

Birmingham Adult Education Service

My Voice



#2

The people of Birmingham in their own words

An introduction to My Voice #2

My Voice #2 is the second Birmingham Adult Education Service (BAES) writing event for learners enrolled in our English courses.

The main aim of My Voice #2 is to encourage free-writing and creativity in our English courses through the sharing of stories and poems, to give our learners an authentic opportunity to have a voice, talk about things that matter to them and share these thoughts and feelings with a much wider audience. Equally, we feel it's important to recognise and celebrate the high level of work learners are producing, with support and guidance from our exceptional team of English tutors.

Again, the brief for this writing was simple; to write poems and short stories that may be fictional or based on real and lasting experiences from the learners' everyday lives. The results have been encouragingly positive. All of these articles are unique, many are compelling, some are thought-provoking and others tell inspiring tales of overcoming adversity. Overall, I feel this book represents and celebrates the great diversity of our learners in Birmingham and I am extremely proud to have taken part in this publication.

I hope you enjoy reading it!



Virginia Worrell
Senior Lecturer in Embedding English
Birmingham Adult Education Service

Virginia Worrell is a Senior Lecturer in Embedding English into many curriculum areas, teaching English Functional Skills Levels 1 and 2 to Birmingham's Adult Learners. She joined BAES as a Key Skills Communication tutor over 10 years ago.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the following tutors who have helped collate these pieces:

Mona Bhogal, Claire Cole, Janet Culley-Tucker, Lee Debney, Phyllis Delaney, Angelina Falconer, Angela Hughes, Corrine Ludford, Harriet Macintosh, Kate McWilliam, Wendy Meredith, Kim Rose, Sue Walker, Rachel Watson and Virginia Worrell.

Disclaimer:

The views expressed in My Voice#2 are the opinions of the individual learners concerned and do not represent those of Birmingham Adult Education Service (BAES) or Birmingham City Council.

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My first day at college

I have chosen this subject, because it was one of the days in history, a day not many people will ever forget. The day was 9/11.

Having left school in 1994 with nothing much to cheer about, I married six months later and in 1999 I had my first child. In 2001 I decided that I wanted to become a nurse. Looking through Sutton College's prospectus, I decided that Access to Nursing was the best way to go. I applied and within a few weeks I had my interview, I was accepted and given my induction date.

On the morning of my induction I was really nervous thinking I was going to be the oldest student there being 24 years old. I was wrong as most of the ladies were in their thirties. I met my tutor Pauline, who was lovely and an ex-nurse herself. We were given our timetables and we were introduced to our other tutors. On the whole it was a very positive day.

I picked my daughter up from the college nursery and took the bus home. I had seen my mother-in-law during the morning and she had asked me to pop around to see her, to let her know how I had got on. As I began to tell her about my day, she seemed to be very distracted, watching the television. Thinking she was watching a very good film, for her to be so glued to it, I asked her what film she was watching. Her reply still shocks me to this day. She replied, "This is not a film, this is really happening and those are the Twin Towers". I watched as another plane flew around and hit the second tower.

We all know what happened next.

A day in history that I hope will never be repeated.

Dawn Gordon

Competition in my family

There will be a competition in my family for the best family member. We are a family of five brothers, we are all contenders in the running, but I believe my second brother, Errol, will be the favourite to win because of his generous and considerate ways towards our family.

Errol plays a very important role model as regards to making sure that our parents' wishes are implemented. He is usually the first to act as regards whatever needs to be done. For example none of us miss birthday dates because he reminds us.

He likes to surprise our parents with gifts and holidays and talks about things we did when we were kids.

By way of another example when it comes to financial problems or any other problems for that matter, he is willing to help out regardless of the task. I have learnt a lot from him and I am proud to have a brother like Errol.

The competition has taken place. The votes were counted. Errol has won, as I predicted. Based on my knowledge and expectations about Errol, my prediction was right.

Edson

My three babies

My babies are everything to me.

My eldest baby Callum, is not really a baby anymore as he is 17. He is a talented sportsman, whose main passion in life is football. He is on the path of being successful in his field, so watch this space.

My middle baby is a girl called Reneé and she is 9. She is the sweetest, most kind and thoughtful girl that I have ever known. She is very creative and always making things and has a wonderful imagination. She is a star!

My youngest baby is TommyLee and he is 4. He is a very special little boy, he is crazy about superheroes and Batman is his favourite and when he grows up, he says he wants to be "a bat". He is such a loving boy, full of beans all the time.

My babies are also so different, I couldn't imagine my life without them. I love them so dearly.

Michelle Foster

My experience in Pakistan

I live in England, I come from a big family and we went to Pakistan for a holiday. As the plane landed, I saw such a beautiful country, full of life and colour. My house is amazing, it's so big, we had three houses and they all have three floors. They are so cool.

The weather in Pakistan is so different to the weather in England. It is so hot, that it's boiling. However, you can sweat like crazy, if anyone wants to lose weight it's the perfect place to go. We had water fights every day, it's so nice being in water in such hot weather.

There are certain things which are not nice in Pakistan, the electricity goes off often, but it's not a problem for rich people because they have generators and batteries. We don't have water like England, where we can open the tap and you get instant water. In Pakistan, it's different, you have to put the motor on and fill your water tanks on time.

England makes life really easy, however, people do get lazy because of the easy lifestyle.

In some areas there are loads of poor people, which you feel sorry for and looking at them, you realise and thank God for what you have in life.

Overall, it's a wonderful and amazing country and a beautiful place to go for a holiday.

Marya Begum

That's life!

Life is a unique gift which was given to us. From post natal care to going to a pre-school group, a mother has to prepare her child to become a joyful child. Sometimes she is over careful and overreacts to some situations. But her love isn't unilateral, her child gives back to her.

That's why she always has a multitude of things to give to him. Before she realises, her child has completed his postgraduate degree and is ready to live his life. He does not want any interaction in his life. His mother used to think that's how life can transform a small baby in to a mature adult. That's life!

Uzma

Letter to Mandy

St Georges Centre
Great Hampton Row
Birmingham

17 April 2013

Dear Mandy

How are you? I read your letter and I would like to give you some tips. I was a big girl myself so I know how you feel. I now go walking every evening and I have lost weight so I will give you some points.

Eating: Eat less fatty foods and don't eat late at night. Drink lots of water and eat lots of fruit and vegetables. Cut down on the sweet stuff and eat less chocolate. Don't eat late and don't eat after 7pm.

Exercise: Go swimming two times a week. Do this and then weigh yourself and you will start to see a change. You can also go dancing once a week and go for a walk in the evenings.

Confidence: You say you don't like to show off your legs. Wear baggy clothes and don't wear tight fitting clothes.

You will feel better about yourself so be happy and don't care what people say about you. Tell them to mind their business! Just be yourself.

If you follow my tips you will see how easy you lose the weight. Write me back and tell me how you get on.

Your friend

Marcia xxx

My best friend

Welcome, I would like to tell you about my life and how I met my best friend. We are still friends to this day. In 2009, I joined a social-network site, so I could keep in contact with all my family members; from my mum to my sisters, brothers, aunties and cousins.

When I was visiting my family, my sister told me about this site where I could keep in contact with all my family. I went home after my visit and went on to this networking site. I added all my family members, that I was in contact with. I also introduced my daughter, when she arrived from Bangladesh.

My daughter had friends requesting her to be their friend, because she came from abroad. I was keeping an eye on the friends she was choosing. I used to ask her if it was okay that I could also add them to my site and she said it was fine.

That is when I met my best friend ...on this site. He was a friend of my daughter, then I added him to my friends list and we kept talking day and night for two years. Then he gave me his telephone number and told me, at any time I could contact him. I did tell him that I was married and that I had four children and he was okay with this.

He has been there for me - a true best friend.

R.C.

Losing a loved one

On the 15th January 2006 I was staying at my mother-in-law's house. It was a cold freezing morning, a normal wintry day in Pakistan. We were there for a wedding. Everything was going on as normal until my aunty came running and called me and said, "Come quick and see what's wrong with Imran." I ran to his bedroom, when I got there I saw him with foam coming out of his mouth and nose. By then my other sister came running too. I said, "Hurry get him into the car". My sister and uncle took him to the hospital, but unfortunately he passed away in the car. When they reached the hospital my sister called me and told me our brother, who was three years younger than me, was no more.

I threw the phone down with anger, pain and grief and then broke down in tears. My mind went blank, I went deaf I could not hear anything, with the shock. My younger sister had phoned from England to find out what had happened. I could not hear her; all I was doing was screaming and crying. The last time I saw my brother alive was when I helped him to the car. The next time I saw him, he was lying dead on a stretcher being taken out of an ambulance. Another uncle was in Pakistan when he got to hear about this news; he came down to my nan's, where it all happened. He said he wanted to take my brother back to my dad's house that was in a different village.

By then the whole village had gathered in our house. My sister, uncle and both of my children went to open the house doors. I had gone to my dad's house in the ambulance with my brother. All the time I was in the ambulance I could not take my eyes off my brother. The tears rolling down my face and all the memories were flashing in front of my eyes. I remembered the times when we were laughing at silly jokes, whatever I wanted he brought me. The things we did until the day before and looking out the window and thinking you walked on these roads yesterday, but from today you will never walk here again.

This is your final journey on these roads so say your goodbyes. My parents and other siblings and two aunties reached Pakistan the next day at 10 o'clock in the morning. When they all came from the airport to the village, we could hear them screaming and crying. They came and saw their loved one just lying there. An hour later my brother was taken for the funeral prayer and then for the burial.

We all went to the graveyard and threw soil in his grave. I wished I was only having a bad nightmare and I would wake up any minute - that never happened - and it's been six years now.

The pain is still there, it has not got any less. He had two boys; they are still growing up with all the love we are giving them. My mum and dad are still living in pain, not one day goes past without remembering or shedding some tears for him.

This is a personal message from me to my loving brother: I know you are looking over us all. I love you so much that it hurts when I remember you are no more. May your soul rest in peace and you be happy up there.

See you soon.
It's a fact after love,
A broken heart will sorrow,
It has been proven,
After life death shall follow.

Noreen Akhtar

All about myself

My name is Julietta Vital. I was born in the parish of St John in a country called The Commonwealth of Dominica in the Caribbean.

My father's name was Peterson Vital and my mother's name is Jean Vital. My father was a sailor and he knew the Caribbean countries very well. I have seven sisters and twelve brothers.

I attended the Clifton Catholic Primary School in the parish of St John. I didn't achieve a secondary education. No fault of my parents, but mine. Later I became a baby-sitter.

A few years later I travelled out of my country to another country in the Caribbean called Montserrat. There I spent ten years of my life and I had three children.

In 1995 on the 15th July the volcano in Montserrat started to erupt. The country was declared not safe to live in 1997 and knowing that Montserrat is a Crown Colony Country, we were given permission to enter the United Kingdom, where I live today with my family.

Today I have five children, three girls and two boys and a granddaughter. Now I am achieving my goals. I am doing courses in Floristry at level 2, level 1 in Cake Decorating and Sugarcraft, entry 3 in maths and entry 2 in English.

I am looking towards the day when it all comes to the end of my courses and my dreams come true with hard work and a big smile on my face!

That's all about me.

With love

Julietta Vital

Woman

Look at this woman,
Pale with gray hair,
Looking into the distance,
A very serious face.

I wonder what she's thinking,
On that very day,
Is it the past or the future?
That bothers her dearly.

I maybe an observer,
In this life of uncertainty,
Trust and assurance,
I think is the key.

A.S.

Don't let age stop you

At the age of 35, I was classed as an old mum, but I gave birth to a beautiful daughter.

At the age of 42, I started a new job as a school cook.

I had to have qualifications and I was frightened, scared and had a few tears. I passed an NVQ Level 2 for Professional Cooking and became 'Learner of the Year', my hard work paid off.

At the grand old age of 50, I wanted to do my dream job and become a support teaching assistant. I had to keep studying and get more qualifications.

But, at 51 I have now passed at Level 3 Support Learning and Teaching and got my job.

Now at 51 and a half, I'm hoping to pass Functional Skills Levels 1 and 2 in English and Maths.

But now I am not frightened or scared and there will be NO MORE TEARS.

Don't let age stop you achieving.

Sherraid Lack

My water birth experience

This was my second pregnancy and last! The anticipation of child birth was exciting, but yet frightening, even though I had done it before the prospect of it was still worrying. Being organised as I am, I packed my bag, birth plan completed so I was ready for the arrival of my daughter.

I was feeling anxious as it was my final week of the ninth month of pregnancy, but excitedly awaiting the arrival of my little bundle of joy.

My due date had arrived and nothing! I had to wait a further ten days. She was ready to make her appearance. My sister-in-law and I got to the hospital hoping for a swift delivery. The lovely midwife did all her checks and told me to go for a walk urging the contractions to become stronger. As the contractions became stronger, the nurse advised me to go into the birthing pool as it's great form of pain relief, but I said, "It wasn't in my birthing plan". I gladly said, "I'll give it a try". Once I was in the birthing pool the contractions were more bearable. Two hours had passed and the contractions were getting unbearable. I said to the nurse, "I need more pain relief, but to my amazement the nurse said, "It's too late and it's time to push. The only thought I had in my head was, "I should have stuck to my birth plan!"

The pain was excruciating and I was getting so tired. I was so high on the gas and air that I didn't even have the strength to use it. It was when the nurse said, "You will have to push harder and longer as your baby's heart beat is dropping". Hearing those words, I found the inner strength to push and I pushed like I've never pushed before. After three more pushes she was out.

There were tears of joy from myself and my sister-in-law. The immense love I felt for this perfect little person was overpowering. I would recommend a water birth to every woman as it was a magical experience and I am so grateful for the midwife who encouraged me to try it.

Mariah was born on 21st February 2009 at 9.11pm

Michelle

My schooling

When I was growing up, school did not matter to me. When other children were going, I would go to a place called Hope Garden, where I would spend the day with my friends, cooking and swimming. You may ask the question, “why did you not like school?” Let me try to explain why.

When I was born, something happened to me. One of my eyes did not turn the right way. The doctor told my mother that I had a ‘lazy eye’. Other people called it a ‘squint’ or ‘a cast eye’, I could have had it corrected, but my mother said, ‘no’. Little did she know how hard it would be for me in my life.

As a child growing up, you think that everyone has the same problem, but it is not like that. Everyone has their own problems. For me, school was not a good place to be, for when you cannot see the blackboard from the back of the class, that is not good.

You could ask why I did not tell the teacher. I did not, for as you know, children can be very cruel, so I kept quiet about my eye. At the end of my school days, I had not learnt very much. I could barely read or write when I left school.

Nothing has changed with my eyes. I am older now, but the good thing about it is, that I am back at school trying to catch up on my education and really enjoying it.

Mick

Believe in yourself

Your amazing strength comes from deep inside,
How you do it, you should write a guide.
Your words and actions always inspire,
The way you do it, I truly admire.
When I look at myself, I’m very proud,
I am not afraid to proclaim aloud.
Every challenge that I faced,
I manage it, with so much grace.
This strength of mine often amazes,
I deserve more than just praises.
With all you do, I hope you get rest,
The rest of us, are profoundly blessed.

PJ

My Visit to Spain

When I went to Spain we went to Barcelona, we went on the main, high street it was called La Rambla.

There were loads of shops. There were also loads of mime artists too. I think they looked funny.

I had a picture taken with one of them. He had loads of flowers on him. They were all different colours. The man gave me a bunch of flowers. He had a pink face. We were both wearing hats with different coloured flowers on them.

I was really happy!

Nikki

Derwen College

When I was sixteen I went to a residential college called Derwen, in Shropshire where I stayed for three years, which was really nice.

All the courses were exciting, because every week, I did something different. The courses they offered were independent living skills, practical skills and office work. Practical did a lot of different things and covered a lot of areas, such as casting and design, recycling, woodwork, art and craft and animal care.

Animal Care was very interesting, because they had lots of different animals to look after such as guinea-pigs, rabbits, sheep and goats. I really enjoyed animal care because I got to learn about their habitats, what food they eat and their characteristics.

In my spare time I socialised with my friends in the social centre. They had discos every Friday night, which were good, but after a while they got boring as they played the same songs each week. So I started to go to other clubs.

The other clubs they had was a book club, motor club, bike club and drama club, which was my favourite as they did music. I went on all sorts of different trips and places of interest. Here are some of the types of trips I went on when I was there - Chester Zoo, Drayton Manor, Alton Towers and Blackpool. I also sometimes went to football matches.

I left Derwen College in 2006 when I was nineteen. I went back to live with my foster parents where I stayed until I moved to a place called Wheelwright Road.

It really was a great time of my life.

Rianna

My Shard End life

Hello, I am a 28 year old single mother of three children. My oldest child is 11 years, the second 5 years and then the youngest is 4 years old.

I live in Shard End and have done so all my life. I live in a house right by the woods and fields and in the summer it's lovely looking out of my window and seeing all the greenery.

I have a few hobbies. I like doing DIY around the house and fixing things. I also like crafting and making things with paper and polymer (bake-able clay). I have made loads of little charms and key-rings and I intend selling them at a school fete in the summer-time. I'm a very creative person and love making things.

I haven't been in any education for a long time and left school when I was about 13, because I had a pretty hard time there! Now I am older and have children, I want to further myself and be a good role model for them and that is why I have joined an English course.

Shardie

My special celebration - Vaisakhi Day

On April 13th we have Vaisakhi Day. We make samosas, pakoras, chips, tea, Indian food and curry. It is free food known as Langar; then we go to the Temple to pray to God and give money for donations and we wear orange coloured Indian suits. We go to the fun fair and play games. People sing and dance. It happens throughout the day. We can buy jewellery and clothes, then the Sikhs celebrate Vaisakhi. In 1699 Guru Gobind Singh chose Vaisakhi as a special celebration.

Pamela Chopra

East meets West

I met the father of my four children through working in a predominantly run, Asian based retail company 25 years ago. Although I feel that this is a very personal issue to myself I would like to help others in maybe similar situations, by sharing my story.

