



Telling Our Stories, Finding Our Roots in Devon Interview with 'Mac' Mudabbir Ahmed

00:00:03

Interviewer: Starting our interview. Starting our interview with Mac. Thank you very much for coming -

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Mac: Thank you for having me.

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Interviewer: - In Tiverton. And we're going to do an oral history for the project and we're going to talk about Mac and his background and his life in Tiverton. So my first question, Mac, is can you tell me something about yourself and your background?

00:00:32

Mac: Right. Originally I come from Bangladesh, if you know where that country is. A small town in Sylhet. But I've been living in the U.K. for since 1998. So that's a long time I've been living in U.K. as well – what, like twenty years now? Isn't it? Over twenty years. And I've been living in London all this time. And I moved to Tiverton in... last July in 2019 just to open up a business.

00:01:22

Interviewer: You can carry on. Thank you. Sorry.

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Mac: So, it's been a year. It's been a good year I've been living in Tiverton and I'm kind of enjoying it here. I'm meeting new people and making new friends, and through my restaurant I'm getting to know more people.

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Interviewer: When you came from Bangladesh, did you come with any family [or were you on your own]?

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Mac: [I came with the family], yeah.

00:01:37

Interviewer: You came with a family? And you lived in London?



00:01:38

Mac: Yeah.

00:01:40

Interviewer: Whereabouts in London?

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Mac: In East London, near Docklands. Near Canary Wharf, yeah near there. A famous fishing market, I would say. Billingsgate Market. Everybody knows. Where all the fish sells. Yes, that's where I live... that was next to there.

00:01:56

Interviewer: Did you have a restaurant there? Or were you working in the food business there?

00:02:01

Mac: I did have a restaurant before, that was in a small village called Yately in Surrey, is it Surrey? Near Camberley.

00:02:13

Interviewer: And then, when you came to Tiverton did you come with the idea that you were going to open your restaurant?

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Mac: I came to Tiverton. First I came to Tiverton that was in 2007. That's when I first came to Tiverton. I stayed here like about six months and there was a guy who used to live in Tiverton, a Bengali. I was friends with them as well, that's why I knew Tiverton.

00:02:39

Interviewer: Oh, ok, so you had friends here?

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Mac: They don't live in Tiverton any more. They moved.
Yeah, so that's when I came to Tiverton and stayed for a bit, then went back.

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Interviewer: Ok, so when you first arrived in the U.K. can you tell me something about that? Can you remember that experience?

00:03:01



Mac: I was really young, though, and where I grew up in Bangladesh I was scared of police. They can take anybody in and they can torture somebody, so in the beginning I was really scared of police in here as well. Then one day, like, I got to talk to police. Basically, a fight happened in front of me and I was the eye witness, and then I started talking to them, giving them all the evidence and that's when I realised they're not bad.

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Interviewer: "Ok, so that was a good experience?"

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Mac: A very good experience, yes.

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Interviewer: Was there anything you saw when you got here that was a more negative experience? That made you unhappy, or was it all generally quite positive?

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Mac: I was positive. I like the fact when I got here, like, I saw how busy people's life are. And that made me really, like, No one's got time for putting their nose into someone one else's business.

And I like that. That's exactly how I live my life as well

I don't put my nose into other people's business and I don't like people asking me about my own stuff. Like, I don't know somebody, I don't need to talk, if that makes sense. Not being rude, like.

00:04:07

Interviewer: Yeah, that's quite an English thing... [to sort of run around and get on with your own life].

00:04:09

Mac: [Yeah, so I fit in quite well.]

So that's what London is like. Even if you go today. In Tiverton if I walk through the town centre I will talk to ten people ... I know them by face, but in London, once you step out of your door... you don't know the people and they don't have time for you – you don't have time for them.

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Interviewer: So it's quite different now you've got to here, so you're getting to know...

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Mac: It's making me more relaxed in Tiverton now. I'm enjoying it.



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Interviewer: It's a nice place. Devon, it's quite a relaxed...

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Mac: Very welcoming. The people welcome me in Tiverton with open arms, and I love that.

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Interviewer: That's good. That's really nice. So, moving on to our next question. You kind of like Tiverton, you've already talked about that. Is there anything else you'd like to say about the town?

