist. So in Sri Lanka, I mean here you study comparative religions, there certainly up to O Level or GCSE or equivalent you have to study a religious subject and that depends on your religion, so if you're Buddhist, you study Buddhism and you have an exam in Buddhism, if you're Christian you have an exam on Christianity etc. So I started off studying Buddhism, but because, and it's quite embarrassing to say this, I'm more fluent in English than I am in Sinalese and the medium of instruction was Sinalese for people of a Sinalise background. I really struggled with that particular one subject because there were so many archaic references and things like that. So when I was 11 or 12, my parents decided I would be better off studying Christianity in the school, just for the sake of the exams you have to take. That meant that I had to go to chapel service and all of that and I ended up then converting to Christianity when I was 18. And I'm an atheist now. I

mean I've been an atheist for the best part of my life really. I don't have any religious faith but I kind of experienced two legs of it.

00:22.00 **Mark: When you say you converted, I take it your family is Buddhist?**

00:22.06: Shajeev: My father is Buddhist, my mother is Christian anyway, so my converting to Christianity was something I decided to do, you know. I did an A Level in Christianity as well, so I was so steeped in it by then, you know, that I became a convert, I was baptised at the age of 18 and had god parents and all of that.

00:22.32 **Mark: Right.**

00:22.34 Shajeev: Then fundamentally, I think as I grew into myself, I'm an atheist, that's who I am.

00:22.39 **Mark: So your father and grandfather had gone to the school previous to you?**

00:22.48 Shajeev: My grandfather, my dad and my younger brother all went to the same school. Yes.

00:22.59 **Mark: So when you were in the pre-school, what age were you there until?**

00:23.05 Shajeev: OK, so this part is quite interesting as well. You can go across to the main school at any point. At the time I was there the main school didn't have a great reputation, the head of the school wasn't seen as very effective, it wasn't seen as having a great standard of discipline, education and so forth. So my parents decided to keep me in the prep school right up to my O Levels which was 16 for everyone else and 15 for me as I was a year younger. So I actually only went to the main school for the last three years of my schooling but, you know, that had a much greater impact on me experientially. So if you asked me what school I went to, that's the school I went to. I have a tattoo of the school crest on my arm [Laughs]

00:23.55 **Sharyn: Oh that's lovely.**

23.56 **Mark: So you spent most of your time in the pre-school. So when you moved to the main school that was a big influence on your life. What made that influence your life? What was the difference with that?**

00:24.07 Shajeev: It was the culture, the history and the tradition in the main school, because the prep school was only founded in the 1950s and it was founded mainly because the main school couldn't cope with the number of students that wanted to go there. They made the prep school almost as an overflow [laughs]. But you know it's become a very renowned institution in Sri Lanka in its own right, and I had a lot of classmates who didn't go to the main school, they went to other schools or they went overseas for their A Levels or whatever. So interestingly, though, at the prep school we had our own cricket teams and rugby teams and sometimes at age group level you'd play against the main school, but in the big cricket match you'd always be supporting you know from the [other side] - *audio unclear* [laughs]

00:25.10 **Mark: What part of the school then did, sorry I'll rephrase it. At what point did you decide you were going to go into law?**

00:25.25 Shajeev I've always had the gift of the gab. I was always in the debating teams at school. On my mother's side there were six generations of lawyers as well. You know I mean the cliché in Asian culture about doctor, lawyer, accountant, you know. Medicine, not cut out for it at all. Accountancy, not cut out for it at all. Law seemed the obvious choice because of all the debating and that sort of thing, you know, and I think if I could have practised in the UK I would have stayed in law. Part of the reason I've become a magistrate now is because, now that I have the time, because it's voluntary, the time to do it. It's a way back into the field that I really love. You know without having to retrain as a barrister or anything like that.

00:26.19 **Mark: OK. Was it at your school then that you got your degree? Would you have a degree there, law?**

00:26.24 Shajeev: No, no. At St Thomas' it was A Levels. And from there I went to King's in London.