I was a very naïve 19 year old teenager who had already lost a major male figure in my life at 16 who was my father, to that dreaded illness “cancer.” I admit I had been an emotional wreck, but had decided that I needed to get my life back on track.

I started work and before long this kind, friendly, attentive, young male had shown an interest in me. He was 21 and apart from him being of a brown skin-color, to my white complexion, there did not seem to be any other difference.

How wrong was I? To cut my story short, as I could so easily write a book, I was a young English-born, Church of England British female and he was a young Pakistani-born, Muslim male. Although this may not mean anything to some people, in reality it is significant. As we were both young at the time to be honest it didn't mean a lot to us either, but gradually as time went on, although the love grew stronger the real sense of two people from completely different backgrounds was becoming more prominent.

Although the love was mutual on both sides, the jealousy and possessiveness became excessive on just one side. You're in the thick of it before you even realise what was happening. So true the saying, “love is blind.”

We both left home to live together and he got dismissed from work because our boss was Muslim and did not agree with the relationship.

He eventually found employment and against the odds we were fighting a war. I became pregnant and no denying life got tougher. We were not just up against financial struggle, but people too. “She's white and you're a Muslim”! This was such a common phrase to hear. “You can't do this you're disrespecting your family and shaming them”! The comments were endless.

He unfortunately became more possessive and I know I also changed as a person. I didn't eat certain foods, I had no friends, I didn't go out and my life had completely changed. Although we still had each other, we were up against so much.

I gave birth at the age of 21 to a beautiful baby girl. Had I known then what I know now that she had been born into a “culture clash.” He naturally had his views and opinions for her up-bringing and obviously it was based on how he was raised as a child. My up-bringing was somewhat quite different.

You may well ask as the reader, “So how come you ended up having 3 more children?” Well “yes” you're right, but I think each and every one of us can look back on our lives at some point and think, “if only this or if only that” and maybe done things differently, but sometimes we just have to make

the best out of a bad situation. I've learnt a hell of a lot over the years and I'm still learning. I've laughed, I've certainly cried, I've been angry, sad and in fact I could probably say I've experienced every possible emotion there is.

The real moral of my story is that, we don't think things or situations through when we're young, but we have to learn from our mistakes and as we grow older, the things we've done in our early days do certainly catch you up. The mistakes can then be either too late or too hard to rectify. The problems can then rebound onto your children and before long they are living your mess too.

From my experience, "never judge a book by its cover." Children are born innocent, so why should they have to suffer from our mistakes.

If by sharing my story I can help just one person then it's been worth it. I would not like someone to go through what I have, or my children.

We live and learn and life is a journey.

Sophie Khan

Being me

My name is Rachel, I am 51 years of age, my birthday is in September and my horoscope sign is Virgo. I was born in a place called Derby in the East Midlands and the hospital was called the Florence Nightingale. It was on London Road which leads into Derby town centre. The hospital was very old and near the main hospital called The Derby Royal Infirmary. Outside the hospital there was a statue of Florence Nightingale. This lady was the first nurse to start the nursing organisation. Florence Nightingale also cared for patients in the Crimean War. She was such a marvellous and caring lady who worked under a lot of pressure.

I have a sister who is called Sharon and she's 49 years of age. She's a married lady who has three children, who are all grown up now. Her children (my nephews and niece) are called James, Charles and Elizabeth.

The schools I attended were: Birches Green Infant and Junior school. Then I attended Moor End Lane Senior School. Whilst I was at school I enjoyed learning various subjects and I am still passionate about learning something new each day. Because I think that you never stop learning throughout your life. When I left school I went onto Sutton College to do a preliminary care course, so that I could become a care assistant. At the time I was 18 years old and felt that I needed to get a job.

After leaving college I was very successful in getting my first job as a care assistant in a day centre in Erdington. The job entailed working with disabled people. I have always enjoyed doing this type of work, because it is a hands on job and it means that I get to meet different types of people. I also learned how to care for them and meet their needs.

My hobbies are card-making, swimming and doing tapestries. I enjoy having several hobbies because they keep me busy and also occupies my time. Another thing that I am passionate about is that I follow Derby County Football Club and enjoy seeing them win, but rain or shine either way I will always follow Derby, because I am proud of where I was born and I have been supporting them since I was 7 years old, which is most of my life.

I chose this subject to let you know a bit about myself and what I enjoy doing.

Rachel

My lucky escape

I was born in Zimbabwe in a little countryside called Buhera. Buhera is located in a town called Chivu. The Prime Minister of Zimbabwe, Morgan Tsvangirai was born in Buhera.

It was a hot summer's day in August during the school holidays. My two cousins and I planned to visit one of the biggest rivers in Buhera called Mwerari River. Buhera is a hot country so we opted to go for a swim on that particular day. The journey took us one and a half hours to reach the river. As we walked we were chatting, laughing and picking wild fruits called Tvsanzva which is a very sweet fruit.

As we were approaching the river, we could see our faces light up with so much excitement. We arrived at the river and we all removed our shirts and remained in our shorts. We all jumped into the river like wild dogs. Occasionally, we could come out of the river on to the river bank and dive back into the river, repeating the same process several times. During the process of doing this, we discovered two huge stones. They were located at the bottom of the river. These stones had a gap in between them. As we dived into the river, we were going through this gap. Every time we got deeper in between the huge stones, the water was so cool and I found this very refreshing. It was funny because we would repeat this process over and over and never got tired.

After some time my cousin insisted we would stop and start making our way back home. Whilst walking back something strange happened. We heard the sound of heavy wind and found this very bizarre as there was no sign of wind at all. All we could see was leaves flying from side to side and grass being pushed aside as if there was no gravity. As we looked towards us we saw a huge Black Mamba snake moving towards us in a very fast speed.

It was the fastest speed I have ever seen a snake move. My cousins and I started running with an enormous amount of fear, petrified that the snake was coming to attack us. The fact that we had heard many stories of how this type of snake was very dangerous caused us to feel scared. We heard that people would normally turn black by the poison immediately after being bitten by this kind of snake which would then lead to death.

As we continued running the snake went in a totally different direction. I felt very relieved yet still so shocked and confused as to what had just happened. After realising that we were safe from being attacked by this monstrous snake we walked back home the fastest we had ever walked. The moment we arrived we threw ourselves in the kitchen and we all lay on the kitchen floor. The elders suspected that something was wrong. They asked us, "What was wrong with us and what had happened to us?" Then we explained to our elders the shocking story we had just witnessed. They explained to us that the river we had been swimming in was also infested with crocodiles and how lucky we were that the Black Mamba snake had not attacked us.

Emmanuel Svinurai

A special celebration

My special celebration is to do with my family. I have a nephew who is 23 years of age. Before he was born everyone said that my sister was going to have a baby girl, but I had a feeling that he was doing to be a boy. So when he was born on January 3rd 1990, my brother-in-law rang me to say that he had been born and that I was right, he was a boy.

This was a wonderful time in my life, I felt so overjoyed that a new life had been brought into the world. The next day at 10 o'clock I had a phone call to say that I couldn't go and see my sister and new baby at the hospital.

The hospital's reason for saying, that I could not go and see my new nephew was, that only fathers were allowed to see their new baby.

At the time I felt so emotional about my nephew being born that, I passed the hospital and got really upset about being told that I couldn't go and see him.

His name is James and he is a very kind, caring and patient person. I love him so much because he always thinks of others first.

Patricia Thomas

My adventures with animals in Africa

I went on a Safari in Kenya with my family last summer. After 12 hours on a plane from Birmingham, we arrived in Nairobi early during the morning.

A taxi from the hotel came to collect us from the airport. The weather was pleasant and sunny. The roads were busy with honking cars and lorries along with cyclists.

The following day we set off for Masai Mara. On the way we saw people working in farms, grazing cows and sheep. They were so cheerful as they waved at us as we passed them. The school children were walking to the school in groups wearing their yellow uniforms. The women were fetching water in pails and carrying them on their heads.

After a five hour journey in a Jeep, we came to Sopa Lodge which was in the middle of the jungle with well equipped modern facilities like Internet, comfortable rooms, 24 hour electricity, a constant water supply and beautiful outdoor swimming pools. There were mosquito nets and screens on the windows and doors. We had arrived.

In the afternoon our guide took us to see the animals, there was a lot of dust, but the open space made us feel relaxed and excited about seeing animals. We saw the big five: lions, buffaloes, rhinos, cheetahs and elephants. There were lots of other wildlife such as hyenas, wildebeests, zebras, giraffes and so on. Thompson gazelles are like deer, but their short tails move constantly.

We stayed in the lodge for three days. We went out every morning, after a delicious breakfast and came back in the evening. The staff were very friendly and served us tasty vegetarian food in the middle of the forest. They looked after us very well. We had picnic lunches at picnic spots, with excellent refreshing facilities.

We saw a herd of elephants, one was a broken legged baby elephant. It was amazing to see how the elephants were working in a group to help keep moving the baby. There were lots of tourists gathered to see, but rangers came and told us to, let them do their job and for us people, to move on.

Another time we saw a lion just walking like a king of jungle and making sure that everything is ok. He did not bother about the Jeep or us.

We saw a family of cheetahs with small cubs running around. We also visited the Mara River. There were lots of crocodiles and hippos in the river, who were basking in the sunshine.

We came back from Nairobi with lots of memories of animals. We enjoyed our trip very much.

Florence

My Mother

My Mother was the most wonderful person in the world. She was my Mum, my best friend and she was like my sister too.

She was a very warm hearted and kind person. She showed me how to love and taught me how to care for others. She would always wake me up in the morning to make sure I wasn't late for school. She would make my dinner for me everyday.

My Mum always used to listen to me and I always used to listen to her. She would always encourage me not to make the same mistake as she did.

I will always love my Mum and miss her too. My Mum inspired me.

Nicola Copson

Ashley's special day

Once upon a time there was a little girl called Ashley. She lived with her mummy, daddy and her brother Tommy.

One day Ashley woke up with a big smile on her face. She rubbed her eyes yawned and jumped out of her bed singing, "No school today, it's a special day for me today, hurray hurray", as she put on her dressing gown. Still singing she gripped her teddy-bears and ran downstairs.

"Mum, dad" she shouted as she ran into the kitchen, "Hummm there is no one in here". Ashley soon stopped smiling and started to feel sad.

Ashley ran back upstairs, shouted "Tommy" and rushed into his bedroom "where's mum and dad?", "don't know", he grumbled as her put his hair gel in. "Oh! Tommy where are the p.....?", Ashley said as she looked sadly to the floor.

"Tommy, do you have something to say to me?" "No", he replied. Ashley looked sad holding her teddy-bear. "Wait for me and we will go and look for them together".

Tommy took Ashley by the hand and they both went to look in all the bedrooms and all the cupboards – no one's there. "They must be downstairs", Tommy said to Ashley. They both went down stairs, "Look in the kitchen", Tommy said, Ashley knew they weren't in there, but went to look anyway. Feeling really sad Ashley sat on the kitchen chair, "They've all forgotten my special day". "Ashley", Tommy shouted, "Why don't you look in the living room?" "Ok" she said, and dragged herself off the chair.

She made her way to the living room and opened the door, "SURPRISE!!! HAPPY 6TH BIRTHDAY ASHLEY", she looked up with a happy smile on her face, "WOW!!!" and there was mummy, daddy and big brother Tommy and her Nanna, Grandad, Aunties, Uncles and cousins all standing around a beautiful birthday table with a big pink and purple cake with 6 birthday candles. Ashley was so happy she ran to give everyone a hug. "Oh mummy and daddy I thought you had forgotten my special day". They gave Ashley a massive hug and said, "No, my darling", and Ashley smiled.

They played party games, ate party cake Ashley had a fantastic day with all her family.

The End.

Marie Manorth

Changes in Birmingham city centre in the last 14 years

Since moving to Birmingham in 1998 I have had the opportunity to experience and see the way Birmingham City Centre has changed. To me, it is one of the most attractive places to visit and enjoy.

Some of the earlier transformations that have taken place includes the development of Broad Street, a place to go clubbing; Brindley Place by the canal, where you can find places to eat and drink; the Mail Box where you cannot only find places to eat and drink, but shops that target more up market clothes stores; the new Bull Ring shopping centre; Millim Point on the east of the city, which has a 3D cinema, museum and shortly will have its own park with a land mark.

The latest developments includes a new state of the art central library on Broad Street, opening in 2013; the redevelopment of New Street Train Station, with the latest addition of a John Lewis department store; extension of the metro from Snow Hill Station to New Street Station. All the city centre bus connections to have better access to other modes of public transport such as the city centre train stations and installation of new posh bus shelters.

Just like any other town or city Birmingham City Centre changes will no doubt continue. I hope in generations to come other people will find it, like I do, an incredible place to live, work and play, as it caters for many of my needs on my 'front door'!

Divina Elliott

It isn't easy being me!

My name is Eliza, I am 23 years old and I have two young children.

I had a tough upbringing and was a rebel. I suffered a lot of hurt, but I never let it break me. I have been through many obstacles over the years, but I have also achieved so much.

I left school when I was 14, so did not have any qualifications, but I have been studying a variety of courses over the years and I have made up for what I missed out on, such as: Health & Social Care, Maths, English, Mentoring and Childcare. I have also passed my driving test and got my first car, last but not least my most important achievement are my beautiful two daughters.

I am a massive Tupac fan, I became a Tupac fan when I was about 18 years old, I was going through a rough patch, there were days when I never had enough money in my pocket to eat, I had no family or friends around. That was the lowest time of my life and I felt I had nothing to live for. I came across a Tupac song called, 'Hellraiser' one day and I couldn't stop listening to it, soon after I really got into the rest of Tupac's music. I felt like he understood how I felt and what I was going through, I felt a connection through his music. He became my inspiration and I feel that he encouraged me to do so much more with myself. He saved my life.

Life is a struggle everyday, but I always remind myself, 'If I can make it through the night then there's a brighter day', as Tupac would say. This is what keeps me motivated. I started at the very bottom and have come so far, the sky's the limit for me!!!

I hope to become a support worker in the near future, to help and support vulnerable adults and children.

Eliza

A special celebration

'Eid-ul'adha' is the festival of sacrifice. The festival remembers the prophet Ebrahim's willingness to sacrifice his son when God commanded him too.

The story of sacrifice is also found in the Jewish and the Christian scriptures.

Today Muslims all over the world celebrate this day by attending the mosque for prayers to sacrifice a sheep or a goat. It is also a time when Muslims visit their family and friends as well as offering presents.

Eid means 'happy'. Rich and poor people wear new clothes and they hug each other. In all Muslim houses they make lots of delicious food on Eid day.

It's a really enjoyable festival for all Muslims!

Shagufta Shaikh

My son – my inspiration

My son Bradley is 11 years old and was born on the 2nd July 2001. When he was born, my husband and I were told he had Down's Syndrome. The tests confirmed this. We were only young ourselves, myself being 21 and David 20. This was considered very young to have a child with Down's Syndrome. We were upset, shocked, angry, a mixture of emotions, but we knew that we loved him and we would protect him throughout his life.

Bradley was a happy, loveable little boy, but by the age of 2 he was still not sitting up, rolling over or weight bearing. Down's Syndrome children are generally floppy, but eventually in time they tend to reach the milestones that all other children do. His consultant decided to carry out further tests on him to make sure that there was nothing else wrong.

On the 7th June 2003 David and I set off for the hospital to meet with the consultant for the results of the tests. We were not prepared for what we were told. Bradley had a condition called Spinal Muscular Atrophy Type 2 otherwise known as SMA. This is an inherited neuromuscular condition that affects the nerve cells that originate in the spinal cord. People with SMA type 2 generally have a short life span, it could be anything from the age of 5 upwards.

We left the hospital completely numb. We headed home dreading the thought of telling our family and friends. Everyone was devastated yet at the same time very supportive. We knew as a family, that we had to stay strong and ensure we gave Bradley the best we possibly could.

Bradley is now 11 years old and everyday with him is special. He is always happy and never complains. He is a permanent wheelchair user and relies on us for all aspects of his care. His consultant tried to liaise with various other consultants and organisations as to whether anyone is familiar with any other child with the two conditions. This makes him in our eyes and his consultants a very special boy.

Bradley has metal rods in his back because he had curvature of the spine. These have to be lengthened every six months. He has endured several visits to intensive care where we thought we were going to lose him, but he has always pulled through smiling. His consultant once said to us, "Any adult going through what Bradley has to go through, would have given up", but Bradley bounces back, he is a fighter. Bradley is what helps us get through each day, along with his brother Connor and sister Leah. He truly is our inspiration.

Michelle Foster

Life as a play-worker

Play-work is a very rewarding, fun, varied, tiring, messy, noisy job you do with children and young people aged between 3 and 15 years old, or you could specialise with one age group. As a play-worker supervising, monitoring, motivating and engaging with children from these ages, you plan and organise play sessions, whilst working with other team members.

Through play, children experiment and learn about themselves and the world around them and also learn and develop as individuals. Play-workers supervise the children at all times and make sure safety procedures are followed and we encourage good behaviour. As a play-worker, we encourage the children to become more independent and also encourage them to help set up and put away equipment, which gives them a sense of responsibility. As a play-worker you encourage children and young people to help plan play activities.

Play-workers work with males, females, children with disabilities and children from ethnic minority communities and low income families. As a play-worker, we are able to build good relationships with children and young people's parents or carers. You need to be a good listener, speaker, be patient, tolerant and also work in a team, be creative, imaginative and have good organisational skills.

A play-worker gives children and young people opportunities to create an environment in which they are free to choose how and what they play with. Play-workers can work in different settings such as: after school clubs, hospitals, nurseries and schools.

Catherine Thompson

An exciting experience in Dubai

Dubai is one of the best countries in the world and the best location for tourists. I had heard lots of good comments about Dubai which is why we decided to go there. My husband booked the holiday package on the internet.

First we went to India and spent some time there, and then we went on to Dubai. The people came to receive us from the airport and took us to the hotel.

