



## Lemn Sissay

Lemn Sissay is an award-winning writer, broadcaster and poet, currently Artist-in-Residence at the Southbank Centre and an artsadmin artist. He spent his Lancashire childhood with a white foster family and in various children's homes. As a young man, he found out that his Ethiopian biological mother had spent years fighting to get him back, having only given him up for short-term fostering.

'When I was three months old, my birth mother approached social services to ask for short-term fostering. But unbeknown to my mother, the social worker had no intention of offering her short-term fostering and instead offered the foster parents a "shadow adoption".

'On leaving care at 18 years old, after being fostered for 11 years and in children's homes for seven, a benevolent social worker (not the initial one) said "Someone did love you" and gave me letters from my mother, dated the year of my birth. She was pleading for my return: "I want him to be with his own country, with his own people. I don't want him to face discrimination," she said.

'The social worker also gave me my birth certificate. It had the name on it "Lemn Sissay". Up until then, I thought my name was Norman. Norman was the name

of the social worker whom my mother wrote those pleading letters to, whom she had approached for short-term fostering while she studied. He had named me after himself.

'From 18 years old, I searched for and found my birth family all over the world – it took until I was 32. My mother works for The United Nations and my late father was a pilot. I left the children's homes without a surrogate family, without a birth family and without the knowledge of how to cook a tin of beans. Nobody that I knew had known me for longer than three years.

'All my emphasis and questions in the children's homes were on what I would do when I left care. And yet all I wanted was some clear direction and truth while I was in care. The dichotomy revolves around one clear fact, the present was criminally unsatisfactory. I felt like a living experiment, and said so at the time.

'When a child is in care, the government is the legal parent. It would not be unfair to surmise that how the government treats its children is the most significant indicator as to the state of government.

'Children in care are already stigmatised and in some senses dehumanised. After 18 years in foster care and children's homes, and 14 years finding my parents, my time in care was like being in a constant washing cycle of change. Two responses like detergents swilled through me on a regular basis. They are sentences that somehow were to wash my questions away, but served only to highlight the problems themselves. They are responses from residential staff and foster carers:

"It's not my fault, it's them up there"

"I love children, that's why I do this job"

'To ban the first comment is to open up dialogue regarding a child's needs. I needed to know that I mattered enough for an adult to understand my story. And on the second comment, I needed to know that love was not so transient nor based on the

employment structures of local government. I noticed too that this second comment was never said to me personally. "I love children" was never "I love you". This was my experience of love as a child, strangers moving through me mouthing the words "I love children" and then disappearing, never to be seen again.

'People will often say to me, when they read my books, or see me on stage, or hear of my gallivanting around the world, that I am now a "success story". I try to tell them, it's all relative. But they can't understand, and I understand why.

'The worst effect of my time in care was not while in it, but while out of it. Like shock, the devastation happens after the catastrophic event. My childhood becomes more apparent to me as I grow older. Each birthday, a direct echo of childhood.

'It is no surprise that when people have children they are reminded in a seemingly eerie way of their parents. What I am trying to say is that if you want to truly "evaluate" a child's experience of being in care, then talk to them when they are 30 years old, 40 even. Ask them: "How was your childhood?"

*as long as it takes*



## Lloyd Upsdell

Lloyd is a 100m and 200m sprinter who won two gold medals at the Sydney Paralympics in 2000, and has held the world record in both distances, as well as four World Championship gold medals and three European Championship gold medals. He has also played rugby at county level for Suffolk.

‘When I was born, my lungs collapsed, which resulted in cerebral palsy. I couldn’t give you the medical terminology, but it means that my right leg doesn’t work properly. I walked quite late, but my parents made up for it by talking to me constantly, so that by the time I was 18 months old I could hold a proper conversation!

‘My interest in sport started quite young – in fact, I’ve always been quite sporty. I needed some physiotherapy when I was about six, and so I ended up going to a disabled sports club called the Dovedale Flyers. There were seven or eight of us there and we’d have a good laugh together, doing things like going to the National Athletics Championships at Stoke Mandeville. Then when I was 15 I was spotted by one of the Great Britain coaches and invited to run in the Cerebral Palsy National Championships, and I won both my races. It was a strange experience – I didn’t own any specialist kit, so I ran in my baggy shorts

and trainers, whereas everyone else had all-in-ones and running spikes. So then I was entered into the World Championships. But I got two gold medals. It all happened in such a short space of time – it was an amazing eight weeks.