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Mac: I love about... things about Tiverton I like. People are very friendly, very talkative. Like when you get to know somebody, they don't make you feel like you just met them.

You kind of feel like, like, I'm talking to you now, it doesn't feel like I only met you five minutes ago. If that makes sense. So, I like that. It makes me more relaxed and less worried. Because I run a business here. Imagine, the locals didn't accept me. It would have been so hard for me to run a business.

Sometimes I'm in Nawab, I had a call from somebody in the town centre, I'm going quickly to the town centre I don't even bother to lock my door. I just pull the door and come to the town centre without locking it. That's how much relaxed I am.

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Interviewer: Yeah, that's quite different to London, I would imagine. I bet you didn't do that there, did you?

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Mac: London? You can't even go out to check the bins without locking your own door. You don't know who lives next door to you. It's tough.

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Interviewer: Thank you, that's great. Okay so moving on. Could you tell me Mac -- so you've told me you're a Muslim. Could you tell me a little bit about your faith, and whether you practice, how much you practice, how much that affects what you do day-to-day, but also how you think...

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Mac: I'm a Muslim. I was born a Muslim and I believe in my faith, but I'm not very practicing at the moment. Yeah. As Muslim - a good Muslim - you need to pray five times a day and God forgive, I've forgotten the last time I prayed. So, God forgive. I need to practice. I need to better

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myself. I ... and as a Muslim your duty is to look upon people, to help each other and be nice to people, be kind. The word is humility. So I'm trying to do my best, but I need to practice more, and to study about it. But I'm not doing it much.

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Interviewer: So you're not praying ... doing the five times a day praying but...

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Mac: Deep down I believe in my faith.

00:07:00

Interviewer: Yeah, and do you think it has an impact on the way that you've been running the restaurant and how kind you've been during Covid in the community? Does that come from your faith in part, or is that part of you as a person?

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Mac: It's probably part of me... plus, my mother was, like, you know, really kind as well How I grew up... it's like, even when I grew up in Bangladesh. Like some families never had food and they're struggling, and my mum used to give them food... my mum used to bring them in and like hide them, and just eat there... you don't need to tell anybody... So, I kind of see this image, like helping people. It's not just like I'm doing it through the restaurant. I'll help throughout the whole year, whenever I could I was there for my friends, for my family... and I'm living in Tiverton this is a big family to me as well.

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Interviewer: That's very nice. Are you -- Talking about your parents; are your parents still in Bangladesh?

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Mac: No, my family is here. My mum is passed away ... that's why I said, like, she was kind.

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Interviewer: So your family is here, so, what kind of family do you have, is it a wife?

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Mac: Dad. Siblings.

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Interviewer: Cool. So they're all with you in Tiverton?



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Mac: No, they're all in London. I live by myself in here. Yes, running my restaurant. I go to London every two weeks.

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Interviewer: Ok, that's quite often. Yeah.

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Mac: Yes, every two weeks for two or three days, but then again, sometimes I go there... like, today I've got London... I'll have a phone call, like - something happened, or you know there's a few bookings. I'll have to come back tomorrow. I take my -- Officially I take two days off in every two weeks, but sometimes I don't get that.

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Interviewer: So sometimes you have to go, and then get the phone calls, and you have to come back and deal with things because you're a businessman?

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Mac: Yeah, it's like, I opened this business, and since then it's just like looking after that business. It's like become your baby. You have a soft spot for your restaurant like I have a soft spot for others. So I feel like my restaurant needs people. I can't enjoy my day off over there. I'll be like, No I'm going back to Tiverton. That's the way it is.

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Interviewer: So we talked a little bit about your faith, can we talk a bit about you celebrating Eid, and then also celebrating Christmas. Can we talk about celebrating Eid first?

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Mac: Eid is all about having good food for us, buying new clothes, yeah? Everybody goes to the mosque in the morning, pray, greetings with others, your neighbours or random people, whoever's are in the mosque, whoever you make eye contact with, you just hug them, say "Eid Mubarak" - happy Eid ... have a good one, stuff like that. Then we come home. Friends. Some friends do come, especially like close family - siblings, we all get together, then we go to relative's house in the evening. We decide like are they going to come to us, are we going to -- you know; message, call. So whoever welcomes us, we'll go there. And they make a hell of a lot of food as well. So the whole day is basically stuffing yourself, rather than doing anything else.