The surrounding location was very impressive on the way to the hotel. The hotel was five star and was very posh, very clean and beautiful. I just loved the hotel and the atmosphere!

The following day they gave us a quality breakfast and we asked them to arrange a day trip for us to see the attractions. They arranged a car for us and took us to museums, mountains, parks and beaches. My most favourite place was the mountains.

We were taken to the sand mountains in the car which felt like a roller coaster ride to me, and I really enjoyed it! A camp was arranged for us in the middle of the mountains for us to visit. We were given Arabian clothes to wear and we took part in a photo shoot. After that we rode on camels ...that felt good! At the end of the day they arranged Arabian dancers for us, these girls danced around the fire, there were no lights so we just used the campfire light and lamps. We sat on the floor on mattresses, some of the people used hukka (a kind of smoke), some people drank Cava (Arabian drink) and some people had barbecued food which included cababes, naan and chicken tikka. At the end of the evening we were taken back to the hotel. It was quite late and we were all exhausted.

I myself can say one thing and that is it's well worth choosing Dubai for your holiday place.

Shabana Shaikh

Mother Teresa

Mother Teresa was born in 26 August 1910 in Skopje Macedonia. Her birth name was Agnes Gonxha-Bojaxhiu. Her father was a wealthy man, but unfortunately he died when Agnes was only 8 years old.

Agnes was fascinated with missionaries from early age. When she was 18 Agnes left home and joined the Sisters of Loreto in Ireland. After a year learning English in Ireland, she transferred to convent in Darjeeling, India.

She took her vows as nun in 1931 and chose the name Teresa. Teresa started to teach history and geography in Calcutta at St. Mary High School for 15 years.

She was distressed by the poverty she saw all around her. In 1946 she decided to begin doing the work she felt prepared to do, by taking nursing a course. In 1948, Teresa adopted the simple sari and sandals worn by the women around her and rented small house in the slums to begin her work.

Her first project was teaching the poor children about basic hygiene and she helped them when she could. In 1950, she was able to start “Mission of Charity” which was dedicated to caring for the hungry, naked, homeless, the crippled, the blind and all those people who felt unwanted, unloved and uncared for, from society. She also opened a hospice for the poor, a home of leprosy and a home for orphan and homeless youth.

Mother Teresa was honoured with lots of awards like Indian Padma Shree in 1962, Pope John Peace Prize in 1971, Albania Golden Honour of the nation in 1997 and Nobel Peace Prize in 1979. She continued her work with the poor, for the rest of her life and leading the Missionaries of Charity until her death in September 5th 1997.

The Catholic Church has begun to move Mother Teresa along the steps towards sainthood and she was beatified in 2003, her official title is now “Blessed Teresa of Calcutta”.

Bharati

My daughter Manpreet

My daughter Manpreet has a problem with her writing and spelling, the same as me. In my daughter’s case she suffers at school because the kids at school bully and pick on her. They don’t want to be her friend! She comes home crying because the bullying stops her from asking for help and also stops her from talking to people about her writing and spelling.

I have tried to help her with her writing but because I have a problem with my own writing I find it hard. It makes me sad because I know what it’s like to be not very good with your writing. I didn’t know how to speak to my own teachers to get help or to tell my family that I needed help. So I left school doing no exams and started a Y.T.S.

I don’t want that for my daughter; for her to leave school with no option but to do a job she doesn’t like, but will have to do because of her writing.

So, we went to her school and an English teacher told me to talk to the Special Needs teacher. He said he would put her in the special needs group for her writing and spelling until she is able to work at her own level.

Ranjit S

My life story

My name is Theresa and I go to Adult Education classes at the Osborne Centre in Erdington, Birmingham.

I come to the English classes regularly because I would like to be able to read and write better.

It has been over four years since I have been coming to the Osborne Centre and so far I have passed Entry Level one and two.

Steady progress is being made and I want to continue to learn more.

I enjoy coming every week and I have met lots of new people in all of my classes.

I want to use my new knowledge in my everyday life, for example when I go shopping and looking up new cookery recipes.

Theresa

Thanks to an angel

My teacher asked me to write an article for My Voice 2013 and I would like to use this opportunity to write an article about an angel, the man who saved hundreds of our children's lives.

Three years ago my four year old son was referred to the heart unit at Birmingham Children's Hospital. He was assessed by a doctor and was diagnosed with a hole between two sides of his heart (Atrial Septal Defect).

Our life was devastated when the doctor told us about his situation and explained to us that he needed a heart operation to close the hole. My wife couldn't stop crying and I was shocked. The doctor explained what the procedure was and he tried to give us confidence about the operation.

We could do nothing except pray. Day after day and I can not tell you enough about how hard it was for us. After a few weeks, we received an appointment for the hospital.

On the day we went to the hospital, which was the first day, the nurses did all the routine checks and the doctor visited my son. The doctor told us that tomorrow he was going to do the operation. He told us there were two options to close the hole, with the catheter from his leg or open heart surgery and he said they were trying to close it with a catheter.

They took my son to the operating theatre and after nearly two and a half hours (the hardest time in our whole lives). The doctor came out and said "the operation was successful", and they had closed the hole by putting a device on his heart without open heart surgery. They had done magic.

Now, after three and half years, my son is very healthy and we had all this from God, his angel Dr Giovanni and his team at Birmingham Children's Hospital.

I am writing to express my deep gratitude and thanks to Dr Giovanni and his team for their superior and professional care of my son and I would like to say, "you are truly an angel".

God bless you and thank you.

H. SH

My memories of Mrs Thatcher's government

I have many memories of Mrs Thatcher's government. I can remember one of the first things she did was to take away the free milk from the children at school. Before she was in power, there were quite a lot of industries. It didn't take long for them to close down and many people were out of work.

At that time I was working at the GKN factory in Smethwick. They used to make all kinds of screws, nuts and bolts. The factory employed hundreds of people, but things started to change which made us all uneasy in our jobs.

Every couple of weeks the management had meetings with the workers. Things weren't looking good for us. Cheaper goods were coming in from other countries which meant that the company was really struggling.

They had to downsize the factory and made many people redundant. In the end I also lost my job. This was very difficult for me and it took over a year to get another one. Times were hard! There were more people out of work than those who were working.

J. S.

English class poem

E represents	English a tool to advance our career
N stands for	Never it is never too late to learn
G represents	Goal our desire we yearn
L stands for	Listen a small polite rule to adhere
I represents	Individual a mix of cultures a class filled with characters
S stands for	Stand together understand and to help each other
H represents	Harmony a quality Rachel brings as a teacher
C stands for	Commitment being on time for each class
L represents	Late missing a vital part of the day
A stands for	Attendance early rise shows motivate
S represents	Study devoted to go all the way
S stands for	Salutary a new word I discovered in the dictionary

Do you know the meaning of the word **Salutary**?

Jewn Gayle

Christmas cookie swap party

Once a year at Christmas time, all my family and friends gather together to have our Cookie Swap Party. It's a chance for us to get together and celebrate.

The idea behind a Cookie Swap Party is for all guests to bake their own cookies and bring them to the party to swap with others.

As the host of the party my sister bakes cookies for the children to decorate with all sorts of lovely things such as, green and gold glitter, sweets and coloured icing. It's great to see the children get in to a mess and the adults also enjoy this too. Our decorated cookies are taken home for us to hang on our own Christmas trees.

We then eat a lovely lunch made up of delicious cold meats, homemade coleslaw, potato salad and the best homemade sausage rolls ever. After lunch we all gather round to swap the cookies we had brought to the party. My sister lays them all out on a table and gives everyone a bag to fill with delicious treats.

This is my favourite celebration of the year. It brings all the family together young and old. We all look forward to the party, I especially look forward to the food as my sister is a fantastic cook.

Sophie Phillips

An exciting house

Recently I moved into a 'new-build' house. I was so excited; I loved the house at first sight. It has three bedrooms, two toilets, one living room and a kitchen with a dining room together. I found that the rooms were smaller than I expected once I moved in. The house has a triangular shaped garden with a driveway where you can park two cars one behind each other.

When you get something for the first time you get very excited ...but when you start to use it you find faults. So, now I am finding faults in my new house!

I found that the inside walls of the house are not very strong. It makes a noise when you knock on the wall. My husband is very scared to put something on the walls. I've also got some new curtains but I can't put the tie-backs on the walls because of the weak walls.

I love the kitchen because it has a big space, I can move around easily and freely. My family members can sit at the table when I cook, but I hate the loud noise from the cooker hood, it means I can't hear all of the conversations.

When I look into the bedrooms my excitement goes away. I preferred my old bedrooms as they were big and beautiful. However, the new house has lots of light coming in from all directions; my old house was a little darker.

My old house had lots of opportunities, for example schools, shops, library, surgery close by. My new house doesn't, even the mosque is a long way away. My children are going to the same schools and we are using the same surgery for now, we haven't changed anything yet, but we may in the future.

Getting a 'new build' house is interesting and exciting but it also worries me a lot. We didn't have a water meter in the old house, but now in the new house we have one. It makes us think when we use water just how much the water bills will be. I like washing up dishes under running water but my husband keeps telling me off for wasting water, I hate that!

I guess in life, you get something and you lose something. You can't have everything. My new house is the same; it has good sides and bad sides. I think I will accept it as it is and be grateful about it.

Niger Sultana

The curse from birth

In the still of the cold, gloomy night the ambulance cruised at top speed, twisting and turning through the old damaged roads: lights flashing, horn beeping all the way. Then suddenly it came to a stop. The driver dashed from his seat and helped the two nurses with the trolley, hastily making their way through the long twisted corridors into the delivery room.

The driver stood at the door of the delivery room; he then started to twitch his nose as the pungent aroma from the delivery ward crept over his shoulder. He glanced at the old clock to his right; it was twelve o'clock when Paul screamed to life while his mother lay still, with tears in her eyes.

Dawn was beginning to soften the edge on the night when Paul's father charged into the room. His serious face looking worn out from drinking all night, sweat pouring off his brow. He looked at Paul "that child is not mine!" Paul's mother was so furious that she suddenly took a dislike to Paul, and shouted "the spitting image of his father."

"What curse has robbed me of my love?"

However, whilst time casually went by, Paul's parents didn't see eye to eye. They often shouted at each other and resented each others company. As the curse grew his mother reluctantly enrolled him into Teacher Johnson Primary School but that didn't last long because Paul was described as rude, disruptive and troublesome in class. Paul later merited his expulsion again. At this tender age Paul grew up with no basic education and few friends as far as he could remember.

Then luck appeared to come Paul's way; at twelve years of age and with no basic education he was enrolled in Greenwich All Age School. When he started the school he was happy and sad at the same time. He was happy that he would meet and make new friends but sad that they too would get to dislike him due to his character, although good, harmless and friendly. As time sped on things were going well at Paul's new school. He had met and developed good positive relationships with some of the other students. Paul was now happy at school.

One day while Paul was playing in the schoolyard a boy threw a stone, hit Paul in his back and sprinted towards the school main gate. Paul suddenly fell to the ground, he tried to stand up but he was so weak he fell on his knees; Paul couldn't do anything but watch the boy gallop like a stallion as he made distance between Paul and himself.

The following day Paul saw one of his friends in his scout uniform, he looked stunning and Paul told himself that he too was going to join the Boy Scout Organisation. He has happy; full of excitement with the idea ...until he went home shouting "mama, mama, I am going to join the scouts."

Paul's mother looked at him, the look was well known to Paul and his other brothers; the look of trouble! It meant that you were really asking for it when she looked at you in that manner. "Boy, what you say, where must I get the money to buy your uniform. Move and sit down boy!" Paul made a hasty exit whilst talking under his breath, "one day I will be free like the birds". He retreated to his favourite corner behind the large black wooden house which stood in the corner of the centre of the yard. It had a large double door that looked like the mouth of a monster from a distance. The house had two windows on each side of the door resembling its eyes and had long stairs to the side where he often hid himself when he was in trouble.

Paul stayed out of sight until the aroma of the chicken saturated in garlic, onions, thyme and sweet pepper flew across his face.

After his dinner Paul decided to run away. He packed his bag and left for his father's home. When he arrived there his father looked at him and said "go back to your mother's home!" Paul as usual meriting rebuff, but this time he refused to return to his mother's home in the dark of the night,

instead he chose sanctuary in the outside kitchen where he slept comfortably all night.

The following morning Paul's father told him to go inside the house and make himself something to eat. Paul was happy again. All of his wishes came true; he joined the Boy Scouts and remained with his father. On the other hand Paul did not know of his father's resentment of him from birth. He was often blamed and punished without any sympathy for things he knew nothing about.

Paul was treated harshly, resented and punished for as long as he could remember for no good reason as far as he was concerned. He finally came to the realisation that his mother and father exhibited the same negative treatment towards him. He then made up his mind to leave his father's home to live at a nearby seaside village.

The seaside village was home to many boys that run away from their homes. Paul was happy again as he was secure that neither of his parents knew where he was or even cared about it. Paul was free as a bird and no one came looking for him. For years Paul lived and played with the boys from the village, he was never blamed, punished or felt resentment as long as he lived at the seaside village.

Now, however Paul's life has changed, it appears the curse from his parents has been lifted. At the village Paul learned to clean the fishing boats, mend the fishing nets and sometimes he even went fishing with some of the older men. Paul was gradually growing into a man and free from the resentment of his parents. He was happy and free from the curse and he often stood proudly at the edge of the raft in the morning looking over his kingdom whilst the large and small boats set sail.

Robert Anderson

The best day of my life

I used to live in the Yemen with my family. I was very happy and I got a lot of freedom in my life.

I finished my education and I worked five years after my degree as a Laboratory Technician. This didn't last too long as shortly afterwards I got married.

I got married in the Yemen, and then three months later my husband had to go back to England to work. After that I started to apply for a Visa to go to England. This took ten months to obtain, I was excited and happy.

Eventually I packed up all my stuff ready to go and I telephoned my husband to meet me at Heathrow Airport.

At that time I felt this is 'The best day of my life' because me and my husband were reunited again in the same house.

Samira Ahmed

My unforgettable Easter holiday

The most unforgettable and interesting moment that I have spent in my life was during this Easter Holiday in 2013.

During this holiday, I went with my family to Germany. It was the first long trip that I have enjoyed in a car.

There was a wedding party to attend for our family friend. I met up with my uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters and cousins after nine years. After I got married I hadn't seen them because we all live in different countries.

They couldn't believe that I had got married and had two young children!

We really enjoyed the party as we all danced and ate together. We took family pictures of each other and kept a copy each as a treasured memory.

After the party we reserved a hotel in the City of Hamburg City for two nights. All the family stayed together.

After two nights everyone returned back to their home places and we ourselves came back to the UK.

It was my most memorable days in the EU over the Easter Holiday.

Howsai Sakhizadeh

My dad inspired me

I must say my father inspired me very much. He was a good man to the village in which we lived and the people loved him very much. He loved his work very much and I think of him every day and what he would be doing now if he was alive.

My dad was a Justice of the Peace and he helped everyone that came to him for help. During one month I think over one hundred people came to see him.

He travelled to North, South and Central America when he was fourteen years old. I believe he saw lots of things in life. He brought us up to love each other.

He was an outspoken man in what he did and never left anything undone. He was a good dad to all of us and as a son I loved him.

When I came to this country in 1961 it took me a long time to help him. Many of us came to this country in the sixties. We never found it the way we heard about it so it took a long time to find our way around. When my dad died I realised I never got to help him the way I would have liked to.

I must say that although he is not with us any longer he still inspires me to do what I am doing. There is a dream and I have to fulfil because of my dad, he planted something in me and I have to take it through to the end.

Huxley Anderson

Oops!

Once in the air and looking forward to our holiday in Cyprus I felt the urge to go to the loo. Unfastening my seatbelt I made my way there. After waiting a short time it was my turn. On going inside the cubical I made myself comfy and started to do my necessary.

When all of a sudden!!!

There stood a lady holding the door wide open. "Arrr, arrr" we both screamed.

To my embarrassment as she ran back to her seat she left the door wide open so everyone could see me... thankfully she came back and closed the door. I have never been so red faced in all my life, it's only now I can look back and laugh.

But... what a shock it must have been for the poor people on the plane.

Amanda Osborne

Tamil Eelam (Future of my country)

I am a Tamil person living in England. Unfortunately I couldn't stay in my country. I was born in Sri Lanka and my mum and sister are still living there. Tamil people couldn't live in Sri Lanka because the governments are killing our people.

When we had freedom from the British in 1948 the Tamil people had to suffer to live there. Everyday there were one to ten people being killed. Forty years ago Tamil people were travelling on a boat in order to escape. When in the middle of the journey the Singala Navy and other Singalas Kundarkal (bad people) killed these people using big knives and saws, even a six month old baby died.

Every time they called our young boys and girls together they bombed them. In 1983 in the Capital of Sri Lanka (which is called Colombo) the army and other Singala people were trying to kill and burn the properties and the belongings.

At that time all the young people started to try to save our people. The government called us terrorists. Our group was grown quickly and they made a Tamil government, our Captain was called Parabakaran. All Tamil people love him, even my sister joined with them in 1990. In 1995 she was killed by the army. So many people lost their mums, dad, sons, and daughters.

During 2009 to 2010 our Tamil people had bad luck. The government was bombing and shooting everywhere so that people moved into small area without any food and medicine. Whoever was injured didn't get any medicine and died. In that period more than 100,000 people were killed.

The government used banned bombs and acid or burning bombs to kill our people. The Sri Lankan army captured all of our land. There was drama because they killed our leader; even our leader's son who was thirteen years old was shot and killed. TV Channel 4 have programmes with some evidence about what the government are responsible for.

Now we are not carrying any weapons and we are proving the evidence to the UN. We are still protesting and now we have made a Tamil government outside of Sri Lanka. The Prime Minister is living in America and other ministers are living in other countries such as Canada, UK, Germany, Switzerland, France, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, Singapore and many more.

We will get our Tamil Eelam soon.