‘I carried on playing rugby and running, but I never really considered athletics as a career. Then in 1998, National Lottery funding for Paralympic athletes came in, which made a big difference. I started to do some events and I qualified to go to the Paralympics in Sydney in 2000. Being out there was an amazing four weeks – I won two gold medals for the 100 and 200 metres, and broke two world records. It was a fantastically well organised, absolutely brilliant Paralympic games, and a very surreal experience for me. I was only 17. It sounds big headed, but I knew I was the fastest so I just turned up, put my spikes on, and ran. I really enjoyed the whole thing, it was amazing. I did do loads of training, though. I went to

South Africa with my brother and slogged solidly for a month beforehand.

'I'm not the sort of person who dwells on problems, and I don't think there's anything I would particularly change. I never had to have help or additional carers, and I went to a mainstream school. It's a purely physical thing for me – my disability has never caused me any social problems or made me feel uncomfortable. And I wouldn't have done half the things I've done if it hadn't been for my cerebral palsy. If anything, it has made me tougher and more resilient.

'My advice to anyone facing similar challenges is "just do it". Just get out there, and do any sport you fancy trying. 2012 is going to offer so many opportunities – just look on the British Paralympic Association website [www.paralympics.org.uk](http://www.paralympics.org.uk)

'If I could change one thing, I'd create better access for disabled people, not just in sport but in all areas of life. I'd make sure they had the same opportunities and access that non-disabled people have.'

*as long as it takes*



## Max Lewis

Max has Down's Syndrome, a hole in the heart, and low muscle tone, which makes many physical tasks difficult. Since the age of seven, he has been passionately interested in drama, and has been a long-standing member of the Chickenshed Theatre Group. This interest culminated recently in him winning a part in the Judi Dench, Bill Nighy and Cate Blanchett film *Notes on a Scandal*.

'I loved taking part in the film, I had a good laugh with Bill Nighy and I thought Cate Blanchett was beautiful. I even had my own trailer. Not many people can say they've been in a Hollywood film. But life can be quite hard at other times, because when you look at me, I immediately appear different. It can be very difficult having to face every day with a disability. People immediately think I'm stupid and that I can't do anything and they sometimes stare at me too. That makes me feel worthless – it also makes me angry.

'But although life is sometimes frustrating, I like to look for the good things and I'm very quick to smile. I love to watch wrestling, go to the cinema and play with my cat Chutney, and I'm a big Dr Who fan. I love to chat and have a lot to say, but sometimes I struggle to make myself understood. I can get quite confused too, especially if I'm told a lot of things, I find it difficult to remember them all.

'My mum and dad have been the biggest influence on my life so far but other people have been important to me. Helen Barker was my carer at nursery and she was lovely. I'm still friends with Helen and her daughter Gemma. Jaia Crebbins was my first ever teacher and she was great. Jackie was my carer at primary school; she helped me a lot and was very kind. My teacher now, Sally Adams, is fantastic. They have all been kind to me. They never got cross and were always there to help me when I needed it. I think they really liked me, I made them laugh and because they liked me, I felt good.

'I have had some horrible experiences with bullies and I don't want to go through that again. I hate bullies. I hate people shouting at me. Some people can get very cross with me and that makes me feel upset and angry. I can't always say what I want to, I get muddled with my thoughts and confused. I want my mum or dad

then. It makes it easier when people know that I find things difficult. People should be kind and not shout. It would be good to have someone to tell them off and to stop. But I try to stay with just the nice, kind people.

'I have often needed help or encouragement and haven't always been able to get it. Actually, it's hard for me all the time. Being at school has sometimes been very difficult for me, because there were some unpleasant people. But I am happy at my school now – it's small and the people there are kind.

'The lessons I have learned from my experiences growing up are to be kind to people, to try and listen to other people, and to tell people when there is something wrong.