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Interviewer: That's nice, so it's quite a celebration, quite a party. Quite a fun time?



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Mac: Yes. I used to like the shopping bit before, before I had like the job or anything, when I was young. Because I didn't buy it with my money; families to buy it for me, so I enjoyed that. Now I have to buy it, to buy for others, for nephews and nieces.

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Interviewer: So, how many people - just an estimate - how many people do you have to buy presents for now?

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Mac: Everybody buys for their family's children, but I still like to buy for my nephews and nieces. They're young, so if I don't miss it I give them a bit of cash as a Eid present or even during Christmas time.

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Interviewer: So you talked about Christmas just then, so what do you do at Christmas? Do you do the same thing?

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Mac: We kind of do the same thing except going to the mosque. We pretty much do the same thing, but during Christmas what we do, it's in the winter time, everyone's got [clears throat] off. It's officially closed. It's a holiday so everyone comes to the house wherever everyone decided to get together, whoever's house it is so at the night before we started making like whole lamb, whole chicken, so it's a big lunch for Christmas as well. So we do celebrate Christmas as well.

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Interviewer: Do you do different food? Because you just talked about lamb, so is that different to what you do at Eid, or...

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Mac: Eid is all about purely curry and dessert and all that, and Christmas is what we do is all about roasting things. Yeah... Yeah.

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Interviewer: Is cooking -- because I suppose cooking is a really important part of your life now, is that something that you got from your family, or is that something that you sort of learnt to do?

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Mac: Cooking -- I learned it from my family and I've got a passion for cooking as well, and I follow a lot of celebrated chefs from all over India and Bangladesh and some in like Pakistan -



some of them made the move from India and so on. So they have their own channels and so they're quite big. I follow them on Facebook, on YouTube channel. So any time I'm not doing anything – after work, I'm sitting down in the restaurant, I will leave my phone there, and I watch something and I'll try it for myself. And if I like it I'll do it for my family, yeah, and if I like that, and if they like it, then it is in my head, like yes, I'm going to do it in the restaurant. Like I did a curry two weeks ago for myself. I saw it on YouTube and made a proper study about it. I made it for myself, I ate it and some of my friends came in two days later to see me in Tiverton all the way from London, and I cooked it and they had it -- and one of the guys is like "do you mind giving me one for take? I want to take it and have it tomorrow," and I'm like "Is that how much you like it?" That's his way of saying "I've never tasted anything like that." And guess what? I've put it on my menu now, and people are loving it. So, the curry I'm doing now, I added it on the menu a week ago I haven't seen it in any Indian restaurant in the UK. So it's something unique. And I've got other curries as well. No one has them in the UK.

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Interviewer: So you're staying up to date with the modern curries...

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Mac: Modern curry that's all I'm doing, yeah.

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Interviewer: From Bangladesh or India or Pakistan. Right. That's amazing. Yeah. Oh, languages. So, which languages do you speak?

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Mac: I speak English, I speak Bengali, I speak Hindi, I speak a bit of Urdu. Pretty much four.

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Interviewer: Yeah, ok, so when did you learn?

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Mac: Four languages, I'm living in the UK I have to speak English. I grew up in Bangladesh, so that was my mother tongue. I do watch a lot of Bollywood, I used to watch a lot of Bollywood film as well – that taught me Hindi. I have a few Pakistani friends here, I made them friends here, and hearing them use their own language I used to pick it up slowly, slowly. I used to ask them what that means what that means, and now I have a convo.

00:14:24

Interviewer: OK, so, it's through friends, it's through film and it's through lifestyle [and, like your first language] and being here.



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Mac: [Lifestyle, yeah.]

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Interviewer: Great. Thank you very much. Ok, so I'm going to ask you --I've got a question here about being different and being somewhere... I suppose, did you feel like you were different in London in terms of coming from Bangladesh and being new to London, and do you feel different in Tiverton or do you just feel part of the community?