Vathani

My pilgrimage to Lourdes

I went on a pilgrimage to Lourdes with Erdington Abbey in August 2012. I had to get up at 4am because Noel was coming to pick me up at 6am. We went to The Abbey where we boarded a coach leaving at 6.45am. We arrived at Stansted airport at 9am to catch the plane which left at 11am. After an easy journey we arrived in Tarbes at 13.50 French time. When we had collected our cases from the conveyor belt the coach was waiting for us. We arrived at the Beau Site Hotel at 14.30pm and in the foyer met with other pilgrims. At 17.45 I served Mass in the Hotel Mediterrane for about 30 people in our group. I was feeling very hungry by the time I went back to the Beau Site and enjoyed the vegetable soup and salad I had for dinner. Later, we went to look at the torchlight procession. It looked good! Everyone took candles and sang the Lourdes hymn, praying the Rosary as well. Later, I came back to the hotel feeling very, very tired.

Early next morning I got up, ate breakfast before meeting the other pilgrims in the foyer. We walked to the St Frai hospital where I served Mass. Later we had a group photograph then went to the Information Centre to see a short film, "The Message of Lourdes" before our lunch. In the afternoon we had a walking tour of places associated with St Bernadette, for example her house, which was very small but big enough for us to be able to go inside. Later on that day I had my PKU cooler and needed a rest.

On the following day, after another early start I went to Bartres, a short trip on the coach and served Mass, then Father Maguire had the sacrament of anointing the sick. After a coffee break we went to the grave of Bernadette's foster mother. I went on to the Lake of Lourdes before lunch, and then to see the fountains opposite the market. I had hoped to take some photographs but when I tried I found the batteries were dead. I had to ask my friend if he would take them and send them on to me later. I went to the supermarche to buy "betteraves" for Rosemary and French coffee for myself. Leaving these items in my room I went to the Blessed Sacrament procession, which was lovely. I walked in the procession, returned to the hotel for dinner and went to the Crypt for Holy Hour. There was a torchlight procession after that. It looked beautiful! Pilgrims were carrying their candles and singing the Salve Regina.

When I got up very early next morning and I had to remind Noel about the Mass in the Grotto. I had to shake him awake. He said to go to breakfast and he would catch up but I said "I don't think so". I showed him the agenda for the day, Mass first, then breakfast. This was so funny. He jumped out of bed! We came back to the hotel for breakfast then on to the baths. The water was cold but when you get yourself dressed straightaway after coming out of the cold water, it feels warmer. We went to pray at the Stations of the Cross and I had a drink of Lourdes water from the taps by the Grotto. The water tasted like mountain water. After lunch we went to the Blessed Sacrament procession again. We lit the parish candles and said our prayers for the departing pilgrims.

On our last day I served Mass in the Ukrainian chapel and after lunch went back to the hotel to collect our luggage. I prepared my special salad for the plane before the journey home and headed back to Stansted refreshed from my eventful pilgrimage to Lourdes.

JDC

Sahaja Yoga

'Sahaja' - means born with you. 'Yoga' means union.

Sahaja yoga was established by Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi in 1970. She opened a gate for all of us to experience for ourselves what meditation really is.

Meditation can only be achieved through the process known as 'self-realisation'. Self-realisation is the awakening of our own pure energy which lies dormant and unknown within. So what is this energy and how does it happen? Self-realisation is the key to self-knowledge and occurs when a dormant energy at the base of the spine is awakened and travels through the energy centres within the body. When it pierces the fontanelle bone area in the skull, it results in a cool breeze flowing out of the top of the head and on the hands. We can feel very relaxed and experience a very peaceful meditative state known as 'thoughtless awareness'. In addition, we can begin to feel sensations in the fingertips and feet which correspond to energy centres in the body.

If you are able to attend one of the sahaja yoga centres they can help you to cleanse these energy centres and show you how to do it for yourself. In this way you become your own master and are able to keep yourself in a balanced state.

Sahaja yoga offers a huge variety of benefits which are mental, emotional, spiritual and physical depending on individuals' needs.

My benefits from doing sahaja yoga are to my health and also emotional. My life has changed since I started doing sahaja yoga. I gained my self-realisation in my country - Bulgaria - six years ago. Sahaja yoga helps me to improve myself as a human being. That means to be a good person and to rediscover all the wonderful qualities we have when we are born but lose with modern life.

My favourite phrase is 'meditation not medication'.

Genoveva Royachka

Nature

I was very ill and spent nineteen months in hospital. Because I was so critical, the doctors had a consultation with my wife and brother-in-law to make them aware that it would be better for me to turn off the life support machine because they couldn't see me recovering and having any quality of life. My wife is a religious person who has a strong faith and she believed that I would recover and with God's grace, I did slowly recover.

My leg muscles just faded away which left me as a little baby trying to walk again after physiotherapy four times a week to build up my leg muscles.

I can remember when my sister took me outside for the first time after thirteen months in hospital. She pushed me in a wheelchair to the hospital pond. Looking around, seeing all the trees, birds and fish in the pond, I was so amazed by nature, how wonderful it was. I reflected that in the past I would just take all of these for granted.

George

A trip to Scotland

As far as I can remember one of my dream trips was to visit Scotland to see the beautiful country but the time was never right.

To my delight in 2009 the minister of my church started planning a trip to Aberfoyle in Scotland. I told the minister that I was interested. The trip was planned for 22 April 2008, Sunday to Friday.

My reason for the interest in Scotland is I heard it is a beautiful country, the landscape is out of this world and the scenery is breath taking.

I had some months of waiting and planning, especially what clothing to take as the month of April can be bitterly cold, but I wasn't going to be put off by the weather.

The day for my dream trip finally arrived. I was ecstatic. We were told to be present at church for 7am 10th April, departure time 8am. Expected arrival time at Rob Roy Hotel would be tea time.

The coach journey was long but OK. On arrival at the hotel, we were shown to our rooms and told that tea would be served at 7pm and breakfast at 7am.

During our stay in Scotland, we visited Stirling Castle, a landmark. Many battles were fought there between the Scots and the English. We also went to Loch Lomond Glendoragh now known as Luss. The BBC Take the High Road drama once filmed there. We also drove past the house where Mary Queen of Scots once lived.

Scotland is a country of great splendour. The scenery is so alluring. The memory still lingers on. I was not disappointed with my trip.

A. Marshall

Cooking, my art form

One of my favourite things to do is cooking; for me it's like an art form. You can select the best ingredients and use them to create the most tantalizing and mouth watering taste.

You can use simple recipes or just create your own; this is what I love about cooking. You can use it to express yourself. It's amazing, you can visit as many countries as you like just by selecting ingredients from their culture and using them to create delicious meals that your whole family can enjoy.

I am of Caribbean descent but some of my favourite dishes to cook are from Italy and China. I absolutely love making lasagne, sweet and sour chicken. Oh that sweet tangy sauce, it's just so delicious, and the smell is absolutely amazing. Just thinking about it now I can close my eyes and see all the ingredients I would need to create this delicious dish.

The great things about cooking at home are that you know exactly what is going into your meals, you are able to control the amount of each ingredient that is used in your meals, the quality of your meals and the overall cost of preparing your meals.

I think that everyone should try cooking; it's an amazing skill to have. You can use it as a way to spend time with your children, to relax or just to explore different cultures.

Imagine visiting a different country every day of the week!

Raxion DaCosta

My sons

My life changed when I had my first son, Siraj, on 4th October 1999; my husband and I were ecstatic. We were so overwhelmed and cried with happiness. My family were over the moon with joy, especially my lovely mum, as Siraj was the first baby in our house. My mum was with me and has totally supported, guided and given me unconditional love throughout my life.

Siraj was a lovely little boy who started walking at seven months and grew up to be a very boisterous, hyperactive boy always up to mischief, full of life and energy.

My son Siraj is 13 now and growing up fast. He has an intense character and strong personality and can be very emotional. He loves football and is extremely good at it; he is the captain of the football team in secondary school.

Three years later I had my second son, Shaan, on 17th October 2002 and I was overjoyed, because now Siraj had a brother to play with. Shaan was a gorgeous baby and has grown up to be a kind, caring, sensitive boy but can also be very stubborn. Shaan is always checking on me throughout the day to see if I am ok.

On 8 June 2005 I had my third son, Ibrahim, the baby of our house. Ibrahim is so loving, caring, kind, very cute and enthusiastic. He is always racing around the house giving me and his dad lots of hugs and kisses and constantly telling me, "I love you mummy."

My baby Ibi is so full of life and energy; he loves talking about everything and everyone and is always asking far too many questions. He's so active; he cannot keep still for long and is quite mischievous.

Ibrahim loves chocolate, cakes and ice cream and getting Siraj and Shaan into trouble.

Ibrahim is the sunshine of our household; his cuddles and kisses brighten my day and he is lovingly called "Bubble" by me.

Shaan is my considerate talented son with a beautiful voice, Masha Allah and likes to read Surahs and Naats and like to take care of people when we have visitors or family around.

Siraj is my darling, very special son whom I love more than he will ever know. I love my son tremendously. I am very sensitive and can get quite emotional when it comes to my son Siraj, I hope that in future years I can have a closer and special bond with my very special son Siraj.

Siraj is close to my wonderful sister Zubia and has a special bond with my lovely younger brother Akram and opens up to him more than anyone else.

My house is always quite noisy with my three boisterous boys wrestling and chasing each other around the house and garden, they also love football, cricket and water fights.

My wonderful husband has put a lot of time, effort, love and hard work into making mine and my sons' lives as happy, comfortable and enjoyable as possible.

Each one of my sons is different
 Each one is special
 Each one is beautiful
 There are 3 boys whom have my heart
 Their smiles make my day
 Their happiness brings me happiness
 My 3 Princes Siraj, Shaan, Ibrahim

Love always, mom

Ghulnaz Ajmal

A special celebration

I as a Muslim celebrate Eid twice in a year. First Eid is called Eid-ul Adha and comes after Ramadan. Ramadan is a holy month for all Muslim people around the world.

Eid-ul-Fitra is a big celebration after the 30 days of fasting. I look forward to this special day to celebrate. Before this special day we prepare ourselves, we save our hard earned money to buy expensive food and clothing for the whole family. We share a special moment with close friends and family. It gives everyone a joyful time.

It is very special for me, because my children enjoy every moment of that day. Their faces are full of smiles and that is what makes me feel proud, my every penny worth millions.

I wish I could celebrate the second Eid the same as the first Eid, which is called Eid-ul Adha. In this Eid people sacrifice animals, give donations to poor people and feed them.

In this Eid many families travel to Saudi Arabia to join the pilgrimage in places called Mecca and Medina.

Eid is very special for my family!

Eid brings happiness!

Eid means celebrations!

Rashia Khatun

People who inspire me

Who inspires me? My first thought was to the great and the bold, inventors of old, of our creature comforts and of travel; gas, electricity, the great steam engine and the motor cars, Thomas Edison, James Watt, Karl Benz. I'm inspired by the unspoken such as Garrett Morgan, inventor of the traffic lights and the first gas mask; thought of during a rescue in Lake Erie, the style was re-designed for military use. Mary Seacole, a nurse, who had a passion for medicine and herbal remedies, was the first mixed heritage woman to go on the battle field to help the soldiers during the Crimean War, 1853.

Closer to home, I'm inspired by hard working parents bringing up their families to have a chance and even make a difference. I'm inspired by the woman who gave me life, my mom, a woman of substance, strength and courage, who braved a far away journey from 'sunny climes' to be in Britain; who cared for me and my siblings and gave so much through love and pride, bad times and good, and hard work. I'm inspired by my children because of their infectious smiles, continuous humour and the effort they put into their education to succeed. I'm inspired by the less-able who to me and you everything they do seems to be impossible but they seem to do so effortlessly; swimming, dancing, writing, driving, all the things we take for granted, and even become Olympic winners.

I'm inspired by the ones who reach out and make a difference.

I'm inspired by the common factors in all the above: hard work, perseverance and love. You see, most of all you, the unspoken, I'm inspired because you inspire.

J.C

Love at first sight

Whenever I heard people say they believed in love at first sight, I used to look at them sympathetically and worry about their emotional well being. Surely they couldn't possibly believe that they could actually fall genuinely in love with someone they met for the first time in their life? I thought that love at first sight was a load of hot air, something people would say if they jumped into a relationship too soon and needed to justify their action, but boy was I wrong!

It was a cold and gloomy day in February 2000, and my feelings were identical to the weather we were experiencing, or possibly worse. I decided to take a walk to clear my head, but little did I know that I was about to have my head filled with clouds and other visions that cannot be mentioned. I had just stepped outside my door and as I turned the key in the lock, I heard a familiar voice behind me. It was one of my work colleagues who I had met only six months ago and we became very good friends ever since. He had his usual wide welcoming grin on his face which always warmed my heart on a gloomy day, but this was no ordinary gloomy day. My whole body was getting warm for sure, but his smile could take no credit for this physiological occurrence because next to him stood the most gorgeous hunk of male physiognomy and it took some time for me to realise that my friend was speaking to me.

"I am sorry Patrick, what did you say?" I apologised nervously, without averting my gaze from this gorgeous six foot three inches stature standing next to him. I was already feeling a tension in my neck from looking up from my five feet five inches frame, but refused to look away, as if by holding his gaze I could prevent him from vanishing.

"I was saying this is my brother Jerome," he repeated, slightly agitated.

"Your brother!" I echoed, in a voice slightly less than a shout. "You never told me you had a brother?" I continued in a softer tone. "Especially one as stunning as this," I wanted to add, but instead I extended my hand to accept Jerome's gesture of a hand shake and felt immediately that this was a mistake to touch him.

We made contact and all my organs refused to work and my only reaction was to giggle uncontrollably, like a teenage girl who met the guy she had a crush on for all her life. I just met this guy for three minutes and I lost all my senses of my whole 30 years. This is ridiculous I thought and looked around for a quick escape before I died of embarrassment.

"Sorry I have to run, I am meeting someone and I am already late. Nice to see you Patrick and lovely to meet you Jerome," the words came out in one big rush and for fear of being caught out with the lie I just told, I turned away quickly without waiting on a response. I walked swiftly and disappeared around the corner finally breathing when I was out of sight.

I walked for two hours trying to make sense of it all, but was unsuccessful. My mind was racing with thoughts. I am a thirty year old single mother with two young children. I have no time for dating or messing about with all this love thing. My life is great the way it is, with my job as a chef and looking after the children. I have great friends who look out for me, even Patrick who I see at work every day, who is like a brother to me, who never told me he had such a drop dead gorgeous brother. All those thoughts followed me on my two hours walk and all the way back home.

But why am I so affected by this man? Except for his good looks, strong build and firm handshake, I knew absolutely nothing about him. I can't even remember his voice as he barely muttered, "Nice to meet you," when he shook my hand. He didn't even look at me, how stupid of me thinking that I am in love with someone I met for the first time ...for only three minutes!

What happened after was unexplainable. My life was completely changed since I met the love of my

My Voice: The people of Birmingham in their own words

life. Jerome was all I could think of. Things became awkward with Patrick and I tried to avoid him at work as all I ever wanted to do was to get information about his brother. Eventually he told me that he didn't want to tell me but his brother was actually five years younger than him, even though he seemed older and more mature. This was a blow to me as that would make me ten years older than Jerome. My world came crashing down as I slowly let go of the idea that anything was possible between us.

Three months after we first met I ran into Jerome in the city centre and needless to say I turned into mush all over again. This time he was more receptive towards me and even appeared very happy to see me. He embraced me and I allowed myself to get lost in his bear hug. I liked the way I felt really small in his arms and wished he never let me go.

My wish came true as he decided to hang out with me that day, holding me close as if we were made for each other. I allowed it without question. After all, a girl can dream, right?

As we walked through Birmingham town centre, we talked about our lives, and I was relieved when he didn't seem freaked by the mention of my children. He was funny, playful and extremely attentive, by far the most romantic person I ever met. I was totally in love. We hung out for about three months after that day. We went to the movies, talking on the phone and taking long walks together as we lived quite close - him with his parents and siblings, me with my two children. But I knew I had to say good bye. This could only end badly. So I told him. We couldn't hang out together and he couldn't meet the children. He was gutted and so was I. And life continued as it was. Not exactly.

It was three and a half years since I said good bye and I was once again having a gloomy sad day and decided to take a walk. As I stepped outside my door I was reminded of that day. The day I fell in love. It was like *deja vu* except Patrick was absent.

I heard the familiar voice say, "Hi" and I turned to look at the most beautiful sight ever. It was Jerome and he was more handsome than I could remember. He obviously had been hitting the gym, I thought. He was bigger and very toned like a sculpture.

He took me in his arms before I could answer and gave me a kiss that caused time to stand still. "I heard you were still living here," he whispered in my ears as he held me close.

He had moved away from the area since I last saw him over three years ago. His brother told me he met someone and moved away from Birmingham. I knew I was supposed to be happy for him but I couldn't help but feel angry that he could actually move on with his life, after six long months of hanging out with me, pretending that we were not having a relationship. How could he?

"I have been back at home with the parents for the last six months and never see you around," he said still holding me close to his chest as if trying to make us one entity.

"Are you seeing anyone?" he whispered again before I could respond.

"No," I whispered all choked up with emotion as I wondered if this was one of my many dreams I had about him since the last three years.

"Great," he said with a sigh of relief, smiling as he shifted his body to look down at my face.

The smile slowly faded from his face and he held my gaze for what seemed like forever. My heart was racing and my palms began to sweat uncontrollably. I tried to swallow but my throat wouldn't allow it.

I saw his lips move and look as if he said marry me. I smiled at my ridiculous imagination and nearly passed out when he said, "So is that a yes?"

I nodded my head to indicate yes as my voice failed me. Did he just ask me to marry him, and most importantly did I just say yes?

It was yes from the first day I met him. The day I fell in love with my husband, my best friend. It has been nine years since we have been married and we still talk about that day. We now both love cold and gloomy days as it was on such a day the rest of our life began.