00:26.32 **Mark: Oh yes, that's right. That's where you got your degree from. And then you went for your bar afterwards, was that it?**

00:26.54 Shajeev: That's right I went to bar school in London as well and you have to join an Inn of Court, you know there's four Inns of Court, it's like a club you belong to this Inn of Court, so I'm a member of Lincoln's Inn in London, and you have to do, at the time you needed to attend 18 formal dinners as part of, you can't qualify without attending 18 formal dinners, it's, I mean, the dining hall at Lincoln's Inn is just beautiful, I mean it's five or six hundred years old, it's absolutely beautiful. It's a very formal affair, you know its port passed to the left, seriously, you know and you have all the law lords and supreme judges that belong to the Inn of Court sat on one table, the barristers sat on another table in order of seniority, and then the students at another table.

00:27.42 **Sharyn: Did you find that intimidating at all?**

00:27.44 Shajeev: No, no like I said, growing up in this colonial, you know, the old club system, some of the British colonialists formed clubs, some of them were sporting clubs, some of them were recreational clubs, shooting clubs at the time etc. There was a club up in the hill country where they grow the tea, it's called The Hill Club, I mean it was actually, this was not such a wonderful thing but they didn't allow Sri Lankans to be members until the late 60s. My dad was one of the first members because of his company and wanting to entertain guests, they got him a membership sort of thing. But we would go there for our holidays. In April the weather is beastly in Sri Lanka, it's so hot apart from in the hill country, so everybody goes up there for the holidays, and I've been going up to The Hill Club since I was seven or eight and, you know, you would have to dress for dinner - they won't let you in to the dining room without a jacket and tie [laughs] so I've grown up with all of that you know. So this dining at Lincoln's Inn was, I suppose you have to be the sort of person who likes that sort of thing anyway, and I guess I am because I really enjoyed it.



00:29.15 **Mark: You were taught how.. it's like the civil service, you'd have been taught the proper, outside in...**

00:29.28 Shajeev: [Laughs] I know, literally passing the port to the left.

00:29.22 **Mark: [Laughs] I know, I'm ex-military. Pass the port to the left hand side. Never allowed to touch the table, so yeah.**

00:29.29 Shajeev: And you weren't allowed to leave. Once you'd started you weren't allowed to leave. If you're ex military, I found HSBC very much modelled on the British Army. Oh yes, because if you think about it again, before HSBC bought Midland Bank, you know, it was mainly operational outside the UK and a lot of the people who worked for HSBC were, you know, public school, Sandhurst, some sort of commission and then in to a bank. And so when I joined, my designation was as resident officers and international officers. We had an officers mess in the building, we had our rules and things, and so it's very much modelled on that.

00:30.24 **Mark: Really, I didn't know that at all. How did you find that though? How did you find going into a well established business, that I take it would have had virtually a military regime sort of side?**

00: 30.35 Shajeev: Kind of, in as much as a hierarchy, it was very hierarchical and that I struggled with. I think besides finding London and university being for me and I really fit in, in Sri Lanka you are taught by rote to memorise stuff. In name at least you are brought up to respect your elders and do what they say and don't think for yourself and all of that sort of thing and that was huge for me coming here and independence of thought and people having their own opinions even at the age of 18 and 19 and actually being very mature I think compared to, well I was pretty mature because I was so coddled, you know, and I really found that for me I don't particularly like being told what to do, you know, and am quite independent minded, that I quite often think differently to other people and so I went up against senior people quite a lot at HSBC to the point that (I don't know if this is something to go in the final thing) but I remember my, the deputy CEO in Sri Lanka, calling me into his office and saying, literally saying, listen Sham [*check shortened name here*] if I were you I would be looking for another job because you're not going to last here. [Inaudible comment and laughter]

32.10 **Mark: Ah!**

00:32.12 Shajeev: I had actually wanted to leave up to that point but after that I thought, I'm not leaving until I get to the same grade as you, and faster than you [laughs].

00:32.21 **Mark: So you thought of it as a bit of a challenge?**

00:32.28 Shajeev: Well yeah, because as I said, I value authority, I respect it, but I don't necessarily like it being foisted on me.

00:32.37 **Mark:** Ah that's interesting. Sorry, I've taken away...

00:32.39 **Sharyn:** No, this is really interesting.

00:32.40 Shajeev: Can I ask what regiment you were in?

