

INTERVIEW WITH ABI OBENE

INTERVIEWER: LAURENCE HILLEL
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0:00:02.0 Laurence Hillel: Here we are in Ilfracombe, and today, 26th August 2024, I, Laurence Hillel, volunteer for *Telling Our Stories, Finding Our Roots*, am going to interview Abi Obene, who's the project coordinator for *Telling Our Stories* in Ilfracombe. I'm quite looking forward to our interview, and I am going to throw you in the deep end, Abi, and just say, where would you like to begin?

0:00:36.7 Abi Obene: Oh, gosh. I suppose we could begin just with childhood and growing up, or first being here, which is kind of tied into...

0:00:53.0 Laurence Hillel: Let's go to childhood and growing up, and maybe something about yourself and your roots.

0:01:00.5 Abi Obene: Yes, okay, so I am half Nigerian, half Caucasian British. Nigerian side of my family is my dad's side of the family, and white side of the family is my mum's side of the family. I was born in London, in St Thomas's Hospital. Some people might be able to tell, occasionally there's a little bit of a Streatham twang that comes through, which I don't want to get rid of, but I've never been quite able to anyway. I grew up in the early days in Streatham in London, I think a pretty normal childhood, as far as you can say something's normal. My parents divorced when I was three, I think, so while I've had contact with my dad, I grew up mostly with my mum.

0:02:08.8 I've had more contact with her and her side of the family, and the contact with my dad's side of the family, particularly after the age of three, was a bit more in terms of individual people reaching out more to stay in contact. My dad also would visit quite frequently, so I'd sort of see him every couple of weeks for an extended visit. I grew up in London, where because when I was nine we moved to Devon, so before that point, I do very distinctly remember looking back, not really understanding or knowing or noticing ethnicity. People were just different colours and were just from different places, and that was whatever. None of the kids in my school, none of my friends, it didn't matter to any of us at all, and then moved down to Devon and suddenly went, 'Oh!'

0:03:18.4 Laurence Hillel: Presumably growing up in Streatham, because as you know I'm a Londoner, presumably Streatham from my knowledge, it's got a fairly kind of mixed ethnically population, so in a way you wouldn't have stood out.

0:03:35.3 Abi Obene: Yes, exactly, and just from even just down my street, people, all sorts of walks of life. Some people who had been asylum seekers from various countries that were experiencing difficulties, some people who, again, of all colours, all ethnicities, who were born and bred in England, in Britain. It was a real mix and it was something where, it wasn't that I didn't talk to people or see that there were differences in people at all really. [REDACTED]

0:04:35.1 It was something that we would, we as in myself and my friends, again from all walks of life; it was more just it didn't make any difference at all. It wasn't something that we would even ask questions about, because there was kind of a natural way in which different cultures, different foods, different ways of talking, different religions would just permeate through all areas of your life, and you just sort of picked up on things almost passively. The handful of times when something was more direct, like finding out one of my friends when I was a kid was Muslim, I didn't really have a grasp of what being a Christian was or what being a Muslim was or anything. I hadn't actively thought about faith at that point, and going, 'Oh, what's that?' He explained it as best a seven-year-old can explain it, and we all went, 'Cool,' and then we went to go play in the playground. It was just a lot of that. It was a really nice time.

0:05:50.8 Laurence Hillel: In terms of the early years in London, about the family members that you saw, who did you keep in contact with? Especially after your father and your mother divorced.

0:06:08.0 Abi Obene: Mostly it was my dad's, on his side of the family. It was mostly my dad. His sister, my auntie, would also get in touch from time to time, and actually there was a period of time later on where we stopped communicating. More recently we've started talking again, just going, oh, we've just sort of fell out of touch, let's connect back up again. Then my dad's brother, Uncle Dan, he would sort of say hello and that sort of thing, and his kids as well, for the first few years they would always be coming to my birthday parties and that sort of thing. A lot of those connections gradually over time with various cousins and so on, gradually it petered out a little bit. Certainly by the time we

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were moving down to Devon when I was nine, beyond Christmas cards it was really mostly just like, talking to my dad was my only real connection to that side of the family. It just was this gradual thing that kind of happened. There was no sudden cut off point, it just gradually wound down, and then again as an adult and as a teenager, starting to make some of these connections again later on.

0:07:48.0 Laurence Hillel: I'm going to ask you more about that in another area, but interesting. If you think back to the London days, were there any kind of customs, traditions, foods that were slightly different? Obviously not in a sense of yourself, but is there anything that you had which you could share, which was slightly different from what maybe people who were white English would kind of, you know?

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Things came through in drips and drabs, and again, it was more something that I've engaged with as a teenager and up in an active effort in my sense. Once I hit the point where I could go out and find these things myself.

0:10:47.7 Laurence Hillel: Yes, and I think that I share that in a sense, because you know a bit about my own background. In a way, as a child you're not very aware of these things, but it's

quite interesting that you gradually do become. In terms of early schooling is there anything that's worth mentioning, before the Ilfracombe days?