Do I believe in love at first sight? Sure because now I live in love from that first sight.

Tashi Nyame

Criticism

Hi my name is Emma Woodcock, the reason why my title is Criticism is because when I was at school I struggled with my work and no one knew why or how to help me. The teachers just thought that I could not read or write which made me feel helpless and it took some of my confidence away from me, so I stopped trying to learn. It was so frustrating for me. I just didn't know what to do with myself.

Then the children picked up on the fact that I could not read or write and became negative towards me. Some of the time they made me feel like I was stupid which put me down more. It was probably not a big issue for them but for me it was. Then I realised that some of the kids were criticising me for no reason. I just thought, 'What gives them that right to do so?' But now I have learnt that some of the community of all ages, even in their older years, do so. It is really bad.

Also, the pressure on children and younger adults to wear named clothes and look the same as other people is silly, but if you don't look the same or wear something that relates to it you might get criticised and told that you can't afford to buy named clothes.

If most of us took a look and saw why we are criticising and stopped it, then it would stop bullying and verbal abuse. We could then be positive and see that the world is a good place and that only you can change it!

Emma Woodcock

Cake can make you smile

I love to bake. I have baked for many years since I was a child. I was about seven when I started baking, I was bought a book by my godmother and it was called “Basic baking for children”. It had a recipe, easy bread making, and I tried it one Saturday morning and ended up saving my mum from buying bread as she was finding it quite hard financially. Even though our dad was around and working, money was tight.

Then I started making buns, biscuits and cakes and just seemed to enjoy baking and the whole experience of making something nice and then giving them out to my brothers, sister and friends.

I baked for many years and was given some good compliments about my baking. I stopped baking when my daughter became seriously ill, she was diagnosed years later with Leukodystrophy. I just dedicated most of my time to looking after and being there for her. While trying to work a full time job and an evening part time job, it became very difficult and eventually I had to give up work as my daughter was admitted to hospital every few weeks.

While I was so busy concentrating on my daughter I didn't realise my daughter's dad was losing weight. One day I looked at him and thought he didn't look himself, but I said he should go to the doctors to have a check up. He refused and put it down to working too hard, and thinking about his daughter being sick. I insisted a few weeks later that he should go to the doctor as he had not been for a few years. We went together and after telling the doctor a few of his symptoms, the doctor phoned the hospital and booked him an emergency appointment to see a consultant. He was diagnosed with lung cancer and died 3 months later.

I hated the world. How could he leave me to deal with his daughter all by my self? I know it sounds selfish but I don't think I thought straight for at least the next two years.

One day my mother asked me, “What do you want?”

I replied, “I don't want anything. Why are you asking me?”

She smiled, and said “What is the one thing he always loved?”

I didn't even need to think about it: CAKE. He loved it when I baked, so I made a cake and invited his friends and family over for dinner. Yes, everybody did compliment my cake but it also made me smile so much. He always smiled when I baked so it inspired me to bake for family and friends again, and also to learn to decorate my own cakes so I started the Sugarcraft level 1 course and I love it.

When I am feeling down I love to bake and I love to share my baking to put a smile on everyone's face. My neighbours swear I'm trying to make all the kids overweight. One of my neighbours said to me in the summer holidays, “Every time I look out the door, they're at your door or in your garden, but please can you bake something a bit healthier.” So the kids and I got together and decided to bake two cakes, pineapple upside down pudding and carrot cake, and they took some for their mums and now one of the neighbours has me baking for her mother who is an elderly lady in her eighties. Every Sunday when her daughter goes to visit her she has to bring her a piece of cake.

You see what a piece of cake can do: make someone SMILE.

Veronica Duffus

My mom the fisherlady

Growing up in Jamaica in a small fishing village in Treasure Beach, St Elizabeth, my mom was everybody's mom. Mom would be up at 4 am to help the fishermen to push their boats off the sand and out to sea. Mom would take pots of coffee and cakes down to the seaside for the men before they went out to sea.

When all the boats had left the seaside and gone out to sea, mom would come back to the house, get us out of bed so we could do our chores before going to school. After we had left for school mom would sit on her stool under a "shady tree" as she called it. She would sit there and look out to sea to see who would be the first one back to shore.

Mom would again have pots of coffee and cake ready for them to eat when they came to shore. The men along with my mom would pull the boats back onto the sand. The men weighed their catch of the day and sold it on to their vendor. When all that was done mom and the fishermen would sit down under her "shady tree" and enjoy her coffee and cake: all homemade cake and "parch and beat" coffee made by my mom. The fishermen then headed home to their family with some of their catch of the day for that night's dinner. Mom of course would get a share of their catch for her family.

There were two types of fishermen, 'near sea' or 'far sea' (or 'Pedro Bank'). 'Near sea' fishermen would leave the sand at 5 or 6am and come back in shore around 10 or 11 am. The fishermen that went to far sea would leave at 12 or 1 am and return around 5 or 6 pm. My mom would be present at all of them, she was very hands on with the fishermen that used Calabash Bay seaside. Most people that came to visit the bay thought that she owned all the boats but in fact mom only owned one boat. My mom did not go out to sea herself, her boat was captained by her husband and when he retired the boat was captained by one of my brothers. The business is still running today, with my brother John in charge.

When my mom passed away the entire parish of St Elizabeth mourned her death. Calabash Bay still remains a fishing village but not as big as it was in my mom's day.

Kathleen Simpson

Affirmations we should live by

- Start the day with a positive outlook
- Try something you have always wanted to do e.g skiing, cooking etc
- Tell a loved one how much you appreciate them
- Travel abroad or meet someone from a different culture
- Get involved in charities, visit someone sick or help an elderly person
- Play your favourite song and just dance, live in the moment
- Open yourself to new experiences
- Don't be afraid to express your emotions. Cry if you need to, show anger or love.
You will feel a big release when you do
- Try not to let negative situations get you down. Keep moving, there will be better days.
- Most important love yourself! You are special and unique in every way.
There will never be another you.

Bianca Trench

My new life in England

On 20th August 1998 I left Pakistan and came to England. It was very exciting for me because I was going to come into a new country where it was totally different compared to where I was born and brought up.

At first it was quite hard to mix with everybody, because I was missing my mother and all of my friends who I grew up with and spent a lot of my childhood with.

After a few months, I started working in a clothes factory where I made some new friends. My first few days at the factory were very hard because before that job I had never used a sewing machine and my job was as a machine operator. However I did manage to get the hang of it after a couple of weeks.

Meanwhile, I enrolled on an ESOL course. After a year I left the factory job and decided to enrol in college and learn English, Maths and IT. While I was learning English I also found a part time job at Shoe Zone. The Shoe Zone staff were so great, they helped me so much with my English which I don't think I can explain in words.

After working for three years at Shoe Zone, I had to move from Edgbaston, where I lived with my sister, to Sattley. My younger brother had bought a house in Sattley where I moved out to with him; again it was new area and new people.

I also started applying for jobs in Birmingham city centre and did manage to get a job at New Look in the Bull Ring. In 2002 I enrolled in Sutton Coldfield College on English and Maths level 1.

In 2003 I stopped my studies and went to Pakistan to get married, I stayed there for 2 months. I came back and started working full time at New Look. My husband came over to England in October 2003. We both worked very hard and saved a deposit and bought a house of our own.

Life carries on and now I have 2 daughters, aged 4 and 6, a lovely husband who's working hard and supporting me because I am not working. I have come back to complete my studies and get a job in health and social care. Fingers crossed, I hope that everything goes to plan.

Yasmeen Akhtar

Myself aged thirteen years old

My name is Susan and I came from Chesterfield to Birmingham when I was thirteen years old. Chesterfield is known for its crooked spire and people all over the world come to see it because it's famous for it and people love to come and look around it.

I arrived with my dad to be with my new family who live in Birmingham. My step mum didn't come with my dad to pick me up; he came on his own for me by train. It took over four hours on the train although I think it's only sixty miles away.

My new family had a three bedroomed house, my step mum and dad had one bedroom, my big sister had the next room and my room was the biggest for myself and my niece to sleep in together, she was only two years old but she didn't keep me awake at all.

Of course I had to start at a new school which was called Broadway. Everyone made me feel welcome but I didn't like the lessons. When I was sixteen years old I left without passing any examinations. Now later in my life I am busy working on passing many examinations.

Susan

My team Liverpool F.C

I used to and still support Liverpool F.C because it's my team.

Liverpool Football Club was the most decorated club in the world in the 1900s. Liverpool F.C was made official in March 1892. Liverpool F.C. was founded following a dispute between the Everton F.C committee and John Houlding, club president and owner of the land at Anfield, which was the land where Liverpool is based.

Now in this era Liverpool F.C is owned by George Gillett and Tom Hicks the American citizens who paid over £218.9 million to buy the club.

The song "You'll Never Walk Alone", originally from the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical Carousel and later recorded by Liverpool musicians Gerry & the Pacemakers, is the club's anthem and has been sung by the Anfield crowd since the early 1960s.

I have supported Liverpool since I was 7 or 8. I can't remember why I supported Liverpool because my brother supports Tottenham and it caused a rivalry between me and my brother to see whose team was better. Now it's Tottenham who are the better team in the last two years with Tottenham finishing in the top 4 last season where Liverpool finished 8th, and this season they are 5th and Liverpool are 7th in the Premier League.

My favourite player back in the times was Ian Rush who was the top scorer for Liverpool as long as I can remember.

I was too small to remember the Hillsborough tragedy which happened in 1989 after the FA Cup semi-final between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest. There were too many people in the stadium with 96 people being crushed to death on that day.

My favourite player for Liverpool is at the moment Luis Suarez he is the second top scorer in the Premier League with 23 goals just 1 behind Robin Van Persie of Manchester United. He is a talented player with so many skills. His previous club was Ajax. He cost Liverpool £22.8million and he is showing he's worth that much or even more.

Luis Suarez bit Branislav Ivanovic on the arm on Sunday 21st April 2013 and has got a 10 match ban, which I think is about right. Liverpool F.C has fined Suarez, but he has given his fined fee to The Hillsborough Family Trust. I was shocked to see Suarez bite someone in the match, but he has done it before in Ajax and got a 7 match ban for his actions.

My favourite manager for Liverpool was Rafael Benitez. He made Liverpool what they are: a top team, but his selling of Xabi Alonso and Javier Mascherano in the early 2000s has set Liverpool back. Liverpool's manager at the moment is Brendan Rodgers. The youngsters such as Raheem Sterling and Philippe Coutinho are trying to put Liverpool back to the top like in the 1990s.

My conclusion of Liverpool F.C is that I am hoping that Liverpool will finish 1st next season, but I will carry on supporting Liverpool no matter what happens to them. I am hoping that Liverpool keep the manager, Brendan Rodgers, next season. I say give him a chance for at least 3 more seasons.

Irfan Ali

My grandmother

My grandmother was a very nice and lovely lady. She was a very caring and kind person. She cared and respected everybody. She was a tall, big lady. I remember she had grey hair, black eyes and a beautiful smile.

The lady next door and my grandmother were very good friends. She treated her like a sister. My grandmother helped her financially because her husband left her with children and my grandmother stepped in and supported her. She did as much as she could do.

When I was little she taught me how to pray Namaz. She used to read the Quran every morning and pray five times a day.

She spent a few years of her life in this country as well. Every time when she went back home she took presents for friends and family.

She has not been forgotten. Today she is not with us, but she will always be with us in our memories. We love her lots. God bless her. Ameen

Tanzila Kousar

My pilgrimage to Makkah and Madina

I will always cherish the time I went to perform hajj.

As a practising Muslim I always wanted to experience the place where Islam began. It took 16 hours until me and my husband arrived at our destination, Makkah Makaramah. There was volcanic rock and lots of sand as far as the eye could see. Makkah used to be a desert before civilisation began.

When we arrived in the city, there were tall skyscrapers, markets and takeaways all around. The coach stopped outside the hotel. We had an hour's rest to freshen up and make our way to the sacred mosque, Haram Sharif, to perform our umrah, the first stage of pilgrimage. Seeing the Kabbah (holy site) was very emotional. We said our prayers then continued with the circulating of the Kabbah. We did all the rituals which complete the umrah.

After one week, it was time for the hajj ritual. It was very busy; millions of people from every part of the world were there. We had to hold on to each other tight so that we wouldn't get lost. I made lots of friends and really enjoyed myself. After completing the rituals we were returned back to our hotel.

The next day we got ready to go to Madinah, it took another three hours. Madinah was more relaxing than Makkah and cooler in temperature.

We arrived at our hotel, freshened up and made our way to the second sacred mosque to say our salutation to the resting place of the prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). We visited different places and our time was coming to an end. I was very sad and emotional to leave but I pray one day to go again with all of my family.

Noreen Akhtar

My cats

When Whiskers came into my Mom's, brother's, sister's and my lives, she was a stray wandering in and out of my Nan's kitchen. Me and my brother and sister persuaded my mom to keep her and in the end my mom agreed to keep her. My Mom said to me "Well Elisha, if we are going to keep her we need to decide on a name for her," and of course I chose Whiskers. The reason I chose Whiskers was because she has long whiskers and long eyelashes as well.

After we got Whiskers home she was kept in for three months followed by a trip up to the vets the next day for a health check. After three months Whiskers started meowing to be let out so my Mom bought a pink harness and lead on the way from school for the cat. When me, my Mom, brother and sister got home my Mom let her out with her harness and lead on and started walking her up and down the garden. After half an hour my Mom would pick her up and bring her in for the night. This kept happening until one day Whiskers got really curious and started climbing up the fence. My Mom managed to get her lead off her and the next thing my Mom knew was that Whiskers jumped over the fence into my next door neighbour's garden. At first I thought Whiskers would never come home but luckily enough she did for when we got home.

After Whiskers started going out she was bringing home some of her friends. A year down the line Whiskers started bringing home some dead mice and rats. Once, Whiskers brought back a dead bird. She was so proud of herself about this bird that she brought it into the house. Then my Mom caught up with her and my Mom said to Whiskers, "What have you got there Whiskers?" Whiskers turned around with this bird in her mouth. When I woke up I went downstairs and I said to Mom, "Where's Whiskers?" My Mom said she had gone back out. I asked whether Whiskers was okay and my Mom said, "She's fine she brought a bird home this morning." I started laughing. Anyway, five minutes later Whiskers came in with a big smile on her face.

Last year Bee came into our lives along with Amber. With Bee let's just say he has a heart of gold with his blonde fur and white stomach. Bee came to us with a few tricks up his paw. When I wake up Bee will be there with his blue eyes on me, rolling over and being cheeky.

Amber came to us with five little kittens. The kittens went to the Cats' Protection and we ended up with this beautiful ginger mother cat. Now with Amber she tries to copy her sister, Whiskers, with her rat hunting but has not quite managed it yet. Amber did the same thing as Whiskers did when we first had Whiskers but with Amber she brought a rat into the kitchen. Bee has never killed a rat in his life he is cute and gentle, you would think he was a girl instead of a boy with his big red lips and his snowy fur.

And that's how my cat turned into cats.

Elisha Betts

Family and childhood

Hi, I come from a big family. My mum and dad live in Lozells and I have five sisters and one brother. I went to Holte School. In my childhood, at the age 12, I was bullied because I was overweight. The kids called me fatty.

When I was 16 I left school and I went on a diet and I lost my weight. I got married when I was 22, one year later I had a baby girl. She was five pounds when she was born; she was underweight so she was kept in the hospital for a week before I brought her home. She was all healthy then.

Two years later I had another baby boy who I was happy about because I always wanted a baby boy. After Kasim, I had another baby girl who is two years old now. My son is five years old and my oldest is 9 years old. My daughter goes to Heathland Primary School.

Now that all of my children are in school, I have started enjoying life. I am also going to an adult education centre. I am studying English, maths and Computers Second Steps. I will be getting a job when I finish all of my courses.

S. Bi

A story about my friend

Today I am writing a short real story about one of my friends who was kidnapped for 27 years by a family.

She is my friend. She was very poor when she was a baby because she was kidnapped by a cruel person.

When she was a baby she lived in Lebanon which was a country in war.

During the war her dad died, but her mother didn't. When her dad died a person saw a little baby there and he took the baby to his own family without telling the mother where her baby was. The person travelled with his family and the baby to live in a different country.

She was brought up by this family and never felt the love from them and she never knew why. My friend thought that the kidnappers were her real family when they weren't.

After 27 years living with the fake family my friend knew they weren't her family, that was a big shock for her.

So she went back to Lebanon to find her real mother. After a few months she found her mother and she met all of her real family and she found a real love with her family that she had missed for 27 years and now she is very happy.

G.F

Shelley's diary of Fircroft

My first time at Fircroft was full of mixed emotions. I had feelings of anxiety and had butterflies in my stomach. The very first short course I did was anger management, the main reason I choose to do this course was because I wanted to learn how to manage my anger in a more efficient manner.

I clearly remember seeing one of the long course students, by this I mean the access course to higher education, one of the tutors told me to go and sit with a man called Sid, that's not his real name by the way, I am sure he would not want me to use his real name. When the tutor asked me to go and sit with him I remember feeling extremely nervous as I knew I already fancied him. I pretended to drop a pencil and pick it up to delay having to face him. I sat down on a chair opposite him, he explained why he was doing the access course and what it involves, after talking to Sid I felt very inspired, and highly motivated in wanting to do more with my life and in higher education, as his outlook was very positive, and his sheer determination was an aspiration to me greatly.

My overall experience has been excellent, but I can't deny I had a few hiccups along the way, there was one time I had left my keys in Sid's room and didn't realise, I went outside for a fag and because it was so late, I had locked myself out of the main building. It was three o'clock in the morning and it was very cold. I don't know what I was thinking, I climbed on a fence and onto the roof I saw the door which led to the main building, but of course the door was locked. I stayed on the roof for two hours until I saw a couple of people come out for a fag at about five o'clock in the morning, they helped me to climb down as it was easier to get up than it was to get down. I finally got into the building, I went straight to Sid's room, he answered the door and did not look impressed at all I could tell he was very annoyed with me but still let me into his room, I then asked him if he had my keys, he said yes, I went to sleep in Sid's room, after half an hour the caretaker Jim knocked on the door, and said let me look at your hands, and was very surprised that my hands were covered in antivandal paint, at this point it dawned on me that I had done something very stupid, I then realised there were consequences to my actions.