00:32.46 **Mark:** So I was in the 12th *[inaudible]* The Royal Artillery.

00:32.51 Shajeev: The reason I ask is, a lot of my friends at university were in the officer training corps so a lot of them then came to the territorials in various regiments and some of them went on to serve as well.

33.06 **Mark:** I never got to the high rank of officer. I prefer to work for a living as I always say.**[Laughs]**

**[Laughter]**

00:33.08 Shajeev: Three stripes?

00:33.09 **Mark:** No not three stripes. I got two stripes, but then I finished my time. I was going to get three stripes but a lot of officer change come along *[unclear audio]*, a lot of difference, so another complete story.

00:33.25 **Mark:** I just sort of want to come forward a bit, with the school, you said the cricket. Did you ever play for the school?

00:33.30 Shajeev: At junior level you know **[laughs]**. I didn't have the commitment or the discipline, I was actually fundamentally very lazy. So I played a bit of cricket, a bit of rugby, rowed a bit, all at very junior levels. My younger brother was much more of a sporting achiever, he played for the 1st 15, played tennis for the school, my dad played hockey for the school and all of that sort of thing, I just played at Under 13 levels and Under 14 levels, I was on the debating team and I was doing well academically so I concentrated on that.

00:34.00 **Mark:** So you just support them now, you're happy to support?

00:34.06 Shajeev: I actually played for Ilfracombe last year for a few games!

34.08

**Mark**

**Did you?**

00:34.10 Shajeev: Yeah [laughs]. Because after the pandemic, I thought really do the things you want to do rather than just talking about it, so I got involved with six or seven games in the season last year for Ilfracombe, so...

00:34.24 **Mark: Very good, are you going to carry it forward?**

00:34:34 Shajeev: No, no. The first game I had last year was 19 years after I last played cricket and I just found I wasn't getting the same enjoyment out of it. If I'm feeling confident I do well. If I don't I really doubt myself and that affects everything about my performance, so I felt I wasn't performing and I wasn't enjoying it for that reason and it's a team sport right? And so if you're not contributing then, so I decided to step away. And I broke my ankle this year at the end of January so that's like put the kibosh on it for a while

00:35.16 **Mark: I hope you don't mind me asking. You say you doubt yourself? Obviously for yourself, from where you are now you've done really well through your life, you know from what you got from school to where you are now as a barrister. And obviously you say you like to be confrontational, you like to talk, so like for yourself you've done well, you know where you want to be for your life. Why do you doubt yourself?**

00:35.36 Shajeev: I mean, you know, so this is what I do now for a living. I work for myself now, and I'm a corporate trainer and consultant and I run executive coaching, I coach people, so it's that same stuff - doctors don't look after themselves like they look after other people, that cliché, but we're all wired in a certain way and your wiring stays with you throughout your life. You think you can find tools and mechanisms, you deal with the things that are not helpful for you but they're always there, and for me a big part of my wiring. On the surface, there are people who think I'm the most arrogant person they've ever come across in their life. People who really, really know me, like my wife know that that's not true. I can put on a great front and I won't back down from a confrontation, but on the inside it's like the swan on the lake, and underneath the surface it's, you know, it's just my wiring  
Sharyn

00:36.51 **Mark: Slightly come forward now to when you said when you came to the UK, originally you came to the UK but you came as a large family trip in 1986?**

00:36.59 Shajeev: 86 yes yep

00:37.01 **Mark: Yes, 1986... Tell us a little bit more about that**

00:37.04 Shajeev: Okay so basically my dad used to travel a lot on work, all the time, and so literally he was supposed to go to the UK and the US on this trip, and then fly on business class. So he said to the company look will you give me the, the, instead of buying me the ticket will you give me the price of the ticket and would you mind if I then took my wife and my kids and we will all fly economy? And so they said yeah and so, then, I'm a lot like my dad where is quite impulsive, you know, leap on one idea and then turn that into a massive thing, so this trip that was supposed to be to London and New York because he was going there and we had people we could stay with so no hotel costs or

anything like that, then spiralled into this sort of tour of Britain and we ended up going on one of those bus tours of Europe as well. So they got permission to take us out of school because it was you know educational and all of that and so it was a two month trip i think.

