

'Your circumstances DON'T 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

In 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 stay 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,



Antoinette with her mum, Joyce

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.

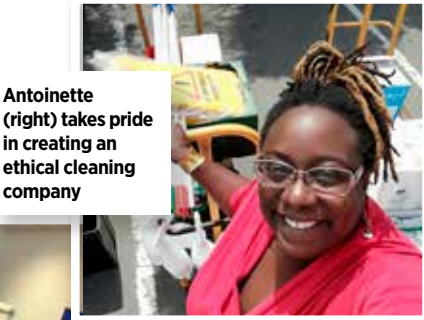
I loved school, especially when I was playing netball. It was a sport I was naturally gifted at, and I played at county level. During those hours, I could be a normal child, just like my classmates.

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 learned resilience and how to think creatively



Antoinette (right) takes pride in creating an ethical cleaning company



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

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. • justhelpers.co.uk □

AS TOLD TO: BELLA EVENNETT-WATTS. PHOTOGRAPHY: CAREY SMITH. GROWING BUSINESS VIDEO