I received a letter through the post to ask me to come in to Fircroft and explain why I climbed on the roof, and why I did what I did, I knew that I really wanted to do further courses at Fircroft so I telephoned to get an appointment to sincerely apologise and I explained how much I would like to come back to Fircroft and learn new skills. I did this and the tutor told me I would be allowed to come back to Fircroft, I was over the moon when I found out I could come back.

For me personally it was a great learning curve, and taught me to take my learning journey more seriously.

As for my crush on that guy that was doing the long course, I decided that when I saw him again I would totally ignore him, as he was a total distraction, I realised that I should concentrate more on my learning at Fircroft than my personal relationships.

I would say that my journey at Fircroft started off a bit bumpy, but now seems to be a lot more plain sailing, since the incident on the roof. My whole outlook to adult education has changed, thanks to Fircroft and the amazing tutors here to guide the students through each individual personal learning targets. I am more determined than ever to achieve more out of life and especially in higher education.

So that's my diary of Fircroft college, I really hope you have enjoyed reading my diary and would encourage anyone that wants to learn to come and have an experience of a lifetime.

Shelley Guy

Special friend

My friend is kind, considerate and a very caring person.

She is always there for me when I need her.

Good friends are hard to find but I have found a good friend.

We help each other out when we can; also I can talk to her about anything. She will always keep it to herself. She never judges me when I have problems.

Our friendship lasted for a long time. This friendship means a lot to me. She is also very special to me.

We met at the Hart Centre. I was taking an English course, when I met her in class. We seemed to get on very well. She told me a little bit about herself. I really became fond of her. She told me that she only lived down the road from me. Then we started to meet at my house and I sometimes went to her house. She also asked me if I would like to make some handmade cards. I had never made handmade cards before. I had a go at making these cards and I really enjoyed it.

I think my friendship is very important to me because it is all about caring for someone, being there for them when they need help, advice and support. We spend a lot of time together when we can. Also she has taught me to make cards and jewellery. My friend has helped me to get over my problems in my life. I hope people who read this have a similar friendship to mine.

Marie Corley

Newroz – Kurdish new year

Newroz is the Kurdish New Year. Every year Kurdish people celebrate Newroz on 21st March, also the 21st March is the first day of spring.

Every year people set a fire on the top of a mountain, wear traditional Kurdish clothes, go to a picnic and have a party.

This day belongs to a true story that happened many ages ago, because on this day Kurdish people celebrate that they gained their freedom from the dictator leader.

This leader killed all the young boys in the village and gave the blood to his snakes that he kept on his shoulders.

After lots of years of the people suffering. A brave man whose name was Kawa, killed this tyrant leader; that's why people set a fire on the top of the mountain, because they wanted all of the other places to know that the Kurdish people had been saved from this leader.

Also, nowadays in the UK, Kurdish people celebrate this day with each other and have a party in public places or go to a park to have a picnic.

Amez Abdulla

My hopes and dreams for the future

As a single parent of two gorgeous boys, I have always wanted the best for our family. At the moment I am studying literacy which I think is beneficial to my career ahead. I want to get back into work this September in administration as I have previously worked in that field.

I hope to become a very successful business woman. I hope to get a nice car, as I will be re-starting my driving lessons this September. Once I have my own car I will be able to take my boys out on day trips and drive to our church. I believe that if I take little steps it will get me far. I believe in myself and know that I can get to where I want in life. The love I have for my boys makes me want to achieve big and better things.

My biggest dream of all is to take my boys on a holiday to Disney World Florida; that would be a dream come true.

I know the time will come when my boys will turn into teenagers and hopefully one day very successful men. I do my very best to keep my boys on the straight and narrow path, as their future and careers are very important to me. I will always support my boys through life; that is a mother's unconditional love and nothing would make me happier than to see them excel in their lives. All your hopes and dreams are achievable; if you put your mind to it and believe in yourself, you can be where you want to be.

Chantelle Stephens

I'm really missing something!

Hello my name is Aaminah from Somalia.

I live in Birmingham with my children and my husband and many of my friends. However, fresh camel milk is one of my favourite foods that I cannot get here in England.

You may be thinking it is strange but, do you know how important having a glass of camel milk is? The answer is: it is essential to have sources of proteins, vitamins and minerals in our daily life; these can be found in camel milk. Also it is highly rich in calcium, which we really need to help our bones and teeth.

Research says that camel milk is the healthiest milk from animals. Moreover the camel milk stays fresh longer without a fridge, unlike other milk from animals. Another researcher suggested that antibodies in camel's milk could help in fighting diseases like cancer, HIV/AIDS, Alzheimer's and hepatitis B, but this has not been proved yet.

Camel milk tastes salty and it is very watery compared to cow's milk. It is two per cent fat compared to four per cent in cow's milk, it is lower in cholesterol and has five times as much vitamin C.

There are two types of camel's milk; one is fresh which you can have straight away from the camel. Another one is like yogurt, which is when the milk has been kept for about two days. Both truly have a special taste. I wish that I could buy it from shops in England as well as other milk.

Aaminah

People who inspire me

Life is a journey; it has its ups and downs. Sometimes everything goes well and another time it is the opposite. In your good days you will enjoy every moment of the day and pray for the next day to begin. In your bad days you would question the day you were born and your existence on earth. However, it is amazing what people can do to motivate you during your valley days.

Paul, who is a prophet in The Bible, shares his experience of being a prophet in the days of old. Paul's story tells of really hard times such as being beaten, stoned and put in prison for preaching to individuals about the true and living God Jesus Christ. None of these things stopped him from doing what he believed was the right thing to do.

Talking from experience, I too have my ups and downs. Some days everything seems like it has gone well, in terms of finance, work, family and friends. On the other hand, some days are extremely different, misunderstandings with my friends, reduced hours at work because of the economic pressure, whilst struggling to keep up with the different activities and demands from family members.

At this point in my life, Nelson Mandela springs to my thoughts and helps me to stay motivated. The key lesson that I have learned is that not everybody will see your dreams or visions and not everyone will go the extra mile to ensure that their dream becomes a reality.

Therefore, when I am going through my valley days, I will remember Paul's and Nelson Mandela's stories which have inspired me on numerous occasions.

Hyacinth Crossfield

My favourite place is Beacon Park in Lichfield

Beacon Park in Lichfield is our (my family's) first choice of places to go for a family day out. There is a famous Cathedral Church nearby, it is attractive to so many visitors from all over the world, but Beacon Park is more attractive to us and the families in the Midlands.

Beacon Park has a lovely view, when you first go in, you can breathe fresh air and the lovely smell from the flowers and the grass. It makes you feel relaxed and would like to slow down your step to enjoy the environment. The garden design at the entrance is beautiful. There are a few different shape flower beds and layout of different patterns with lots of colourful flowers. On the side there are a few famous statues, although I don't know who they are, but we still took lots of pictures with them.

A path leads into the park, on the way some of the people like to ride their bikes; some of them like to go jogging or skating. People do different things to enjoy their day here. There are also tennis courts, football fields, bowling courts, a pond for wild birds swimming and also for people rowing boats, a large play ground with lots of activities for children to share. This playground was the main point for my family to spend most of our time there on our day out. There are sandpits, swings, jigsaw, climbing rocks, tram train, pirate ship... and lots and lots more for children to explore and deplete their energy. There are also plenty of soft grass fields around the play area, so parents can find a nice place to sit down, lay out the food and drinks for a picnic or you can have ball games there if you like.

After long hours playing, if you would like to go shopping, it is also very convenient. It only takes fifteen minutes to walk to the shopping area. There are many shops, banks and restaurants. More importantly is that Beacon Park is a fun place to visit for FREE; therefore you can save your budget to enjoy the drinks and dinner there!

Hui Bing Li

My life in two boats

When I first arrived in England from India, my plane landed at Birmingham Airport. I was so excited to see my husband after 5 months. When I walked out of the airport's door he was waiting for me with a big bunch of flowers. I was so happy to see him, but on the other side I was so sad because I had to leave everyone behind, all of the people I loved and cared about: the cousins I grew up with and my brothers who looked after me as their baby sister. It really hurt my heart; it was the first time that I felt pain inside of my heart. In India we all lived as a joint family, a family of 20 people. It was a small house but I never felt alone, coming to England from the big family to only three people in the house was very hard.

When I arrived in England, every day I explored new adventures. I was so happy in England - no electricity cuts! I loved the big garden because I never had a garden in India. However, when I looked, all of the trees had no leaves, that made me so sad. The house was so nice and clean. I still remember my first snow in England because I had never seen it before. My husband was leaving for work, when he called me to open the curtain and look outside, when I did it looked so beautiful and white everywhere. I could not believe my eyes.

Even though I quite enjoyed living in my own house in England, I felt so isolated in my own home. My husband used to work 17 hours a day. I hardly used to see him. In India I had a large family but here I was all alone by myself all day until midnight. I could not speak English at all and I could not communicate with anybody. Then I asked myself, "Why I am here? What I am doing in this strange country?" At that time I felt heart broken and I could not tell my family back home but I appreciated my husband, even though he had little time, because he made me go out to do the shopping and make appointments with the doctor.

Then I had my first little girl, I was so happy at last I had somebody with me all the time in the house. After another two and a half years I had twin girls. I was so happy to have twins. I still remember that day when I held my babies in my arms.

My husband encouraged me to learn to drive and join English classes. He never let me have Sky or any other Asian television in the house, I really hated him at that time but I did not see the point of what he was doing for me. I realise now, because watching English channels made my English much better.

As my girls were growing up they joined the Scouts and, seeing them enjoying it so much, I decided to become a helper leader with the Cubs. I also do voluntary Punjabi classes with my girls and I still go to maths and English classes. I want to carry on with my further studies in the future.

I had to make my home in England, it was the hardest decision that I have ever made in my life. It was not easy to start life in a totally strange country but I have done it. I am so used to being here with my freedom, I love it but part of me still belongs to India especially when I think about my family that I left behind. I remember when I left I thought, "I do not know when I will be coming back and who will still be here." A couple of people in the family passed away and on that day I hated being here, I just cried and cried but I could not do anything about it. In those moments I just wanted to go back but I could not. It is so hard to go back now because I have my family here. My heart belongs in India but my life is here now in Birmingham and I love being here. I do not think that I would ever move out of Birmingham.

Over the years I have achieved and learnt a lot. I always push myself to learn and never give up. I teach the same thing to my girls: nothing is impossible in your life, always believe in yourself.

Writing about my life I can feel pain and joy at the same time in my heart but no one can see that. I do believe that my life is in two boats!

Manjit

The life of Elizabeth Bessie Coleman

Elizabeth Bessie Colman was born on January 26th 1892 in Atlanta, Texas. She was the tenth of thirteen children. She was the first female pilot of African-American descent and the first person of African-American descent to hold an international pilot license.

She was born to Sharecroppers George, who was part Cherokee and Susan Coleman. Elizabeth was two years old when her family moved to Waxahachie, Texas where she lived until she was 23.

She had to walk four miles each day to get to her segregated one-room school. She established herself as an outstanding maths student. Elizabeth completed all eight grades of her one room school. Her school chores and church was interrupted by the cotton picking season. During this time George returned to Oklahoma, the Indian Territory as it was called then, to find better opportunities. His wife Susan and the rest of his children stayed behind.

When Elizabeth turned eighteen she took her savings and enrolled in the Oklahoma Coloured Agricultural and Normal University (now called Langston University).

In 1915 at the age of 23 she moved to Chicago, Illinois where she lived with her brother. She got a job in the White Sox Barber Shop as a manicurist, where Elizabeth sat and listened to the stories from the pilots. These pilots were returning from World War I and spoke about the war. She could not gain admission to the American Flying School because she was black and a woman. No black U.S. aviator would train her either.

Robert S. Abbott, founder and publisher of the Chicago Defender encouraged her to study abroad so she did. Elizabeth received financial backing from a banker named Jesse Binga. Elizabeth took a French language class and then travelled to Paris on November 20, 1920.

She then learned to fly in a Nieuport type 82 biplane, with a steering system that consisted of a vertical stick the thickness of a baseball bat in front of the pilot and a rudder bar under the pilot seat.

On June 15 1921, Elizabeth became not only the first African-American woman to earn an international aviation license from the Federation Aeronautique Internationale but the first African-American woman in the world to earn an aviation pilot license. Determined to go further Elizabeth spent the next two months taking lessons from a French ace pilot near Paris to polish up her skills. She also did an advanced flying course in France then left for the Netherlands to meet with Anthony Fokker, who was the world's most distinguished aircraft designer.

After further training in Germany, Elizabeth then with more confidence and enthusiasm returned to the United States to launch her career in exhibition flying. She earned the name Queen Bess.

In February 1923, she broke a leg and three ribs when her plane stalled and crashed. She was offered a role in a feature-length film entitled 'Shadow and Sunshine' but when Elizabeth read the first scene in the movie required her to appear in tattered clothes with a walking stick and pack on her back she refused to proceed and walked off the set saying it was the principle of it. She had no intention of perpetuating the derogatory image most white people had over black people.

On April 30 1926, she was in Jacksonville in preparation for an airshow. Her friends and family did not consider the plane safe. They pleaded with her not to fly it. Her mechanic and publicity agent William Wills was flying the plane with Elizabeth. She didn't put her seatbelt on because she was planning a parachute jump. About ten minutes into the flight the plane did not pull out of a dive - instead it spun. Elizabeth was thrown out of the plane at 2000ft (610m) and died instantly when she hit the ground. Elizabeth died when she was 34 years old.

She had three places where she lay in state. In Jacksonville, Florida on 2nd May 1926 was attended

by 5000 mourners. Three days later her remains arrived in Orlando, Florida where thousands more attended. It was estimated 10,000 people filed past the coffin all night and day. She was then lay to rest in the Lincoln Cemetery.

Jean Granil

My nanny Vera aka Stumpy

She laughed, she danced, she sang out loud, she was just never quiet but had lots of stories to make us kids behave. Who am I referring to... my grandmother, Nanny Vera aka Stumpy to her friends and family.

My gran was originally from Jamaica, but spent most of her life in Canada. She travelled a lot many, many times over. Her regular trips were to visit our large family spread around the world. Her nickname was Stumpy she never forgot to say, especially when always telling us stories of her days of courting. She said she remembered how men used to say you're little and petite and very sweet. She always told that to us, it was her way of explaining to us that you might be small and tiny, but you can be small and loud but still be very proud. She always knew how to put a smile on our faces when we were down.

She loved the church and said Jesus was her first ever love and always used to say, "Jesus is the answer for all the world today, above him there's no other, Jesus is the way." We all knew this quote of hers very well, but as we got older we realised that the same quote is from a song. Well it didn't matter to us because it sounded better coming from our gran.

By the time gran was in her late 70's she was still travelling and still managing to charm people wherever she went with her infectious and loveable personality. My mom said she used to look forward to travelling back to Canada with gran. Mom said very often the cabin crew were so taken by her that if there were spare seats in first class, they used to ask my gran if she wanted to sit there for more comfort. Mom said by the end of the flight the whole crew were calling her Nanny.

My gran was 100 and 42 days old when she died on the 6th March 2012, she lived to witness five generations of her growing family. It's my youngest daughter's birthday on that same day, so on that day I celebrate, I remember and even sometimes shed a tear for my beautiful, fun loving gran, who we all miss greatly.

M. C. Brown

The first day in my college

I was sixteen years old when I finished my secondary school in Pakistan. Now it was the time to choose a college and new subjects. As I had passed secondary school with good grades, I was confident to get an admission into the one and only GOVT Girls College. I brought the admission forms, filled them in and sent them into college and had the admission. Now I was waiting for the day when I was going to start my college.

It was the first of September, first day of my college. I woke up early in the morning, wore my new uniform that I had ironed a week ago. I was very excited but also a little bit nervous.

As I had already visited my college for admission, I knew it was a huge place in comparison to my school. When I entered through the big iron gates of my college I couldn't breathe for a moment. There was an endless sea of girls, wearing the white uniforms. Only the colour of their scarves was showing in which year's class they were in.

I was feeling nervous now because it was really hard to find my school friends out of this look like same crowd. After a fifteen minute search, I spotted one of my school friends, as me and my friends had chosen the same subjects and luckily had got the place in same class with the same teacher.

We were in our first class of the day that was the Islamic Studies class. We found our seats at the very end of the class; that was a big victory of the day in the situation where many girls were standing up at the very end. We all were waiting for the teacher to come in. Suddenly two girls came into the class to inform us that the teacher was waiting for us in the Lecture Hall; the colour of the scarves of those girls was showing they were from year four's class.

In my country, in our college there was a custom that on the very first day of year one's college, year two used to have a right to fool year one students. Every year they used to plan different tricks and jokes to play on the first years with the help of senior classes.

So when the girls from year four came to tell us about the teacher we didn't realise that they were from year two and were going to fool us. We all went to the Lecture Hall but were shocked that there was no teacher. We were fooled at the beginning of the day. We rushed back to our previous class but unfortunately we had lost the seats that we had before. More than one hundred students were there and the class was full so we had to attend the lesson at the back, standing by sticking to the wall.

This fun continued all day in different ways and different classes. At the end of the day all of us friends had found each other. We decided to choose some places to meet together every day at different times.

At the end of the day we were very tired but feeling quite confident. It was a really memorable day of my life. Later as everything became normal and I became used to the routine, I really enjoyed my college life.

All of the teachers were friendly and very able. The college building was very beautiful, surrounded with tall trees. It was a good learning period of my life, as I learnt much about the social life alongside the studies.

I will never forget my first day at my college. It will be one of the most beautiful and full of fun memories of my life.

Nazia

My precious gift

It was amazing when I saw the two red lines,
Oh my gosh finally something that is all mine.