**00:38.15 Sharyn: Where did you go in Europe? And did you find any desire at the point when you were seeing all of these places - oh I would like to live there.**

00:38.28 Shajeev: Not in Europe no. It was lovely to see and my dad bought me my first proper camera then. We went to New York first if I remember, and my dad had to go to Japan, and he joined us in New York and he bought me a camera, it was my first proper camera and I fell in love, because I love photography, so I mean in London and New York and in Europe in every capital there is so much to photograph, and I think from that perspective I really enjoyed it, the history, the culture, I like learning things, my mum always says that the first word out of my mouth was why because I was curious about everything, so I loved it but never had that sense of 'oh I'd like to live there', apart from London really, you know. Even New York, you know New York is wonderful. I've been to New York so many times on work with HSBC now, I like to walk around Manhattan, I know my way around, it, it feels like home, but not quite you know? London will always feel like home. Hong Kong feels like home even though I wouldn't choose to live there, and Sri Lanka will always feel like home. New York is not somewhere I would consider home, but its really familiar, you know it's lovely but I never feel the desire to live there.

**00:39.51 Sharyn: Does where you're located at any particular point, does your feeling 'This is home' depend on whether you're there or not there? I mean, when you're in Sri Lanka do you feel Sri Lanka is home, and when you're in the UK you feel like the UK is home, but is Sri Lanka still home?**

00:40.05 Shajeev: I think that's a brilliant question, and it's, well yes to a certain extent when I'm here this is home, when I'm in Sri Lanka, I just, you know, it just is home in that sense as well, right? I still feel, more at home in the UK even more than I do in Sri Lanka to a large extent. I think if you asked me in my heart of hearts, where is home, it's here, but that doesn't mean I don't identify with Sri Lanka. You know, I came wearing these flip flops partly on purpose because you know in Sri Lanka you sort of, unless you're going to something formal, this is what you wear, you know. I actually hate wearing shoes [laughs]. You know the first opportunity to walk around in these I do, you know. But I think I am very clear in my mind about who I am, you know. I am Sri Lanka and I am also British, and that's very clear in my mind. I am also an old boy of St Thomas' as well [laughs].

**00:41.10 Sharyn: Is the school connection then, just as important as the country connection?**

00:41.60 Shajeev: In a weird way, I mean not in a tangible way in the sense that I have a lot of classmates that have kids and their kids are their and they are very heavily involved in either the old boy's association, or you know, the form groups that fund activities in the school and I'd say they are far more involved on a day to day basis in a tangible way than I am. You know for me it's just this ideal if you like, its a part of who I am. And that's very front of mind for me, but not in a tangible way.

00:42.07 **Mark: So, you went on your London trip. Another thing I think that was quite interesting was your dad being an apprentice in the tea company. How did that all start, what happened there and what was your involvement?**

00:42.13 Shajeev: Well, I wasn't around! It was in the 60s, straight out of school basically. So, my dad comes from a family of 11, he's the 11th of 11, His oldest sister, she's gone now, but she was 20 years older than him and he saw her almost like another mother. She was in England, she was married to a Cornish guy, and I think were living in Surrey at the time, so he came after school, he basically, just because he, you know, out of school, he wasn't going on to university, he came to spend some time with her, and while he was here he managed to secure an apprenticeship with Harrisons and Crossfield, which was the, well it doesn't exist anymore I don't think, but it was a huge global British tea company, so he managed to get an apprenticeship, and you know, that kind of led to him getting the job in the branch in [inaudible word] and he came back.

00:43.22 **Mark: OK, interesting, one final thing is, I'm quite interested in you talking about Hong Kong. Obviously you like Hong Kong from the sounds of it, however, you mentioned a racist side of it. Can you give me your experience in Hong Kong?**