0:11:11.4 Abi Obene: Before the Ilfracombe days. Well, I went to a really good, not in the sense of it always got really good Ofsted reports or anything, but I mean, it did, just not necessarily in a grade sense. I went to a really good school that was exceptional because it had a fantastic headmistress, [REDACTED] It was a nursery, infants, and junior school combined. [REDACTED] [REDACTED] was infamous for being truly terrifying, but also being actually very fair, and everyone kind of loved her quite fiercely for it. Yes, so just growing up in a, again, really mixed school, which took kids, as long as they were in the right catchment area, basically took kids of all backgrounds, didn't matter.

0:12:12.9 Particularly for her, did not matter if anyone had any learning difficulties or anything, that school was known at that time for being incredibly good for children who were struggling whatever way, because they would expend huge amounts of resources making sure that everyone had a fair crack at it. I just remember it being really normal that in each classroom there would be multiple adults, multiple teaching assistants and support staff and so on, because they were trying to do the best by all of the kids there. For me, I have really positive memories of school. I think while I became properly consciously aware in Devon and Ilfracombe of my skin colour and my ethnicity in kind of an active way, there are a couple of things that started to happen around about the age of eight or nine. Kids started to hit the point where bullying was more prevalent, I think.

0:13:19.7 Laurence Hillel: Was that in Ilfracombe or in London?

0:13:21.4 Abi Obene: That was in London. The school was doing a really good job trying to fix it, trying to solve it, but that was something which I remember. The last six months to a year got a little bit difficult, and that is where looking back I'm now like, you could start to see maybe a little bit of division happening amongst the kids, often along ethnic, just subtle. My group of friends were still very diverse, there were plenty of other groups of friends that were still very diverse, but it was starting to happen almost in a defensive way. You still invited the whole class to your birthday parties and all that stuff. It wasn't anything serious, it was just like the very beginnings of it, you could sort of see it. Again, it was only really due to the pressure from different, quite aggressive bullying parties, but overall it was a very good time. It was a really nice school that just did a lot for its students, and I think that was really important in helping set me up for dealing with being in Devon.

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0:14:46.3 Laurence Hillel: Yes, well, I'm going to come to that. Is there anything else you want to share about your London experience, or shall we move on to Ilfracombe?

0:14:56.1 Abi Obene: Well, I think probably there'll be things that will come up a bit later on. Trying to think if there's anything else particularly notable that happened.

0:15:10.5 Laurence Hillel: Were there any traditions or customs that you were aware of that were slightly different, that you were involved in or learned about or whatever?

0:15:20.8 Abi Obene: I don't know if this would be considered, I suppose it's considered a tradition, which I was aware of because I actively and purposefully because of my dad wasn't being engaged in, where for particularly Nigerian English people but for a lot of Nigerian people as well, it's really normal to teach your kids very advanced mathematics, and I was not taught this. Even though my dad said there was pressure from various family members that regardless of the divorce, I should be being taught proper maths. This is a bit of a stereotype, but it is true based on what people said to me when I went off to university. There's a bit of a stereotype that the only good subjects worth doing are STEM subjects in Nigerian households. Maths, because it is a STEM subject that you can be taught essentially without any further context, like life-long context, it's quite abstract in that sense, was something that you'd get five, six-year-olds who are multiple years ahead of where you would expect them to be because they were taught it at home.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

0:20:05.2 Laurence Hillel: And then we'll move on to Ilfracombe. Okay, so you moved to Ilfracombe at the age of nine, and I just wondered how that felt for you.

0:20:23.1 Abi Obene: Oh, very strange! We moved at the start of the summer holidays when I was nine, so first of all, I had the entire summer holidays with no other kids that I knew, outside of my cousins. Growing up, I saw my mum's side of the family more often. There were two cousins in particular who I sort of semi-grew up with, where multiple times a year we'd be seeing each other for several weeks at a time, and so outside of when they came to stay, it was strange. I came here and I'm sure it happened more quickly than it would have, because I sort of had no real distractions. We were going surfing and swimming and exploring the area and so on, but about two weeks in I remember turning to my mum and going, 'Mum, there's no black people.' I was like, 'Why are we

here? There's no black people. I feel weird.' She sort of said, 'No, I'm sure there have been a couple.' I remember that a couple of weeks after that, but still before I went to school for the first time here, she pointed out a Rastafarian man walking down the street, a black Jamaican Rastafarian man, and was like, 'Look, there's someone.' was like, 'Yes, but he's not black like me. We're different sorts of black, aren't we, because he's Jamaican, I'm not.'

0:21:45.3 It was a bit of a grumpy response on my part, I think. It was something which I became very aware of, feeling kind of like the odd one out. It did actually get easier in a sense when I got to school, because then I did meet, there were a couple more kids and so on. Also, I think a lot of that feeling of being like, 'I'm the only one,' was at least partly because I didn't have any friends to hang out with during the summer holidays. Then you go to school, you make friends. Again, regardless of ethnicity you make friends, and it all kind of eases off a bit. My mum did say she spoke a lot with my dad, a couple of his family members, a lot of her friends who were black or who were mixed race before we moved. Before she'd even decided where to go at all, she made sure to sit down and have a talk with all of them and say, 'Is this something which will be harmful if I move somewhere out of London?', which is one of the most diverse places. Certainly in the UK, but even globally it's a very, very diverse place.