Scared, lonely and getting big,
Oh what joys to feel her kicks.

I was in hospital for a while,
I was feeling absolutely vile.

Feeling worried and fed up,
I really think I've had enough.

That time has finally come around,
When my little precious was ready to be crowned.

Skin to skin contact was finally made,
My perfection of beauty finally came.

Tiny fingers and tiny toes,
That looked so cute so tightly closed.

Overwhelmed with so much love,
So precious and so wonderful as the stars above.

Marika Edwards

My life from caterpillar to butterfly

I am just an ordinary person just like other women. I am a beautician, hairdresser, a positive healthy mum and still a student juggling my life challenges every day, driving from 8:00am until 8:00pm in the evening.

Life wasn't like this years ago when I was brought to this country. I was just a teenage girl who had never been anywhere by myself before. Over the years I did cooking, cleaning for a big family and studying; life was just a part of a circle from my parents' house to school.

I learned to drive and studying ESOL classes was my first step towards achievement. Over the years I passed my beauty courses, English and Maths classes. Education changed my whole life completely.

Now, I am happy that at this stage of life I still have a long way to go but what I have learnt is more than enough.

Ghazala Shabnam

My life story

I was born on August 5th 1982 in Oman. I have got two elder brothers and four younger sisters. I am the eldest out of all the sisters. I studied in a school called Pakistan School Salalah in Oman. I studied till year 10. After that I went to Pakistan with my dad for the first time in March 2003 and got married to my husband on July 12th 2003. After a year, in 2004, I came to Britain and started my married life with my husband.

I had my first baby girl on July 5th 2005. She is a very beautiful little girl. She weighed 8 pounds and was very healthy. Being a mother is the best feeling I have ever had. I had my baby boy on November 28th 2006, a year and 3 months after having my little girl. My son was healthy and cute like his little sister.

After I had my daughter I started to study at South Birmingham College to improve my English and I enrolled on an English level 1 and a childcare course and a beauty course as well. I passed English level 1, childcare level 1 and beauty level 1 in 2006 and I carried on with my childcare course till 2010. I am qualified and passed my NVQ level 3 in Childcare. I really enjoyed my course and did a lot of placements in a nursery called Lady Bird Nursery which is in Balsall Heath.

I had a very hard time with both my courses and looking after my 2 kids and at the same time I had to leave my in-laws house and move to a 1 bedroom flat. We couldn't afford to buy our own house so we applied for a council house and we waited for a whole year. On 23rd May 2011 we got a 3 bedroom house offered to us in Billesley. It was the happiest day of my life and the kids were excited to have our new house with a big garden at the back.

My children study at Billesley Primary school. My daughter studies in year 3 and she is 7 years old and my son is in year 1 and he is 6 years old. As they are busy 9am till 3pm in school, I started to study at Trittiford Adult Education Centre and enrolled on English and Maths to get my level 2 to start my Teaching Assistant course. I would like to be a Teaching Assistant in the future hopefully.

Shazia Kausar

The child

The child I carried and grew to love,
Has turned on me like a vicious beast
When I think about the love,
It's like a blessing from above,
The shame and the strain.
Has caused depression to my brain.
I asked the man above,
To help me with the child I love,
So who am I to judge,
The child I love.

Doreen

I never learned to talk properly until the age of seven

I never learned to talk properly until the age of 7. I always used to make stuttering and gorilla like noises. I always watched game shows such as Fifteen to One and Countdown. I had fun all through primary school. Four weeks after I started secondary school in Selly Oak, I was bullied and I wet the bed up until year 11 when I was expelled because the teachers were too lazy to control me and I was too fast for them. I went to a special school in Lozells in early January 2008 and it was fun and I made friends quite easily despite my anti-social behaviour which disappeared 8 months before my 21st birthday and I was a changed gentleman. I completely changed my behaviour. I was more mature and more social and I go to two different youth clubs 1 in Kings Heath on a Tuesday and Thursday and one in Hall Green on a Saturday.

I used to sit at home sitting in a darkened room playing PlayStation or mucking about and wasting my life and time on the internet, now I learned to enjoy being on my lonesome less and less and going out having a social life and walking more and more. I do table tennis, pool, playing PlayStation which is a lot more social than you might think basketball, arts and crafts, fun activities such as laser quest, bowling, karting , pool, snooker and badminton. I never like to be rushed because it stresses me out having to rush, so it's better to take my time just like Chasers on one of my favourite game shows, The Chase. At South Birmingham College in mid-2012, I met someone who I regret not keeping in contact with. I was lazy and agitated at the time. My brain couldn't function properly. I pitied myself because I was a fool; I know I sound like Mr T. Now I'm studying English. I have written a history about Elijah McCoy and I feel comfortable in the class.

Jaaziel

My friends

I started my college when I was 16 years old. Those were the greatest days of my life. I had no responsibilities, no worries. I had total fun in my life. I had three best friends and we loved each other. We liked to chat for a very long time. Our favourite topics used to be about fashion, new mehndi designs and greeting cards.

We used to wear the same uniforms made of the same fabric, same embroidery and even our shoes used to be the same. We used to skip our classes on each other's birthdays and we enjoyed our time and made fun all day. On the last day of every year we used to do a one dish party and apply mehndi on our hands. Those were the greatest days of my life.

Our college organised a yearly funfair. During that time all of us used to help each other in the preparation of different kind of stalls. It was a great experience. College students used to prepare some drama shows and different competitions for the audience. During that time we used to make lots of noise to encourage them.

Along with the fun, we used to do group studies to keep ourselves ready for the exams. All of the time we had fun together and stayed together.

After all these years our friendship is still the same nothing changes between us, even though we are thousands of miles away from each other we still speak to each other through Skype and on the phone. We discuss each other's experiences which we are having in our day to day lives. Distances are never able to fade our friendship.

Someone said "old is gold" and it is true. I love my friends and they are my true friends.

Nasreen

Iranian new year

It is called Norous.

Iranian New Year starts on 21st March, the first day of spring and the beginning of the Iranian calendar.

Iranian people have two weeks for celebration. That is from the last Wednesday of the year until the thirteenth day after the New Year.

Before the New Year, they start cleaning their houses.

Everyone in the family must wear new clothes as the New Year begins.

Gifts and brand new notes are given and taken too. Usually older people give money to the younger people.

The first few days are spent visiting older members of the family, relatives and friends.

The important part of New Year is setting the Haft seen, which is made up of seven specific items.

All seven items start with the letter "s" they are: sabze (the seeds they have grown themselves), seeb (apple), seer (garlic), serke (vinegar), samanoo (made out of wheat), sekke (a coin) and senjed (the dried fruit of the oleaster tree).

Other items include: somagh (Iranian spice), sonbol (a flower that comes in spring), the Koran (the holy book of Islam), the Divan of Hafez (a poetry book), a candle, mirror, decorated egg and a bowl with goldfish.

Most Iranians will have sabzi polo mahi for their meal. It is a special dish of rice cooked with fish.

The 13th day of the New Year is called sizdah bedar. People mostly go outdoors. They will have a picnic. This day is special for most children because they get to play a lot. On this day people throw the sabze away. They believe illnesses and uncleanness will then be far away from them.

M.D.

I.V.F.

Many years ago, I was desperate to conceive. I wanted children. After 6 years of emotional abuse and threats from my partner of, "You will never leave me or else", I decided to have his children. There were months of distress at not becoming pregnant.

We both saved half each for I.V.F treatment. It was an emotional rollercoaster of intrusive examinations with hormone injections and tablets with a time-table to stick to. After 3 attempts, I now have 2 sons that are now adults.

Alas, they do not stay babies forever and I now find I'm sorting their problems out as well as mine. Now I'm older, its sometimes just too much and wanting children, does not mean it's going to be happiness forever, let alone all the time.

Mrs Robinson

An opportunity for everyone

I have been very inspired by a programme on TV about a very kind millionaire who finds time out of his busy life to go out in the community to find teenagers to help them to find work. He convinced them to try out ideas that may enable them to have confidence and self-worth.

After a lot of negotiations, his hard work paid off when they agreed to a trial in washing cars, team work games and they also helped set up a job centre with a difference. It consisted of employers who were on site to demonstrate work ideas and hands on experience. This encouraged the teenagers to try working in salon, plumbing and cooking with experienced chefs to get vital experience.

Many people out there like me, from other countries, come here with lots of personal achievements like looking after their siblings and extended families and have even worked in important positions in offices. However, for one reason or another they have escaped without proof of their qualifications.

So in conclusion, I think it would be very good idea to have a job centre like the one especially made for teenagers to show exactly what we can do rather than going to scary Job Centre Plus to fill in lots of forms and do endless interviews.

Janette

Matters of the heart

This heart of mine
 Hold some precious memories and some sad stories
 Such a small organ but it holds so much

There is an abundance of emotions that lives here
 They all live here
 They all live here in my heart

It holds the treasurable moments with my family and friend
 Oh, how I wish love, peace, joy and happiness would fill this heart
 Till there is no room for sadness, bitterness, hurt or pain
 The anger and the frustration it is all here
 They all live here
 They all live in my heart

When I love the heart fills the mouth with words of love and comfort
 When I hate the heart fills the mouth with words that cuts like a knife
 It is all here in this heart of mine
 They won't go. They will all stay
 They all live here
 Here in my heart.

Nicole Mcfarlane

Being me

I like being me

I may not be the smartest, nicest or the prettiest person,
but do you know what it's like going through
something not everyone can see?

It hurts my performance
and stops me from being me.

I might not be someone's choice,
but there are days when I
use a fake smile
and a fake laugh.

I'm imperfect
but I am perfect
being me.

I'm not going to change into something
I'm not for people to like me.
I just like being me.

I will live my life being me;
I will strive for excellence and a life
full of integrity, determination and courage.

I love being me.

There is no one like me.

I am one of a kind,
I am me.

I'm imperfect but I am
perfect
being me.

L.G

My grandma

My grandma is not a very old lady and she is young at heart. She is a very bright and cheerful grandma who lights the room up as she walks in. Every person who meets her always says, 'I love your gran!' She's from up North, Newcastle, but really hated living there.

Grandma's a very heavy smoker and also loves her free bus pass which gets her from A-Z. She loves her daily outings and keeps herself moving rather than sitting at home with aches and pains.

Grandma has a very open mind when it comes to talking about different topics, she's always ready to help when needed. She loves to dance, when music is playing her favourite phrase is, 'It runs in the blood'. She just adores dancing.

I'm glad I have a grandma like her who I can talk to and be friends with. She's a great role model for me and I hope we have her around for many more years to come.

I LOVE YOU GRANDMA !!

Samina Akhter

My mum

My mum is my role model because she has always been there for me. Even though she shouts at me all the time and we argue most of the time, we always make up. When I got divorced five years ago, it was my mum who was here to support me and my son.

If I want to go out somewhere with my friends, she will look after my son. She also cooks really delicious dishes which I enjoy eating. My mum encourages me to stand up on my own two feet.

My mum also pushes me to study and to get my qualifications, so I can get a good job. My mum taught me what is right and what is wrong in life. I remember my mum telling me recently that when she was young, her life was very hard, compared to our lifestyle today.

Back in her younger days, they didn't have washing machines, cookers, fridges, microwaves, etc. Mum used to wash all clothes by hand, did cooking all by herself and no one used to help her. She used to cook for forty people and never moaned once. My mum would wake up early in morning at 6am to cook for my dad and uncles who used to go to work. Mum was saying nowadays, people hardly cook at all, they just get a takeaway, which is so true. Mum enjoyed her life when she was younger. When she was younger she didn't go to school, because she wasn't allowed to go, instead she had to stay home and do the cooking.

These days mum has got a lot of health problems; blood pressure, spine problems, arthritis, cholesterol and she broke her ankle a few years ago, despite everything she never complains. My mum is my rock and she is very supportive towards me which is a big help for me and my son. If we quarrel we always make up. Because we can't stay angry with one another for very long. My Mum is the best and I don't know what I do without her, she has been here for me at all times.

I love you mum, you're the best!

Tasleem Coser

My baby

In April 2006, I was pregnant for the first time, but was completely unsure of what was going to happen. On 28th April, I went for my 28 weeks scan. After all the tests, the nurses told me to wait in a room. A lady doctor came and told me that I have high blood pressure. I did not understand, what this meant? A senior doctor came in a few minutes. He said that I have to be admitted. They wouldn't allow me to go home. I was shocked, alone and tired. They called for a wheelchair and sent me to Ward No.4. "WHY" I didn't get it. I went to hospital after changing two buses on my own and now these people are telling me not even to go to the upstairs ward.

After that, I started to stay in the ward. Every day nurses and doctors were doing various tests. Blood tests and a scan became the daily routine. Blood pressure was taken every two hours and my baby's heartbeat was checked regularly. The time was very hard and painful for me, as I had just come to Britain, seven months ago. But the polite nurses, the helpful domestic assistant, the caring, intelligent doctors and the specialist chefs made it a bit easier. They guided me to tell everything; whatever I was feeling. On 15th May, I felt that I can't see from one eye. I told the nurses that I can only see flashing lights in my left eye. Then, quickly they called a doctor, then another and then another. After examination by the third doctor they told me, they need to do my emergency C-Section. I heard they told my husband on the phone that, 'She can go into coma or can have a stroke, as the blood circulation to the brain is getting interrupted'.

Then they started special injections to prepare my baby's lungs to breathe in the open air. On 17th May, I had my baby boy, he weighed one kg at the time of his birth. He was shifted to the Neo Natal Unit on the ground floor and I stayed in my ward. When I recovered from the effect of the anaesthetic I went to see him. He was in the incubator with an oxygen mask. I cried a lot, my baby was struggling for life all alone, I can't do anything. My parents, who were always with me even for the common diseases, they were thousands miles away now. Nobody was there to hear my pain.

After three days of recovery from surgery, doctors started my tests and scans again. They discharged me, and I came home on 27th May, but without the baby. After nearly two months, the doctors told us my baby is seven pounds and can go home. My son is six years now. I love him more than anything else. Because the time, before and after his birth, was very lonely and sad time of my life.

P.K.V.

My son

My son is 5 years old and he is the best thing that has ever happened to me.

My son has been through a lot in his 5 years and at one point he was fighting for his life.

My son is a true miracle, he defied all the odds the doctors threw at him and made it through to the other side.

He makes me so proud because after all he has been through he still manages to have the biggest, brightest smile I have ever seen.

My son's life and future ahead is very challenging and I will do my very best so he can live a happy, comfortable life. When my son is happy, I am happy.

I love my son he is my everything, I would not change him for anything in the world.

Sherise Gillespie.

My favourite aunty

In October 1988, my aunty had a car accident with her seven year old daughter, and her oldest son driving the car. The police and ambulance were called down straight away and managed to quickly rescue her son and daughter who were still alive and in one piece, but they struggled to get my aunty out of the car. She was unconscious and unable to move. To get her out, they had to pull the car door off and with some support took her along with her son and daughter to the hospital.

Her son and daughter had some cuts and bruises but no severe injuries, which was a relief, but when it came to my aunty, the doctors and specialists did some tests and found out that her backbone 'the spinal cord' was broken, they also confirmed she wasn't going to be able to walk again and that she would have to be in a wheelchair for the rest of her life. This was really devastating for all of us and her family. She had to spend a year in hospital, after that she was sent back home to her family in a wheelchair.

Whenever we would go and visit her, she would always put a brave face on and be cheerful and welcoming to everybody, although she must have had her down moments. She would still carry on acting normal and make conversations with all of us and carry on living as normally as possible. She did get all the professional care from outside and family support. So she was well looked after all the time, but I wish there was something that I could have done for her. I also wish I got to spend more quality time with her. She carried on living for twenty one years, but unfortunately she died in February the 13th 2010.

Musarat Ahmed

A beautiful woman

The true beauty of a woman reflects from the soul.

It beams from the soul through her eyes, her laughter, her demeanour and the way in which she treats others.

It is the care that she gives and the passion she possess.

She respects herself and she respects others.

She is not perfect but she understands that life experiences are only lessons meant to take her closer to self knowledge.

She is hopeful and she is strong enough to make her dreams reality.

She knows who she is; therefore not seek definition from others.

She knows God and knows that with him, the world is her playground and that with him all is possible.

She knows love therefore she gives it in abundance.

She does good because she knows that by doing good, good will always follow her.

The beauty of a woman not only beams but it in fact inspires those around her.

True beauty is all that matters.

Nicola Hedging

Fire destroyed our house

When I was around 9 years old our house was burnt down. Thank heaven no one died, it was so terrible I cannot forget it. Terrifyingly, my Dad was ill suffering with a stomach ulcer; he was unable to help himself or any of us.

I remember at around 7pm that day my Dad was vomiting and my mom called a taxi to take him to the hospital and he told my mom that he didn't want to go that night but he would go in the morning.

Around 1am that night my dad got worse with severe abdomen and chest pains, my mom was upset because she had called a taxi to take him to the hospital, but he had refused it. However, because she loved and cared for him she made him a cup of tea, as requested. Whilst my Dad was drinking the cup of tea we heard a big blast and an explosion. My mom went to see what it was and saw pure fire in the living room spreading to the other rooms very quickly.

Luckily, our neighbour heard the blast and he opened his window and saw the fire at our house and he shouted, "Help! Help!" and the other people in the neighbourhood heard his cry and came to our rescue. On arrival they took my dad out of the house and carried him to his apartment, then came back to get my two sisters, my brother, my niece, my nephew and I, then escorted us to his place.

Later that night the police came and they took a formal statement from my Mom about what she saw and if she had any idea what could be the cause of the fire.

The following morning, all I saw was an empty space. Our house was nowhere to be found. My aunt and other families came and gave my Mom their deepest sympathy. They expressed how sorry they felt about what had happened and my Aunt told my Mom, it was ok for us to come and stay with her at her place.

There was not even a change of clothes for us to put on, but luckily my parents had taken out insurance on our house, so when we were settled my Mom got in contact with the insurance company and put in a claim.