00:43.39 Shajeev: I really want to stress that this is my experience, I mean I don't want to colour a country or its people, you know, in a particular way, and I know plenty of other friends who, Sri Lankan friends, Indian friends, who lived there for ages, got permanent residence there and love it. I felt like a second class citizen there, you know. It was, because Hong Kong is a colony as well, and Hong Kong's quite I think an insular place because a lot of Hong Kong was populated by a lot of people fleeing regimes in China and it became a little enclave if you like years back and so I think there's a certain amount of insularity there anywhere, but again that's just my impression, right, and with that I think anyone who's not local Hong Kong, and this is not local Hong Kong Chinese, not even Chinese from China, you know Cantonese speakers from China, is an outsider, but because the British influence was so prevalent there, Chris Patton had been a much beloved governor and all of that, if you were white and English, I think, you know, you were tolerated a lot more. If you were brown skinned, I certainly felt looked down upon, you know, and I actually made some really good Hong Kong Chinese friends, but the person on the street you know I really felt that you know. Then I lived there for six years, three years in one apartment block and three years in another apartment block and never got to know anyone at all. Not like they were unfriendly or anything, but there was no contact, there was no effort.

There was, I can remember one time where I went into a, like a market, and I was just walking up to a stall to have a look and this woman started screaming at me and, you know, telling me to go away, sort of thing and it was just because I was an Asian brown skinned person. And it was shocking, I was really shocked. So this is where the doubting myself, the facade versus the fragile interior comes in. And I'd never experienced anything like that before, you know, I'd experienced no racism at all in this country for the four years I've been here, I've never experienced no racism at all ever in the 13 years I've lived here total, but that was a huge shock to the system, you know, and as it went, as the six years went along, I found it increasingly difficult to live somewhere and be myself and be confident in myself somewhere where I felt I was being constantly being looked at differently and like I said, that's not like anything I've ever experienced here, so like, you know, one of my colleagues said, 'It



sounds like you've diminished as a person" and actually that was spot on how it felt, so in the end I left because I thought if I don't leave here I'll end up staying at HSBC for 40 years. I'll probably live in Hong Kong hating it, you know, for 40 years and for what, and so I literally handed in my notice you know, just after a day's reflection with no plan B, just because I thought I have to get out of here to save myself.

00:47.31 **Sharyn: So it wasn't because of the job or the organisation, it was entirely because of the racism you experienced. If you had adored the job, if you had adored Hong Kong you would have still left would you because of these experiences would you, of being made to feel that you didn't belong?**

00:47.52 Shajeev: You know I think in truth I had got to the point where I was starting to think that, you know, working for a large organisation wasn't for me and I think that goes back to the independent mindedness and not liking being told what to do and all of that sort of thing, and I was really feeling it was not for me. And I have colleagues who have worked there for 45-50 years and it's very easy to never leave there because it's a very good employer and I had the opportunity to do so many different roles by the time I finished my 15 years and left, you know, so it was more, it was if I'd loved living in Hong Kong I might have felt I'd carry on even though I was not convinced I wanted to be a corporate employee. But the fact that I wasn't enjoying living in Hong Kong, and that I had a lot of doubts about what I wanted to do in the future, all of those things led to leaving. But I had no desire to look for another job and stay in Hong Kong because I didn't want to stay in Hong Kong.

00:49.05 **Sharyn/Mark: Yes**

49.07

**Mark**

**So when did you leave Hong Kong?**

00:49.09 Shajeev: 2010

00:49.11 **Mark: 2010. Have you been back since?**

00:49.14 Shajeev: Yeah, so between 2010 and 2015 I used to go back two or three times a year on work, you know. And it's very weird, you know the moment I left Hong Kong and didn't live there anymore I think my whole perspective on Hong Kong changed, when I started going back. I think it's just that it wasn't the day to day. So the experiences you had were more curated like, and the people you came across were more limited to people you knew or you worked with. So I would say I actually feel quite nostalgic about Hong Kong now and that's probably because of those five years travelling back and forth rather than six years when I lived there.

00:50.03 **Mark: So visiting it has completely changed the way you now look upon it.**

00:50.05 Shajeev: Absolutely. I say to my wife - she's been to Sri Lanka many times (I also lived in Singapore for a year by the way) and she's been to Singapore, but she hasn't been to Hong Kong

yet, and I say, I would really like you to see Hong Kong and take you to some of my favourite places there and all of that, but um...

00:50.23 **Mark: Thank you for sharing that. Back to you now, sorry!**

00:50.25 **Sharyn: So, you've lived in various places and some of your friends and family have as well. Are your friends and family spread widely across the globe?**

00:50.39 Shajeev: Yeah.