'If I was in charge of the country, I'd make sure everyone had lots of money. But my life has been brilliant so far – fantastic, fun and funny.'

**These questions were answered by Max with the help of his mum, Sandy Lewis**

*as long as it takes*



## Rhona Cameron

Rhona Cameron rose to fame via the stand-up comedy circuit and became a regular on British TV when she appeared in the first series of *I'm a Celebrity, Get me Out of Here!* She also co-wrote and starred in her own sitcom, *Rhona*. She has published two books to critical acclaim – her memoirs, *1979*, and more recently, *The Naked Drinking Club*, which deals with adoption and alcoholism. Cameron is a Patron of LGBT Youth Scotland.

'Quite a few comedians are adopted, come from broken homes or have suffered the loss of a parent. I'm an artist so I've been able to write about it and rationalise some of it. But I was very lonely at times coming to terms with my adoption. When I naively told people at primary school, one boy called me a bastard for a while. This was obviously distressing and it would have helped me if I'd had someone to talk to.

'Adoption is probably why I'm an utterly perplexing and complex person. Aged 14, I also lost my father, who I had bonded with most in childhood. His death was like a double loss.

'There seemed to be nobody to talk to about adoption. However, a couple of teachers in particular spent a lot of extra time with me, nurturing my talents.

'I also loved Girl Guides because it gave me a safe and joyous environment away from bullying boys, and something to belong to.

'My worst point came when I left home. I had ruined my chances to go to college so I was doing menial work. I was very lonely and drinking in an isolated fashion. I remember lying in the gutter when a nice couple in a car pulled up and took me home.

'At 18, I went looking for my birth mother. It's probably why I wanted to become well-known, so that she could recognise me and see what I'd made of myself. A minister in Newcastle helped me by putting my story on his radio show. I found her, but she had problems accepting me at first and it was a great shock when finding her didn't fill the void I felt.

‘The loss of your birth mother creates a void that can never be filled although good contact with good people can make you feel a lot better. However your ability to choose people in your life that are good for you usually comes from self-analysis.

‘I was adopted in the era just before the legislation of abortion, at a time when single parents were stigmatised. Many adopted children were from poor families, given up by women who couldn’t afford to keep them. Parents were poorly vetted as authorities were just glad to get rid of the child. Most adoptive parents didn’t have the necessary psychological understanding of the adopted child or the ability to talk openly.

‘Things have changed enormously now. The emotional welfare of a child is considered to be just as important as whether adoptive parents have economic stability. But psychological welfare is still not high enough in the authorities’ priorities.

‘A child should be raised by someone who can love and accept love, who has resolved their own emotional baggage. Parents often adopt because of their own grief or unresolved loss, whether that is passed on

from their own parents or because they are perhaps infertile or have lost a child. They are then given a baby onto which they load their unrealistic and high expectations.

‘A relationship with an adoptee is a long and difficult haul. Regardless of parental input, adopted children already struggle with intimacy and find it hard to commit to relationships. The child’s issues of abandonment and loss continue throughout life.

‘I think parents wanting to adopt should have to do more than the current psychological checks. These carers should submit to a course of psychotherapy.

‘There should be someone available for adopted kids throughout their lives – perhaps there should be a yearly appointment which they can take up if they need it until a certain age. Everyone else has a helpline, so why can’t adopted kids? And if a child needs to discuss or pursue a biological parent, they need to be supported and feel able to discuss their feelings openly. Trust is everything with the adoptee.

‘I’m lucky. I’ve had a lot of people in my adult life to see this through with me. Life does get better all the time.’

*as long as it takes*



## Sam Martin

Sam Martin grew up in London and as a child was regularly ‘in trouble’, involved with gangs, fights and joyriding, being cautioned and on one occasion arrested by the police. But a visit to Vauxhall City Farm and a chance encounter with a donkey called Jacko sparked an interest in horses, and he now runs his own riding yard in Surrey. He is training towards competing as Nigeria’s first Olympic horseman in the 2012 Games.

