Personal journey

Your circumstances DEFINE YOUR OUTCOME'

Antoinette Daniel. 48. overcame a turbulent childhood and is now dedicating her life to becoming a force of positive change for others

n one of my earliest memories, I'm blinking my eyes open. I can see my mum, Joyce, frantically trying to wake me. Behind her, our home is on fire. Flames are licking our coats in the hallway and the carpets are alight. My mum raised me in a council flat in Battersea, London. It was just the two of us. The joy of being an only child was that I was always at the centre of Mum's universe. She devoted all her time to me. She taught me to read and write and do mathematics, and she played with me. She understood me like no one else. But Mum was also struggling with poor mental health. Sometimes, we'd stav home with the curtains drawn, Mum

not saying a word. Other times, she'd see things that weren't there, and my godmother would step in to look after me.

Mum's mental health worsened over the years. Then in 1981, when I was seven, she was suicidal and set our apartment alight We managed to escape,



but Mum served a prison sentence for her actions. Afterwards, she was admitted to a mental health unit, where she was diagnosed with schizophrenia. In the meantime, I was placed in foster care.

DIFFICULT TIMES

From the age of 10, I lived with a lady in south London. Despite the setbacks I'd faced growing up, I was recognised as talented in reading and maths. I was given a scholarship to a private secondary school in Streatham, which meant I had opportunities that others didn't, but it wasn't all plain sailing.

If I put a foot wrong, I was cruelly punished. Fortunately, I struck up a

friendship with a girl in my class, who is still a dear friend. She shared her sandwiches with me if I didn't have my own packed lunch. Every morning. I had to get up at 5am to clean the house so it was immaculate when my foster mother got home from working

night shifts. Instead of using the vacuum, I would sweep and do the laundry by hand to avoid making a noise. I shouldn't have had to do those things as a child, but I managed to find some peace in those early hours of the morning. Everything was quiet and still. I had time to gather my thoughts. I also found some satisfaction in cleaning and bringing order.

Hearned

resilience

and how

to think

creatively

I loved school, especially when I was playing netball. It was a sport I was naturally gifted at, and I played at county level. During those hours, I could be a normal child, just like my classmates.

Looking back, those years were hard but they did teach me resilience. I learned to think creatively and how to hustle. I got myself a job doing a local paper round - it didn't pay much money, but it meant I could buy my own lunch at school.

LIFE-CHANGING MOMENT

For a long time, I lost contact with my real mum, as her mental health condition had severely deteriorated. I found it too disruptive. But we reconnected when I was 14. She wasn't allowed to look after me, or see me without another adult

I realised how much I needed her. And I think she needed me, too. She always carried a lot of guilt for what she'd done.

home twice. I left at 16 to be fostered by my maternal aunt. I went to university to study sports science and business. During the holidays, I'd sofa-surf at friends' houses. I couldn't afford thank you gifts, so instead, I'd clean their homes and wash their dishes. I loved seeing the joy it brought them. They were always so thankful and impressed. I knew how to leave a space sparkling.

Years after graduating. I landed my dream job as a PE teacher at my old secondary school. I was inspired by my own experience at the school and the encouragement teachers had given me. During PE lessons, I saw students in all their vulnerabilities and frustrations. You are privy to conversations you wouldn't see otherwise. I could spot who needed help; who was excluded from the group.

I worked my way up to become head of year and imagined spending my career in teaching until one Sunday in

2002, when a church sermon changed everything. A guest speaker from social change charity Oasis told us there were 27.9m people involved in some form of slavery in the world. That was more than the entirety of the people enslaved in the transatlantic slave trade, which spanned 400 years. I simply couldn't quantify how enormous a number this was and it shocked me.

I found it so overwhelming, I'd lie in bed at night, sobbing. I remembered having to clean the house before school. And it was then that I knew I wanted to make a difference and stop anyone being a victim of modern-day slavery. I handed in my notice and enrolled at a mission college in Ware, Hertfordshire, where I spent two years training, learning about modern-day slavery and helping abroad.

To fund my purpose, I sold my house in south London and moved to rented accommodation. Selling my home was a huge decision, but it was for a bigger cause. Saying goodbye to that house was all the more emotional because I had bought it in my 30s, using money that Mum had saved up for me in secret.

Mum and I had grown closer than ever over the years and, when it was time for me to get on the property ladder, she had surprised me with money for a deposit. She was my best friend and

my biggest champion. We spoke most days until the day she died.

PROTECTING OTHERS

(right) takes pride in creating an ethical cleanir

By 2011, I'd joined International Justice Mission (IJM), an organisation that protects people from human trafficking and modern-day exploitation, before joining a fledgling charity called Merton Against Trafficking

I travelled the country to educate people about modern-day slavery. It felt like I was doing something purposeful, but the work was part-time. To keep a steady income, I also started cleaning homes. As word spread, I had to turn clients down, so I hired others to work alongside me and ensured they were paid properly. I heard about their experiences of being underpaid (sometimes not paid at all), often living in squalid conditions. Many were in a spiral of poverty.

The issue I was campaigning against was so clearly happening right on my doorstep. I could be a force for change in my own community where I lived in London. So, I set up my own ethical cleaning company called Just Helpers.

Now. 10 years on. I have nearly 50 people on our books. I want to make sure the cleaning industry isn't putting workers' welfare before profit. My end goal is to create a grant-making and mentoring foundation for young people exiting the care system who are survivors of trafficking. With support, a great idea and hard work, they could create something good. If the twists and turns in my life have taught me anything, it's that your circumstances don't define your outcome.

iusthelpers.co.uk □

present, but having her back in my life, I ran away from my foster mother's

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