00:50.43 **Sharyn: And does the fact that you've lived in different places, you have all these connections with people who live in different places, how does that affect your identity at all, if it does? I mean do you feel part of a more global community as well as belonging here and belonging in Sri Lanka?**

00:51.00 Sahajeev: Yeah, absolutely. You know, and, I, in 2015, shortly after I moved here, my wife and I were in Berlin and just randomly bumped into two people I knew, at a taxi stand there, one of whom had worked for me in HSBC in Sri Lanka, and the other of whom was a childhood friend. And earlier on in the year we had gone to Edinburgh and we were walking around Edinburgh Castle and there were three people who had worked for me in Sri Lanka [laughs] so it's just...

00:51.43 **Sharyn: You just can't get away from anyone!**

00:51.46 Shajeev: All these people! You know, I went to Mexico for the first time on work, you know, the first person I laid eyes on was an English guy I knew really well from Hong Kong. You know, I mean in the hotel I was staying in I suddenly saw someone in the lobby and it was someone who had been at King's. I love that, I love having that connectivity. I'm quiet an introvert, you know, as I get older I get more and more introverted and I don't necessarily look for big group gatherings or anything like that, but I do love the fact that in pretty much any country in the world I go to, if I want to meet up with someone there will be someone I knew there.

00:52.28 **Sharyn: So it is important to your sense of identity that you've not just restricted your life to one country but you've got all of these threads connecting you. In relative terms is that just as important as your identity from living here and in Sri Lanka? Or is it a secondary thing?**

00:52.57 Shajeev: Could I put it a little differently please?

00:52.59 **Sharyn: Of course.**

00:53.00 Shajeev: I wouldn't think of it in terms of it being important to my identity. I think I'm really fortunate to have lived in four countries and really been fortunate to have travelled so widely, because, and again I don't want this to sound pompous, but I think it has enhanced me as a person, because I had so many cultural experiences and met people from so many different parts of the

world. It just makes you more open minded to the world and to difference in the world I think because you don't just know one thing [*background noise blocks audio*] in your life and I really like that and feel very fortunate about that and feel that it's made me a better person, but I don't necessarily connect it to my identity.

00:53.56 **Sharyn: Right, yeah.**

00:54.03 **Mark: Right, so you're a magistrate now, yeah.**

00:54.03 Shajeev Yes I'm a magistrate.

00:54.06 **Mark: I'm going to ask you now, what was your journey to becoming a magistrate?**

00:54.09 Shajeev: So, somewhat shamefully, after becoming a barrister here and all of this, I had no idea that magistrates were volunteers, you know, and that just about anyone can apply to be a magistrate. I had no idea about this. Some years ago, in 2017 in fact, I acquired an executive coach for myself, who was this amazing lady who was working out of Croyde. I used to see her once a month sort of thing and as we got to know each other better and she knew of my background it turned out she was involved in the panels that interviewed magistrates in North and East Devon. So she said to me, well, you know, you'd make a great magistrate, why don't you apply? And that was the first time I found out that anyone could apply to be a magistrate. The fact that I have a legal background is helpful to me - you don't need one to be a magistrate you know. I couldn't apply to be a magistrate until I had permanent residency in this country so I became a permanent resident in 2020 and I became a citizen in 2021, so I couldn't apply until 2022 when I had my permanent residency, you know, but I applied pretty much as soon as I could.

00:55.46 **Mark: When did you become a magistrate then?**

00:55.49 Shajeev: So I was sworn in in February of last year. I mean it was quite a lengthy process because obviously, you know, there's a lot of vetting, there's a lot of interviews, there's a lot of background checking and all of that that needs to be done and that obviously had an impact on timeframes. So I started the application process in October 2021 I think and I was sworn in in February last year, and I sat for the first time in April last year.

56.27 **Mark: And is it Barnstaple?**

00:56.28 Shajeev: No it's Exeter.

00:56.31 **Mark: And is that.. Are you qualified to do Crown Court?**

00:56.36 Shajeev: No. Magistrates just sit in the Magistrate's Court, and you know, within the guidelines of the Magistrates's Court. You sit on a bench of three people and you make the decisions with legal guidance and so on and so forth, but its, for me, its hugely fulfilling because a) I love the law and have a huge interest in it, and b) I really hadn't realised how worthwhile you feel, what a

worthwhile thing you're doing. You know, now that I have a year of being a magistrate under my belt I realise what a worthwhile thing it is to do as well, I find it hugely fulfilling.