‘The person who made the biggest contribution as I was growing up, apart from my mum, was a lady called Tracey Allen, my first proper trainer. She taught me horse riding from the age of 12 to 17. From the very beginning, Tracey seemed able to get onto my wavelength by treating me as an adult and an equal. She never made me feel anything other than totally able and capable of learning. She made me feel that she had confidence in me and my ability, which in turn made me believe in myself.

‘I remember once, when I was about 13, hacking out with Tracey and about six other riders along a busy country road. The horse I was riding was very young and although I had ridden him before I had not taken him out onto the roads. I was already a bit nervous, but the horse made me feel totally petrified – every time a car would pass, he would jump into the air and

run into the hedges or out into the road. It felt very dangerous. I really wanted to get off – I was crying and I remember being quite blunt and aggressive toward Tracey. But she made me stay on – she told me I would be ok and that I had the ability to ride this horse and teach him everything was ok and that the traffic would not hurt him. I stayed on and after about half an hour, we both relaxed. That ride was one of the best I have ever had – we galloped through fields, jumped hedges and ditches, and I learnt how to trust a horse and myself. From then on, I had complete faith in Tracey and in my own ability. Passing my coaching exams later on in life required me to believe in myself. Those early experiences in life have made that much easier.

‘My lowest point in life so far has to be the winter of 2005. I was just starting to get going and my competition results and my training were starting to

improve. I was renting a stable yard and a cottage and had horses to sell on and train. But it was a tough time. I remember it being really cold and icy, and all sorts of things breaking and not working, and the little money I had going on repairing things. It was one thing after another – the fencing needed repairing, my car broke down, and a stable fell down! Then there were horses not selling, or failing their pre-purchase vet examinations, or coming down with colds and requiring lots of veterinary attention. Keeping myself warm and clean was difficult and expensive, and food was a struggle. I remember at least five times during that period having to decide between eating, being warm and washing, and feeding the horses. The horses always came first. At one point dinner every night was half a baked potato with no butter, with a slice of dry toast for breakfast.

‘One particularly bad time, while walking to the yard (four miles) in the snow, being hungry and cold and totally alone in life, I had to dig deep to convince myself that I was not losing my mind. It seemed mad to be doing all this and not having enough money to eat, let alone run five horses. What I really needed was a sponsor, or some more cash from teaching clients, but I hadn’t been doing it long enough to build them up. I was the closest I have ever been to giving up. I’m glad I didn’t.

‘Things got better because I started winning more competitions on a very good horse I bought quite cheaply because he was a little tricky. He came good and my reputation grew, and as a result I became a lot more involved in training other riders and horses.

‘I have certainly had times when I needed some good advice but didn’t know who to ask. But I think we all have at some point. As you grow older and gain more

life experience, it becomes easier to find help and advice if you can’t get what you want from friends. In the times when I did not know which way to proceed and had no one to ask, I stayed as focused as possible on the bigger picture and believed in my instincts.

‘I wouldn’t change much about my past – I don’t have any regrets. But there are situations like being arrested at 13 and cautioned a few times that I would have preferred to have avoided. These experiences helped shape me into who I am and I have learned from them. I am happy with who I am and what I do – the past has got me here, so it’s all good.

‘My advice to other people in similar positions would be to stick at things once you have decided what you want to do. Anything is possible and money is not always needed to start something and progress with it. Instead of thinking “what can I do with this money”, I like to think instead “what can I do without any money?” I have learnt to be decisive and think laterally to achieve my goals.

‘If I was in charge of the country, I would try to promote the Apprenticeship Scheme more. I would make it possible for young people to have the option of work-based training within whatever field they had an interest in from the age of 16, regardless of background, experience or qualification. If someone had the aptitude and desire to want to succeed, I would make it possible for them to specialise from an early age and be trained by the best from that specific area. I would form a foundation that was made up by the top 100 people of every occupation the world has to offer. There would be a six-week trial period followed by interviews. The apprentice would receive a wage plus free accommodation and food.’

*as long as it takes*



## Sinclair Thomas

Sinclair Thomas has represented his country in wheelchair basketball more than 150 times, and won a bronze medal in the sport in the Athens 2004 Paralympics Games. He retired in 2007 and now works full time for the Great Britain Wheelchair Basketball Association. One of his roles is assistant coach for the 2008 team for the Beijing Paralympics.