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Mac: When I was living in London I didn't feel any different because we've got a big family in London, and like I was busy with what I was doing, and I'm very into sports- I was into sports as well, so whenever I had spare time I was either in the gym or playing badminton or cricket – or – I had three different groups of friends. One was playing football, they had their court booked in the gym centre throughout the whole year, I'm playing football with them, playing badminton with another lot, and I play cricket as well. Well, I played... not any more since...

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Interviewer: Can you not play cricket here? I suppose there are - I don't know...

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Mac: There are. A lot of people offered me ... but like I said, I'm kind of like, I'm not doing anything, then again, I'm not free. Does that make sense? Because when I'm in the restaurant, any shopping they need, whenever they need something, I'm the one who, like, go and get the shopping.

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Interviewer: Yeah, too busy for sports, but maybe later...

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Mac: Maybe later, let it settle down a bit and maybe later I will go into cricket again. A lot of people from Tiverton ask me if I want to play I can go and join them, and I said...

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Interviewer: Is there a Tiverton cricket club then? Or somewhere near?

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Mac: I think they play in Cullompton.



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Interviewer: “Yeah, ok, so it’s not too far. Ok, the next question, we’re going to talk about the work you’ve been doing throughout Covid, and you opened your restaurant, you said a year ago, didn’t you, and we obviously had COVID and then you closed for three and half months.... Could you tell me a little bit about why you felt you had to close, and then about the things you’ve been doing. The reason I found out about you was because of the newspaper, and I think it was a Facebook post that showed you were giving food to people if they needed it. Do you want to talk about that?”

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Mac: Why did I close the restaurant? The reason for me closing the restaurant ... it was like, we are working in a place where like eight or ten of us come from different families and ... people need to go home and come back – there’s a lot of travelling as well, and plus I had to think of the local community. People will come, so it’s the free mixing. So I was thinking, like, if I close the restaurant and follow the instruction the government is giving, it will be safe for us, safe for the restaurant staff, and the community, therefore I was like, ok. I will survive somehow, but let’s close it for that period, and that’s what I did. So, I was closed for like three and a half months. I went back to London, but I was still cooking there. I didn’t tell anybody.

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Interviewer: So you didn’t stop working but you closed the restaurant --

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Mac: No. I closed the restaurant and I went back home, but I was still cooking because some of my friends is a key worker, a carer and stuff. So they have big carer houses like in London that they work for, so I used to make them food.

00:17:53

Interviewer: Is that the places where the care workers were staying when they couldn’t go back home?

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Mac: Yeah. So I cooked for them as well, dropped off food to them.

00:18:04

Interviewer: Wow! That’s really impressive, thank you. And so tell me a little bit more about what you were doing in Tiverton, because what was the Facebook post about?

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Mac: Facebook page was... I was thinking, like it's been six year... six months. I'm struggling. I spoke to a few people, and a few people are like, one of my regular customers.... I don't know his name. I bumped into him in the town centre and I said I haven't seen you for a long time. And do you know what he said to me? "I can't come in any more, Mac, I lost my job." And that brought tears in my eyes. Later on, you know, it's like, he used to come to the restaurant every week, having the same meal, and talking to me. He likes his rugby, and I love my cricket, so we have always a debate there. And he's not coming because he lost his job. So his missus can't come to the restaurant either because they can't afford to eat. So that kind of got me to think, like, what can I do to help people that can't come – they feel ashamed to sit down without paying to eat. And that sounds like, if I say something on my Facebook I've got over, like, 2,000 people on my business page. So that word of mouth will go everywhere in Tiverton, and if somebody fancies something different because when... without - not being funny, I can't make like English food like you can do English food. But if I cook curry every day I will get bored of curries as well, I need something different, you understand? So people are eating home, and they have a little bit of money, whatever, but they're eating home, but they're probably having the same meal so why can't I offer something, if they like it. I'll pay from my pocket if I have to, but I want to treat them to something I could afford.

00:19:46

Interviewer: It's quite enriching, isn't it? I know what you mean, so when.... Especially when you're poor, you do eat the same thing. You do eat boring meals, and it makes you more depressed and less likely to be able to pick yourself up and go out there and get the next job.

00:20:07

Mac: That's when I was... now I need to offer something to people... somebody something that's different. Do not say it on the page... Don't let others see. Private message me, I'll give you the time and you come and pick up your food, and that's all I'm doing.