Two to three months later someone came from the insurance company to inspect the house. They carried out their investigation to identify what was the main cause of the fire. Fortunately it wasn't anything to do with the house and within four months time they send out a cheque to my Mom, it wasn't a lot but it was better than nothing. With the help from friends and family putting some money together, my Mom managed to build back our three bedroom house.

Andrea Harrison

The best sister in the world

My sister is the most important person in the world to me. She is 9 years older than me. When I had my older son I had to stay in the hospital for two weeks. My sister used to visit me every day, even when she was working full time. In 2005 I went abroad for two weeks. My sister said to me, "Leave your children with me and you just enjoy your holiday." She spent way too much money on my daughter; she loves my daughter as her own. When I celebrate my children's birthday parties she takes a day off from work just to help me with the cooking and cleaning.

In 2009 when I bought my house, she gave me the deposit. I was really struggling at that time and she helped me out. I don't know what I would do without her. My sister is my best friend.

Aziza Bi

My life and work

I used to think I had a hard life in my childhood until my illness when I was in hospital for 19 months.

I was two years old when my father left me to go to England and four years old when my mother left Jamaica. My grandparents took care of me until I was nine years old when my parents sent for me to join them in England.

As a young child coming to a new country, I found it very hard to adapt. My parents were like total strangers to me and I had a sister three years old I had never seen before. Starting school, it was very hard for me to settle down. It caused a lot of problems for me in my education. I left school with very low reading skills.

I always wanted to be a motor mechanic from a youthful age, but because I had no school qualifications I could not get an apprenticeship motor mechanic job, so I took a glazing job in a factory for nine months. After nine months in the factory my uncle got me a job in a garage without an apprenticeship and I started to go to evening classes to improve my reading.

After five years in the motor trade, I excelled myself in motor track and reading. I was a very good mechanic but I still had no certificate so I started evening classes at Handsworth technical college for three years and passed all my exams and became a Motor Technician, MOT Welder and foreman. I also quoted repairs for customers. My last job was at a service station. I worked there for thirty years.

George

Hopes and dreams

Ever since I can remember I have also had a dream to study something to do with health so I can become a children's nurse.

To study and become a nurse is one thing I always wanted to do, because of the childhood I had. When I was young I was always ill and I was in and out of hospital. While going in and out of hospital I met really nice people who inspired me to like caring for people.

I feel I have grown up to become a very caring person due to the way I was treated in the past. Now that my health condition is stable I feel that it is my duty to make a change in somebody's life, like somebody did to my life.

At this stage of my life I feel I need to work as hard as possible to give back to the people that are in need of help.

I have currently completed my level 3 child care course, which has given me enough credits to go to university and study nursing, as I always wanted. According to what I have found out after studying three years at the university and going to placement regularly I will be given a job at the hospital, so that I can fulfil my responsibilities to care for others.

Kadijatou Diallo

Nelson Mandela

Nelson Mandela was born on 18th July 1918, in Transkei, South Africa. He was a South African politician who served as a president of South Africa from 1994 to 1999. For 20 years Nelson directed a campaign of peaceful, non violent defiance against the South African government and its racist politicians.

When I was told in my English lesson to research about someone famous, I picked Nelson Mandela. As I studied him in History at school I found him an inspiration, and an interesting ideal person to learn about. Nelson was not from a wealthy family he lived in huts and ate a local harvest of maize, pumpkin and beans which was all the family could afford.

Unfortunately on June 12th, 1964 Mandela was arrested and convicted of sabotage and other charges. He was sentenced to life imprisonment. Nelson Mandela went on to serve 27 years in prison, spending many of these years on Robben Island. When Nelson was in prison, the outside world started to learn more about him. This gave him a worldwide profile. He was known as a significant black leader in South Africa, who wanted to improve the country's welfare.

A worldwide campaign and condemnation of apartheid led to his release. When Nelson came out of prison he was determined to achieve his goals. He started his commitment to work towards peace and said that The African National Congress would struggle until the black majority received the right to vote. In 1991 Mandela was elected as president of the African National Congress with a lifelong friend and colleague, Oliver Tambo.

Nelson Mandela became the country's first black president on May 10th 1994. Mandela shared his Nobel Prize for Peace with De Klerk for their work. This was a great achievement for Mandela and the country. His birthday on July 18th has been declared Mandela Day, a global celebration of his legacy.

Maria Dadra

My life with dyslexia

My life started out like any other child, I was playing around, climbing up trees, playing around with my brother and winding up my Mom and Dad; but when I was young my mom started to see signs from me with my development and she knew that something was wrong.

When I was in infants my mom said to my teachers that something was wrong with my development but none of my teachers listened to my mom at the time. By the time I was in year three I could not even spell the most simple words like 'and', 'the' and 'was'; but my mom kept on going back and seeing them. When I started playing instruments I had to learn to read music scores and that is when my family knew I had some form of Dyslexia because I could read dots on five lines better than reading English or my spelling.

By the time I was in year five and I changed schools from one junior school to another junior school. I could just read baby books at the age range of 3-4 year olds. That was a hard time for me because all my class mates were on the right level for when you are aged 9 but my mind was at the stage of a 4 year old. When I was in year six I was put in this class with some other students who struggled with English and maths. To me how I felt was, and I still remember it to this day was, "What's the point I can't do anything."

At the point I started to play my clarinet, after my violin, my mom and dad thought it was going to be a six weeks wonder, with me like any other child, and part of me thought it was as well.

It got to a point where playing my clarinet was the only place where I could be myself I did not have to read any English or maths, I could be myself.

By the time I was doing my SAT tests, that you take at the end of year six, I got a low score on my SAT's so that meant I was in the bottom sets in senior school and it was like that all the way through my school life.

Through my secondary school my interest in instruments started to increase more. By the time I was in year eight I was playing the piano, in year nine I started to play my saxophone and in year eleven I was playing the flute so I had a lot to help me through in my school life. My mom never gave up on me, she kept saying to my teachers that I had some form of dyslexia at parents' evening, but they never listened to my mom.

When I was coming up to taking my GCSE tests I put my heart and soul in to my English course work and I always stayed after school to do extra revision because I never had any English teachers when I was in year eleven. I had three teachers for English and one of them was my music teacher so she did not know what to teach. When she asked them for some work they never gave anything to her, so in that lesson I did my GCSE Music course work and revision for it. My other teacher was never there and so we had one English teacher and that lesson was the last lesson on a Friday and no one wanted to learn so everyone in my class thought to play up. There were five of us that put our heads down and did some English work.

When I left secondary school I unfortunately did not get the grades for my Maths and English. So when I was 16 I started my English level one and level one maths with adult education. It was through my English teacher and my mom that I got the Dyslexia assessment.

When I had the assessment I had to do a lot of tests such as spelling tests and writing and reading tests to see how I was. It turned out that I had Dyslexia.

When they told me, my mom was there with my English teacher waiting for me in the other room. When I came out of my mom's office where I found out that I had Dyslexia I stopped and slid down the wall and I was crying my heart out while I was on the floor. My mom and English teacher saw me and my mom knew what had happened. I remember the words I said to them "I am thick, I can't do anything, what is the point?" At the point my mom was getting upset and she said to me, "We will get through this, we have got to find the ways you learn and you will get there my darling."

It took a while for me to understand and realise that I will always have Dyslexia. I tried all of the different ways that I could possibly learn, but the one way that I found out that I could learn was by kinaesthetic learning. This way is by learning things with your hands and visual aids.

If it was not for all the help I had from Birmingham Adult Education Service I would never be where I am today, doing my level two English and having fantastic and supportive class mates. Even though I have struggled through my life I will always prove to myself and the people that said, "She will never get anywhere," that I can do it even if it's hard I will always get there.

Stephanie Elizabeth Williams

Childhood is the best time of life

Childhood is the golden time of life. You have no responsibilities. You don't need to worry about anything because your elders sort out everything. What's more, you don't have to work, pay bills, wash clothes, cook or clean.

When we are kids we have more time to play with toys and friends. Now my two sons and my daughter are enjoying their childhood. They don't need to worry about money, they just enjoy their toys, games and children's movies. When I buy my daughter a new toy or princess dress she is over the moon. She imagines herself as a princess. When she reads a princess story, she also enjoys the fantasy.

When we are young, we try many things and learn from our experience. We play with sand and mud which actually starts to build interests and give us the experience that we cannot replace when we become older.

We cannot bring back our childhood time but we can enjoy this time when we see our children in this age. This time is precious for them, so let them enjoy this time!

Faiqa Batool

A story for my princess

So the big day had arrived, I had woken up in pain and I felt ever so nervous! Today was the day I was going to be induced.

Soon enough I was going to meet my princess for the first time. I would finally get to see what she looked like. It felt like I had been pregnant – forever! I really could not wait to meet my baby girl, she was twelve days overdue and my belly felt ready to – POP!

I got up and rang the hospital. I gave them all the required information. I was told to arrive no later than half past eleven and there was a bed ready for me. When I arrived at the hospital I was seen by a midwife, who confirmed that I was in labour. However, as the day went on the pains got worse and it felt like forever till I'd get to meet my princess. I had to stay in hospital until I had given birth which was – horrid! I don't like hospitals but slowly over night my labour did progress.

The next day I did not feel well as I had not slept all night because I was in pain and couldn't get comfortable. I felt ill and I had a bad reaction to the painkillers I was given and it caused me to vomit severely. Nonetheless due to the amount I was vomiting and because I couldn't control it I was given an anti sickness jab in my leg, which resulted in making things worse. My whole entire body started shaking and bouncing on the bed. Three midwives tried to hold me safely on the bed which worked and I didn't fall off and after about two to three minutes I had finally stopped shaking and bouncing. It was so scary.

My princess's heart beat started to drop and I felt very scared and I started to panic and her heart beat continued to drop. I thought my baby was going to die inside me and I felt sick with fear and worry. A few scary, nerve wrecking and painful hours later, I finally got to meet my princess. She was so beautiful and precious that I fell in love with her as soon as I saw her.

Friday 31st January 2008 started off feeling like the worst day of my life. I was stuck in hospital, I felt tired, sick and very far out of my depth with nerves and worry over my princess and her well being. However, the day ended being by far the best day of my – life! It was the day my beautiful, tiny, precious princess was born and I was blessed to be her – mommy!

Linda Jay Jordan

My nan

I don't remember my nan overly well, but the memories I do have are ones I will keep forever. I remember her Irish accent and I also remember how tall I thought she was even though, in reality, she was only 4'10"! She had ginger curly hair and I think she had blue eyes, but I can't rightly remember. She was a timid little thing and she always spoke quietly.

We saw her a lot, I suppose, but she lived quite a way away from my parent's home. Sometimes she would stop over at my family home over the weekend, or we would go to her house for a while.

I remember looking through the dressing table in her bedroom and pulling out all of her hair combs once. I also remember helping her wash the basin in the bathroom and I distinctly recall her telling my brother and I not to touch a flannel as it had bleach on it.

When she came to our house we would take her shopping. Cardigans were her first port of call and then she'd move onto the towels, although she had plenty of each at home. I've always remembered not to brush my teeth with hot water because she told me not to.

My brother and I regularly talk about our nan and her habits. The way she would hum gently wherever she was, and the way that she loved our soft fluffy toy kittens because she loved cats. We would never leave her house without her giving us two of her home-made cakes, which tasted so nice. I remember her giving me some of the little cake decorations to eat as I watched the television.

Each year my family and I travel down to the area that she lived in to meet up with our other relatives and we always drive past and look at my nan's house to see how it's doing. It sounds odd, but we like doing it.

My nan may have been gone for almost ten years now, but she is definitely not forgotten.

Grace Grant

Special celebration

Eid is my favourite and special celebration because you get to meet your family that you haven't seen for a long time, you get lovely tasty special Eid food (swayyan is the special sweet dish on Eid day) You can wear new smart clothes, get lots of presents and get some money from your elders. This money, called "Eidi" could be between £1 - £100.

Eid is important to Muslims because it is the month after Ramadhan, we do fasting so that we can think about the people who are poor and do not have even a little bit of food. We learn how to keep away from sin and bad habits. After Ramadhan Allah rewards the muslims a special day called Eid. This is Eid ul Fitar.

The other Eid is Eid ul Adha which we celebrate in memory of prophet Ibrahim (A.S) and his beloved son Ismaile (A.S). Eid ul Adha is also called Big Eid and Eid Bakar. We celebrate it on 10th of Dulhajj of Islamic month, after day of Hajj (pilgrimage). Many people sacrifice animals and give the meat to family and relatives but again there is a big contribution for the poor people.

Fahmida Kousar

A great sacrifice of my step-father

My mum got married at an early age. My father was educated and was doing little jobs. They both moved from village to city. My mother had three children, my sister, my brother and me. I was the youngest in the family.

My father wasn't earning as much money as he wanted. He was really worried about us. He wanted a bright future for us. One day my father decided to go away and work hard. He got a visa for Germany. He was so excited to go and work there. As soon as he got there he had a brain haemorrhage and passed away.

My mother was only 24 years old when she became a widow. That was quite a difficult time for my mother with three children and she had lost her husband. I was only 4 months old.

My uncle who was my father's brother offered to marry my mum and he would take responsibility to look after us. My mother refused. My uncle persuaded her. Not very long afterwards they got married.

My step father made a great example by looking after us. He has always been a fantastic and lovely father for us. He also was young, about 19 years old when he undertook the responsibilities. He started a little business to earn money. From time - to - time he made progress in his business. Now he is known as an honest and a great man. He's got a great business like no one else has in the city.

My mother had three more children. We all respect and love our father because he's a great man.

Nazia Parveen

My childhood story

I am going to write a story about my childhood when I was seven years old. We were on holiday in Pakistan. Me and my youngest sister were playing hide and seek. It was her turn to find me so I was looking for a place to hide. My older sister was also there. I asked her, where can I hide myself? She gave me an idea to hide in the suitcase.

It was a very small suitcase with thick material. I was happy to find a place to hide myself. I thought my youngest sister could never find me there, so I jumped in the suitcase and my sister locked me up in there. She did not know the pin code of the suitcase, even my mom didn't know.

I could not breathe, I could not move. It was too squashed, too hot and too dark in the suitcase. I was calling my mom for help to get me out. I was really scared but my mom could not help me because she did not know how to open the suitcase without knowing the pin code. Everyone was in panic. They were shouting and crying. They didn't know how to get me out of there. They didn't know what to do. My mom couldn't phone my dad because in that time there were not mobile phones, but luckily my dad came home. He saw everyone was in shock, my mom told him what had happened.

He tried to take me out from the suitcase and I don't know how but finally it was open and I was free to go. I was locked up for 30 minutes in that small case. After I ran to mom and I was holding her tightly. I said sorry and promised that I would never do this again. Mom was not angry at me, she was angry at my sister because she was older than me and I was just seven. My mom punished my sister for being naughty and careless. This was the biggest shock I've had in my life! I still have nightmares about it!

Aqsa Butt

Special friends

There are friends here
 There are friends there
 There are friends everywhere
 But special friends are hard to find anywhere.
 Special friends are always there for you
 Especially when you are down and blue.
 They make you laugh, but sometimes make you cry
 I wonder why?
 Special friends help you get through hard times in life
 and tell you after dark there is light.
 They reassure you that when all doors close,
 then others open.
 That is why they are special friends.

Hazera Bibi

Joys and frustrations of growing your own vegetables

When I moved to my new home there was a big park and allotment at the bottom of the road. I'd walk through and think how nice and peaceful it all was.

The allotment club house even had a bar. Watching and talking to the gardeners I said, "I'll give it a go," so I signed up for an allotment.

My first year growing vegetables was very hard work, digging and weeding all the land. It can be hard physical work.

When the soil was ready, I started to sow all the seed I had brought. I planted all sorts of vegetables: potatoes, tomatoes, onions, leeks and my favourite, sweetcorn. All the vegetables growing so well, I noticed slugs eating all the spinach at night, so I thought, I'll catch them. Night after night for a whole week I went to the allotment to eradicate all the slugs that were eating the spinach completely.

Less slugs, more spinach, only to find that the cute and beautiful squirrels I'd been admiring all summer - now a lot bigger - definitely like sweet corn as much as slugs like spinach. The squirrels had eaten all my favourite sweetcorn. Ah, the joys of growing your own veg!

Peter Hewitt

P.S. I too have eaten delicious meals of the vegetables grown.

The most important person in my life

Every person's mum is important for them, and every mum is great. Today I want to tell you about my own mum.

She played a very important role in my whole life. She had 3 children and she looked after her children very passionately. After my birth, her health condition was not very good, but she did not bother about her health. She gave all of her attention to our health.

Her important role in my education

She was not a very educated lady, but she wanted her children to get a better education. She always gave us well educated people's stories as an example. She told us how the person could get respect through their education. She felt very happy when I got good results. She gave me presents and arranged a party at home. I remembered, when I passed my secondary board exam she was so happy and tears came out of her eyes. She said, "Nobody can catch 3 things (1) Education (2) Wisdom (3) Skills."

Her feelings when I started my job

After my father's death I felt I needed to start a job. I started struggling to find a job. At last I was successful and found a job. When I came back to my home and told my mother that I had got the job, she was so happy. She stood up and prepared herself for thanks to the God who listened to her prayer about her children.

Every morning she prepared breakfast for me and every evening she was waiting for me. After some illness she died on 9th November 2010.

After her death I felt there was nobody in this world who loved me like her, who cared for me like her and who was important to me like her. I always remember her like my breath.

Abida Akram

Thank you! (A poem for my tutor Harriet)

Helping us to spell definite

Are so kind you will always be in our mind

Recognising the talent in us

Realising our weaknesses

Increasing our knowledge

Expert in correcting our mistakes and

Taking our test until we do our best

You have played a big part in our lives helping us to walk and talk with confidence.

Believing in us when we give up and pushing us until we succeed.

Teaching is your talent. You know how to explain. You do so much, yet you don't expect fame.

Thank you for teaching us!

Sobia Bashir

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