‘I was born with a spinal defect that meant I spent a lot of time in and out of Great Ormond Street hospital when I was a child. They “rebuilt me”, like the bionic man. I had dislocated hips and ankles and a rod inserted into my spine, and although I walked a bit when I was younger, I’ve been confined to a wheelchair for most of my life.

‘My first experience of sport was swimming – I had some hydrotherapy and the therapist used to throw a brick to the bottom of the pool and send me off to fetch it. It was quite an extreme way to learn to swim, but I loved it. I started swimming competitively at a national level, and eventually my swimming coach suggested I try basketball.

‘The first time I played I thought “no way am I doing that again”. I thought it was just too physical, really hard work. But somehow you just get the bug, and I kept going back. The way wheelchairs have developed since I started is amazing – a competition chair is

made of titanium and will set you back £3,000. But they’re hopeless for day-to-day use – you need a comfy one too.

‘Two people who really inspired and supported me, other than my parents, were my coach Graham Young, and my uncle Denzel McIntosh. My parents didn’t drive, so Graham used to pick me up and drive me to the training. Graham really put himself out for me – there were three or four of us that he coached, and being young lads we were often quite a handful, but he was good at keeping us disciplined and motivated.

‘I think my lowest point was when I was about 10, when my older sister Monica was murdered. She went out one day to start a new job, and never came home. We got a call from the Police to say that her body had been found in Alexandra Palace. My dad’s brother was charged, which made it 10 times worse. My mum was devastated, but we were a very close-knit family and it really unsettled us all. She took the younger kids,

including me, back to Barbados for a couple of years. It was a very hard time and it probably toughened me up. My dad's brother was not convicted and it's still unsolved.

'Having sport in my life helped me through it. But sometimes young people need someone to talk to who is completely independent and will just listen. These days you have sports psychologists but in those days there wasn't really anyone to offload your troubles onto.

'I don't feel negative about my disability. I've never known anything different, and I've had a very satisfying and interesting career that I wouldn't have had otherwise. It has been a great experience and I've had a wonderful life.

'If I was to give advice to a young person facing similar challenges, I'd say "seize the moment". You've got to seize your opportunities and make the most of what you have. I think people can achieve whatever they really set their minds to. Sport is a huge opportunity, especially now with London 2012 coming. But times are changing. My kids want to be in front of the playstation at the age when I can remember wanting to be outside all the time.

'One government initiative that did help me was the Youth Training Scheme, funnily enough. I got a job with the local council, which had a couple of days' training a week. It meant that when a lot of my friends had just left school and were dossing about, I had a job, and a bit of money, and a bit of responsibility. And because of the training, I ended up managing people there. It was a very good introduction to work.

'If I could change the world, I would make sure that there were cheap local sports facilities available everywhere. At the moment, every playing field is getting turned into houses, and sports centres are left empty because they're too expensive for the local kids to use. They should be free. We'll never make great athletes out of rich middle-class kids because they haven't got the hunger. If you want the next generation of world class athletes, you have to find the young people from dingy estates who haven't got anything else to look forward to and are hungry for success. They also need the support of their family – which I have now in my wife Sarah, and my kids Austin, Connor, Sheridan, Sophie and baby Samuel.'

*as long as it takes*



## Toby Anstis

Toby has presented Heart 106.2's morning show for the past five years. He first made his name on Children's BBC as presenter of *The Broom Cupboard*, but has also appeared on *Big Brother's Big Mouth*, *I'm a Celebrity...*, and the *O-Zone*, as well as hosting *Children in Need*, *The National Lottery Live*, and *Grandstand*.

'My twin sister Kate and I were adopted at four months. We went to live with my adoptive mum and dad, and my older brother David, in Maidenhead. We had fairly conventional upbringing, and I think it was easier in lots of ways because we were twins – there was always a sense of not being alone, and of having an additional element of emotional support. So it was natural that when it came to looking for our birth parents, it was a joint decision.