00:57.26 **Mark: And are you still a practising barrister?**

00:57.27 Shajeev: I've never practised.

00:57.28 **Mark: Never practised, oh ok.**

00:57.31 Shajeev: So I, because I couldn't practise here when I had my qualification then I went back to Sri Lanka not wanting to practise there, you know, I was a bit lost as to what to do, and my mum sort of produced this newspaper clipping of the HSBC job advert, I applied for that, just on a whim, got that, and worked for HSBC for 15 years after that, left HSBC and worked for myself pretty much for the rest of the time. I briefly worked for a consulting firm in the UK after I moved here. I worked for that same consulting firm in Singapore, that's why I lived in Singapore for a year before I moved here. You know, started working in 96, left HSBC in 2010, worked for the consultancy for five years and for the rest of the time worked for myself.

00:58.32 **Mark: Have you ever thought about, now you're a magistrate, have you ever thought about venturing into the more legal side of it?**

00:58.39 Shajeev: There's a part of me that would love to be a Crown Court judge [laughs].

00:58.48 **Sharyn: It isn't too late!**

00:58.50 Shajeev: I honestly don't know what the process is, but my understanding is that most Crown Court judges are people who have practised law as barristers and if that is the case I would have to go back to getting a practise contract as a baby barrister, a junior barrister, start again and practise for many years, and you know... yes, I'd love to be a Crown Court judge but I love being a Magistrate, you know I think that ticks so many boxes for me.

00:59.29 **Mark: I think you do actually see some quite interesting cases coming through the Magistrate's Court.**

00:59.34 Shajeev: Every single case in this country starts at a Magistrate's Court, so even if it's outside of the jurisdiction of the Magistrates it would go straight to the Crown Court, but it starts in the Magistrate's Court. So every single headline case that you have seen in our area for example will have its very first hearing in the Magistrate's Court.

00:59.59: **So you're working at the very foundation of the process of the law.**

01.00.02 Shajeev: You are. And then you deal with certain, you know, with certain levels of cases in the Magistrate's Court and everything that's above the jurisdiction goes up to the Crown Court

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

01.00.03 **Sharyn: I think just about the last thing is when you came back in 2015. Was that to get married?**

01.01.10 Shajeev: Yes, we got married first in Sri Lanka, yes, we got married on 2nd of April 2015 and then I put in my papers to move. I was living in Singapore then at the time. I put my papers in in Singapore and moved here at the end of June 2015.

01.01.27 **Sharyn: Because this is where your wife lived?**

01.01.32 Shajeev: So yes, she was born in Winchester, but her parents moved here when she was seven or eight I think, so she grew up here.

01.01.45 **Sharyn: So what finally brought you back here was true love.**

01.01.49 Shajeev: Yes, yes, so we went to University together and we weren't an item then [laughs].

01.01.57 **Sharyn: This is very romantic!**

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

01.02.13 **Mark: [Laughs] OK!**

01.02.17 Shajeev: So I came back having got married, and came down here because she's here and her kids are here and her mother's here as well.

01.02.33 **Mark: In Ilfracombe?**

01.02.34 Shajeev: Yes.



**01.02.34 Sharyn: So you were away for quite a while as it were. So what differences have you experienced between what it was like then, at uni, and what it is now living here?**

01.02.49 Shajeev: There's a few things. Well, so I visited Ilfracombe in 1994 to visit my wife in the house we are living in now, so I think, you know I distinctly remember getting a haircut here, and I was used to people knowing where Sri Lanka was because of cricket, and so the barber asked me where I was from and I said Sri Lanka and he had no idea where that was, and that was a bit of a shock in 1994. You know I think from then to now obviously I imagine a large number of people here who travel abroad have been to Sri Lanka on holiday. That's a huge change, you know Ilfracombe has broadened its horizons in many respects - that was one big difference. I think there are a lot of things that have changed for the better in the world personally, you know in terms of people's individual liberties, their right to choose how they want to live their life and who they want to be and who they want to be married with, and I think that's a big difference in the world.