00:20:21

Interviewer: That's lovely. Thank you. I think that's really important for the community and it helps us. Yeah.

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Mac: Well, I'm part of... I've been living here... Tiverton people welcomed me more than I was expecting, so I'm part of the family, part of the community and I have to do my bit.

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Interviewer: "Thank you."



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Mac: You're welcome.

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Interviewer: Okay, so talking about -- I've got a question here. It says, Where do you work? We've talked a lot about where you work. But do you want to tell us a little more about the restaurant, just so we know a little bit more about The Nawab. As if you've never been there and didn't know it.

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Mac: Nawab is next to... Do you know where Bridge Street is? By the river. It's next door from Wetherspoon everybody knows that shop, yeah, it's next to Wetherspoon. It's a small restaurant, but the people who knows Nawab, who've been there, they coming back – they do love Nawab. The people who don't know Nawab yet, or haven't seen it, that's where we are – next to Wetherspoon on Bridge Street, and if you come you will see where we are and what we do.

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Interviewer: That's lovely. Thank you. I think we're nearly at the last question. So thinking a bit more philosophical more thoughtful kind of question. What hopes do you have for the next ten years, and maybe what challenges you face?

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Mac: Next ten years... the challenges I will face is -- first things first, I will need to get out of this tough time ... Covid. Until then, I don't know what is going to happen. I don't know how long, like, I could run the restaurant if people stop coming in ... but what is now, people are coming in. The restaurant is going well, but if there is another lockdown it will be really tough on me. Not just me – throughout the whole country, I would say. It's going to be tough on everybody, so let's just hope it's not, and then I could think of ... in ten years it's ... the next thing I'm planning... this is between me and you, I haven't said this to anyone in the restaurant, I'm looking for the homeless houses and hostels in here. I want to feed them. That's my next week plans, my following plans. And in ten years everyone wants to be in a better position. I would love to be a successful businessman, own a property or two, have a fancy car. Then we'll see [laughter].

00:22:53

Interviewer: What kind of car?

00:22:54



Mac: What kind of car would I like.. that's a tough question... something like a Porsche, but that's something for the future. Not at the moment, that!

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Interviewer: That's okay, we're talking dreams here! So a Porsche?

00:23:02

Mac: If it's a dream I would go after a Lamborghini, but let's see.

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Interviewer: I think that's everything, but is there anything else that you wanted to say, that we missed out?

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Mac: One thing I want to say... the post I posted on Facebook... you came up to it and you saw it and you got me into it ... and I'm here talking to you today. I want to say a huge thank you to all the people who have been commenting all the lovely things, sharing my post, liking my post and talking about how good that is. That's kind of made my whole Covid time cheerful, and kind of like given me the strength to do something next. So that's what I want to do now. I don't know Tiverton well out of the town, but I will speak to someone at the council and If they can tell me if there is a place where all the homeless people live there and I want to go out there and we will see how many people are there and I want to give them food.

00:24:09

Interviewer: One more question. You're obviously a busy businessman. When you go back to London quite often. Is it just the town you know? Have you explored Mid-Devon or Devon? Or do you know just this place?

00:24:29

Mac: I only know Tiverton, if I'm honest. Like I said, when I'm in Tiverton I'm always working, and if there's something I need I'm in the town centre when I take my day off I'm back in London.

00:24:42

Interviewer: Yeah, seeing family? Do you see friends in London as well? Do you go and --

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Mac: I have loads of friends in London. I used to be in a club - a badminton club in London, so I still have three sessions a day-a week, like two-hour sessions.



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Interviewer: What, you still do that now?

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Mac: No, I can't now, because of Nawab, I had to give up on that. But I'm thinking of going back again, at least four hours. Just to be more fit, rather than, you know, eating here and getting fat. (laughs)

00:25:11

Interviewer: I think we're ok with that. But, yeah, no, it's good. It's just really good to keep healthy. And it keeps you --

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Mac: It does, yeah, we all need that.

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Interviewer: Yeah we do, yeah. Thank you very much, Mac. That was fab.

00:25:21

Mac: Thank you very much for having me.

Transcribed by Nicola Belluomo
22 December 2020