'It was mostly a sort of long-term curiosity. We were blessed with great adoptive parents so it wasn't about finding another set. But we wanted to know about our past, and about our genetic makeup. Because we didn't have anywhere to start, we hired a private investigator to find our mother, which proved to be a bad move. The investigator found her, but went on to sell the story to the *News of the World*, which made a big splash at quite a sensitive time.

'Meeting her for the first time was very strange. We went for a pub lunch, and I didn't really know where to start or what to say. What you really want to ask is what happened and why they gave you away, but you can't exactly launch straight into that. So we talked a bit and shuffled food around our plates.

'It is strange but I don't remember the day very well. When you are adopted, you have years and years to build up all sorts of imaginings about your birth parents – things like what they look and sound like, how tall they are, whether your mother happened to be a famous actress or something. After all those years, you can only ever be slightly disappointed when you meet them and they're just a normal person looking slightly awkward over their pie and chips.

'So it was an unsettling experience, but I'm glad we did it and I'm glad she was willing to meet us. As an adopted person you already have a slight sense of rejection, so being told that your birth mother didn't

want to meet you would have heightened that feeling all over again. But I didn't feel any sense of connection with her. When Kate went to meet her for a second time, this time with her other children, I didn't go.

'We found out that she was 17 when we were born, and had left school and been travelling round Italy when she met our father. They eloped for a few months and then the relationship ended and she returned to the UK, where she found out she was pregnant. Her family pressurised her into giving us up and she never told our father. Until we got in touch with him a few years ago, he didn't know we existed.

'I had a pretty happy childhood and being adopted wasn't a big deal. But I remember a couple of people who really made a big difference to me. One was my French teacher at school, Mademoiselle Lepinois. For some reason I loved French and languages, and she really nurtured my enthusiasm. And the other was Graham Matthews, the station manager at Wrexham Park Hospital Radio, where I did some work.

'I'm the sort of person who bounds into things, full of enthusiasm. I gallop ahead and bounce off the walls. It's not surprising that I'm sometimes given the nickname "Tigger". And that's a positive trait, but I definitely need managing and directing sometimes. Both these people were supportive and nurturing but they also made sure I knew where the line was. They channelled my energy.

'My lowest point was going to start a degree at Bristol Polytechnic and leaving after two weeks. I'd spent the

previous summer working at BBC Radio London, and I'd met my first love Nicky, and I just knew the minute I got there that it was wrong. I packed my car and drove home again. But my parents just didn't understand. Despite my absolute conviction that I was doing the right thing, they just couldn't support my decision. They were quite difficult and I was equally difficult, and eventually I spent more and more time away from home. It was a horrible few months and I still wish they had had more faith in me.

'I think a lot of it was down to genetics. Kate and I are completely different to our adoptive family. We are both very extrovert, whereas my mum and dad and brother are all quite steady, quiet people. I think they assumed that we would grow to be more like them, but genetically we are completely at odds. If I'm honest, I was quite disappointed and angry with them, and they probably felt the same about me. The long-term effect was that I became more independent of my parents – I felt that I didn't want to rely on them for anything.

'If there was one change I'd make to help young people, it'd be to make sure that every child knew where they could get advice, support and encouragement. I know about ChildLine but I'm thinking about just normal everyday things. Just someone to listen and to understand. I'd make sure that there were counsellors available to everyone, so that they could talk things over when they needed to. And I'll be glad if the recent changes to the law mean that access to adoption records is better organised for people who are searching for their birth parents.'

*as long as it takes*



## Tricky

Tricky's debut album, *Maxinquaye*, was nominated for the Mercury Prize and voted Album of the Year by NME magazine. Since then he has produced a string of highly regarded albums including 2008's *Knowle West Boy*, chronicling his tough upbringing on a Bristol council estate.

'I grew up in Knowle West in Bristol. My mum committed suicide when she was 21, and I was 4. I lived with my gran, sometimes my aunt. From the photos I've got of my uncles and grandparents at that time, you can see that they were a tough family. They were notorious, which meant I had it easy.