The one thing that has struck me is that I felt that Britain in the 90s was less divided in some ways and I feel that now there are motivations - I don't experience them to be honest, personally, I don't experience them here - I think Abi, when we first spoke I had not experienced anything in this country, not ever, that's been negative, except for one story I'll tell you, but I feel that social media and the internet fuels more, in a far more accelerated way than it could ever be done before you know, and so I feel that that exists more in this country now, as it does in the world, not just here.

So the only negative experience I've had is the day of the Brexit vote, and by the way this might be something of interest but I've always been able to vote in this country, so even when I was here as a student, because I had a right to live here either as a student or when I moved back because I'm from a Commonwealth country I've been able to vote. And so that's another part of really feeling like you belong somewhere, you know having that enfranchisement. But the day of the Brexit vote I was in London on work and came back on the train, opened the door at Tiverton and there was this chap on the platform, who I thought had been in the pub before that let's say [laughs], an older gentleman and he sort of looked at me and said ha, you'll be gone in a day, oh he said you'll be gone by next year as I stepped off the train, and I was like, OK, that's [laughs] a bit, where did that come from? But that's really the only thing I have ever experienced.

**01.06.24 Mark: That's interesting.**

01.06.25 Shajeev: You know I was saying to Abi when we spoke, I don't want to xxxx [inaudible] anyone else's experience because I know some people have experienced really awful things either because of their ethnicity or their orientation or their thinking or whatever the case might be. I just haven't, you know.

**01.07.15 Mark: So your proudest academic achievement, I take that to be your barrister, sorry Magistrate's?**

01.07.14 Shajeev: Well, actually the thing I'm proudest of is because I coach people, so I've done a lot of coaching now over the years - and when I was at HSBC because you start off as a

management trainee, trainees start off by leading people whether you've got any experience or not - you know I've led a lot of people, but I think the thing I'm proudest of is the amount of people who've said to me what a difference I've made in their life. I mean that's, especially for someone who fundamentally doubts themselves and lacks confidence, I mean that's really important. For the question of identity, that's really important to me in my professional identity and my sense of self worth - because I get, I mean, I'm a good coach, I get that a lot from people and profound differences in their life are down to you, you know. That I think is my proudest achievement.

**01:08.21 Mark: That's great. And your proudest personal achievement?**

01.08.22 Shajeev: [Laughs] It's hard to put a pin in that one, because I don't think of things in terms of achievements in that sense. That I find really difficult, I suppose living in four different countries and feeling able to walk down the street wherever I am. I assimilate quite well, so probably that.

**01.08.54 Sharyn: And finally marrying your wife!**

[Group laughter]

**01.08.06 Mark: [Laughs] Is there anything you want to say to her while you're here?**

01.08.10 Shajeev: [Laughs] In all seriousness, that has been, never mind living in different parts of the world and all that, because I was very much the confirmed bachelor before I got married, you know I was 43 when we got married and I thought I was the finished article, because I have to say, my wife is a very different person to me, she's never really worked in corporate life or anything like that you know and I think it's made me a better person because the values that she has - you know when you work in places like Hong Kong it's very materialistic, and you know the joke used to be, you know the day after you got your bonus all the jewelry shops used to be crowded with bank executives buying themselves the newest watch or whatever. Giorgio Armani has a florist in Hong Kong by the way. There's a Giorgio Armani florist, just to put it in perspective. I think I've become a better person fundamentally for being married to Anne [*check name not clear*]. I'm happy to say that on record.  
[Laughs]

**01.10.48 Sharyn: Is there anything else you want to say, that our questions haven't covered?**

**01.11.01 Mark: Shajeev, thank you so much for coming in, it has really been a pleasure listening to you and your stories and I think it's fantastic. Thanks for coming in.**

**01. 11.09 Sharyn: It's not just been interesting, it's been really enjoyable.**

01.11.14 Shajeev: And for me. Thank you to both of you as well. I've really enjoyed how you've conducted this.

# Telling Our Stories Finding Our Roots

DEVON'S MULTICULTURAL HISTORY  
ILFRACOMBE

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