'It was a good area to be a kid – we would stay out on our bikes until 11pm, because we didn't go to school much. And it was a very safe area too – we all knew each other and were in and out of each others houses all the time. All the families knew each other – I guess it was a sort of white ghetto. There were a lot of tough families, a lot of hard criminal families, and a lot of hard-working families there. But I didn't experience any racism at all. It was more about your family's last name than what colour you were.

'Where I come from, you don't really ask for support. But there were quite a few people who had a positive impact on me. A guy called Jon Stokes ran a youth club

called Eagle House Boys Club round the corner from where I lived. Everyone would hang out there, and they sorted us out with turntables and got us into making music.

'A few of the teachers at school were good too. One of them told us that if we did a job interview, to lie about having a Knowle West postcode, cos we wouldn't get the job if we had. If you need to lie to get on, then do it.

'My Nana was a big influence. She would let me go out in the evening to rap and hang out. Even now I've done eight albums, when I speak to her she still says things like "don't get in trouble".

'My lowest point was when I was in Horfield prison. When you grow up on a council estate like that, you know that sooner or later you're going to go to jail. When I was locked up, the guard took my inhaler away, and they wouldn't give it back, I had a full-on asthma attack and nearly died. That made me very negative

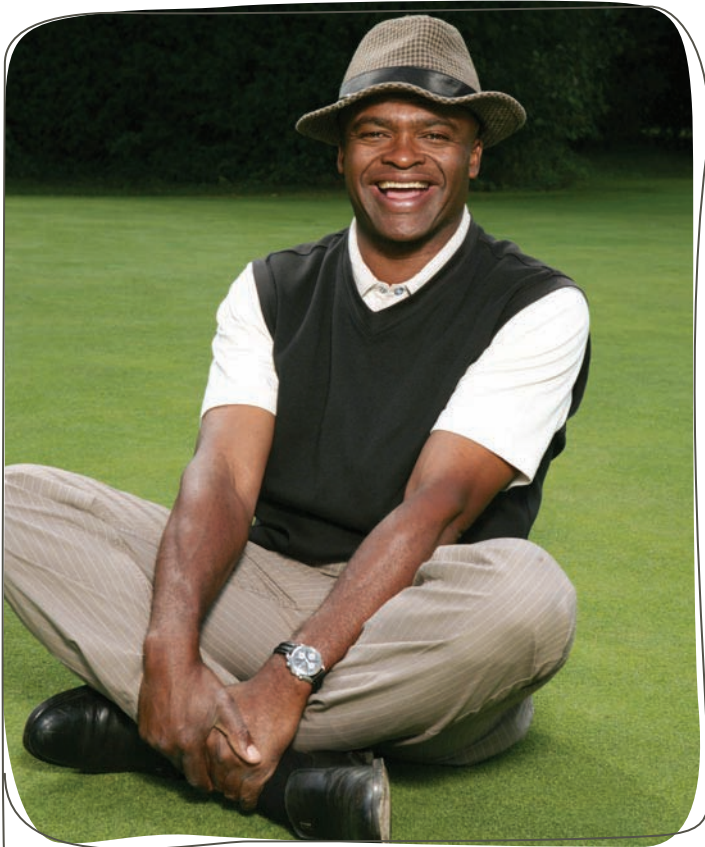
towards authority, I mean, I know you can be punished by the system, but you should still be looked after. I realised then that they really didn't give a f\*\*k about me.

'The big change in my life happened when I first heard Rakim. I said "that's what I'm gonna be". The track was "Check out my melody". I listened to the lyrics on that and it just took over my life. I started writing words, started hanging out at clubs, rapping, meeting people, it all went on from there.

'I wouldn't change anything about my past. I think I've been very lucky indeed. What I've learned is that, ironically, when you've got f\*\*k all, nobody will give you anything. Once you've got something, people give you whatever you want – free clothes, let you in clubs for free, buy you drinks, give you music...

'If I could make a change, I'd give people more cash, and I'd make sure there was a studio and instruments in every school – so kids had those opportunities. Not everyone would make it, but it would help.'

*as long as it takes*



## Kriss Akabusi

**Kriss Akabusi spent 15 years in the army, followed by an athletics career during which he won a succession of Olympic and World Championship medals. He followed this with 10 years presenting and commentating on TV and radio, and now runs his own company providing motivational tools for big business.**

‘My parents came over from Nigeria in the 1950s, having won scholarships to get an education in England – a very highly prized thing in those days. Then when I was four and my brother was two, they went back, leaving my brother and I behind. Now, having three much-loved children of my own, I find it inconceivable – but it was expected of them that they’d take their education back and contribute to the development of the Nigerian economy.

‘We spent the next four years in a variety of private fostering arrangements. Many parents found private foster carers by advertising in newspapers, and they sent money to the foster family. There was none of the checking that there would be today. My parents were very innocent – I realise now how young they were. And at the time it was almost inconceivable to a black family that the white people they regarded as superior were capable of being abusive to children.

‘Some of the families were good, but we moved around a lot and I think most of them were more interested in the money than in the children. One placement, with a Spanish lady in King’s Cross, was really very abusive. I remember being regularly battered by both the woman and her partner. I was terrified whenever the man came home, and she wasn’t much better. I wouldn’t describe my time in those places as terrible – as a child you just accept that’s the way things are, and you get on with life. But I do remember seeing my little brother being really properly battered by this man and feeling completely helpless – I knew I was supposed to protect my brother, but also that if I did it would be even worse for me. I didn’t see the point in both of us being battered. So I did nothing.

‘One of the good placements was with a family in Portsmouth. I really enjoyed it, it felt like a family. There were always lots of black kids being fostered, sometimes six of us. We had day trips out to the South

Downs in an old Morris Traveller and we'd all pile out of the car and lark about. I wasn't a bad kid – I was mischievous and played up quite a bit, but I wasn't aggressive. The only thing about that family was that they didn't know how to look after black hair and skin – I went to school looking like I was made of ash. It was strange because they had all these black kids in their care, but they still didn't know what to do.

'At eight, I went into a children's home. Overall it was very good – the first couple of years were very draconian, but after that I enjoyed it. I felt at home, and felt loved, as much as I can ever remember being loved. My idea of love was care, respect, safety, security and being able to trust. And there was order, you knew what was happening and when.

'As I got closer to 16 and a half, I realised that I was going to have to leave this safe environment and the thought of living on my own really terrified me. Everyone else was thinking about getting jobs but I worried constantly about being made to move into a bedsit on my own. So going into the army was a no-brainer for me. I was going from one institution with its own rules and regulations, to another. Sergeant Ian McKenzie was the first person to talk to me about my potential. He encouraged me, supported me and it was through him that I got into athletics.

'The worst moment in my life was when I was about 12, and I finally realised my mum wasn't coming back. All the time I'd been hoping that she'd appear. My room in the children's home overlooked the front drive, and I'd see cars arriving and it would always be in my mind that it might be her coming back. When I was about 12,

I finally decided that she wasn't going to come, and that I wasn't going to cry any more. I was going to have to be enough for myself. For a long time I think I hoped that someone would want to adopt a couple of boys – maybe a black family who wanted to adopt or foster us. But it never happened.

'There's no doubt that my childhood has shaped who I am. I can trust men to some extent, but I find it very hard to trust women – mums always get the blame, don't they. I've decided I'm better on my own than in a relationship, because the reward of being with someone isn't worth the risk of them leaving you. But I don't feel angry about anything. I've had a magical life. It has been an odyssey. And I've learned how to be happy.

'If I was giving advice to a young person in a similar situation, I'd say "decide who you are going to be". There were lots of directions I could have taken that other kids in the children's home took – gangs, GBH, prostitution. A few have gone on to have successful careers. But you can't use your momentary affliction as an excuse to be anything other than what you want to be. It's always your choice.

'If I could change anything, I'd make sure there was some sort of half-way house for 16–20 year olds to go – a sort of supported tenancy or place where they could make that transition between childhood and adulthood. If I had been forced out into the world at 16, I would have been a crook. I needed that support – the support of a tribe. And I got that from the army. That suited me, but it wouldn't suit everyone. There should be other places to get it.'

*as long as it takes*