0:23:05.5 What sort of impact will it have? Is it a good idea? Should I be looking to move to perhaps another city, even though I don't really want to? She said that every single person who she spoke to said it's really important and a really good idea to get used to being one of many and one of the only, because then regardless of what situation you're in as a young adult and adult, you can sort of deal with it. Now I think it's really a good thing, it's just obviously at the time there was a little bit of it being a bit difficult. Certainly, there are things I've experienced which my friends who've grown up only in cities, but who are either also mixed race or black or Asian, who they sort of react with horror at some of the things that I'm quite used to and quite unfazed by, and it's because they've always lived in very diverse places.

0:24:05.4 Laurence Hillel: Do you want to share anything? I know this is slightly going off, but that sounds interesting. Like what?

0:24:13.8 Abi Obene: Yes, so I mean, this is going into I suppose some stuff that could get a little bit [makes noise of trepidation], but on the more negative side, there's a lot of different ways in which I've found anecdotally, personally, that discrimination manifests, and that racism in particular - that's usually the thing that I've personally been faced with - that racism manifests in different people.

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Sometimes it's subtle. Sometimes it's the sort of thing that it's only when you're a little bit older you go, hmm, hold on. For example, there'd be things here at school where we'd get back, like we'd done some work or something, and I'd be handed back my piece of paper or my whatever test we done. I do remember one particular incident, which again at the time I vaguely twigged, but I didn't fully get it.

0:25:26.0 I think it was a supply teacher handed it back and was like, 'Oh, you did really well. That's surprising, considering,' and then looked at me. I was like, 'What?', and then she just walked off and carried on handing out the marks and stuff to everyone else in class. I remember just looking at that, looking at my paper and going, 'What? Am I imagining this?' I would put it to a side and then later on I'd look back and I'd be like, no, I'm pretty sure that was something, because she would make the odd other comment. Sometimes it was more subtle things like that where you'd kind of double take and be like, I'm just going to put that aside and carry on with my day, and sometimes it would be quite major things. I do remember one time running home from school because a group of kids were chasing me and hitting me across - thankfully I had a backpack on, but hitting me across my back and the back of my legs with bike chains, and saying some racially motivated, horrible things. People would sometimes lean out of cars as I was walking by and yell things.

0:26:41.4 One time, I think I was 11 because it was the first week or two of being in Year 7, so in secondary school, and being pinned up by my neck to the wall by an older girl. I mean, she seemed almost like an adult to me, so maybe Year 10, Year 11. She just pinned me by my neck to the wall and said, 'Your skin looks like shit,' and then just kind of let me go and walked off. There would be these sudden incidents that I thought, particularly by the time I went to university, everyone just sort of had. A lot of my friends who had grown up only in cities were like, we had some stuff, but it wasn't like that because another person who looked like us could just walk around the corner when they were trying to pull something off. There was kind of this safety in numbers thing that I didn't really have. Obviously those incidents are isolated incidents that don't reflect on the vast, vast majority of people. You always remember the bad stuff more than the good stuff.

0:27:55.4 Laurence Hillel: Yes, because it's hurtful.

0:27:56.7 Abi Obene: Yes, it's hurtful, and it's the sort of thing where it really lodges in your brain. I think particularly as a kid and as a young teenager especially, it's quite difficult to deal with. You're just trying to go to school and then go to your friend's house and, I don't know, play video games, or like going around a friend's house to walk the dog and play in the garden or something, and then someone would just say something or do something, and it would be quite jarring. It was like sort of

dropping a bucket of ice water on your head suddenly. You go, oh, okay, this apparently matters to some people.

0:28:41.8 Laurence Hillel: How did you cope with it? I'm not asking you as an adult, I'm just wondering how you coped with it. If you are able to remember, how did you cope with it as a teenager, effectively?

0:28:53.5 Abi Obene: I mean, I don't think I coped with it very well. I did a lot of internalising, and I think some of that manifested in some pretty bad ways. I definitely went through a period where I just despised the colour of my skin, and I remember thinking that I wanted to rip it off. Over time, I would start to be able to rationalise it as it's only a few people, because every time something bad happened, I'd be like, well, when's the last time something like this happened? I'd be going about days, weeks, months, okay, so I've had however many thousands of completely normal to good experiences with this one isolated thing. That helped a lot. I did try at different points to express some of these things to some people, but I think either I wasn't expressing myself very well or very coherently, or some of the things sounded so unbelievable that people just didn't...

0:30:11.8 Laurence Hillel: They didn't want to hear.

0:30:13.0 Abi Obene: They didn't want to hear it, and then I'd be hitting these brick walls with people going, no, you can't have meant that someone did that, because that's really extreme. I'd be going, okay, but it did happen, and then it didn't ever really go anywhere. Also I think, I can't remember who said this or whether I read it somewhere. I read a lot as a kid and as a teenager, which might have been a form of escapism, perhaps. I do remember reading or hearing somewhere that when someone sees you lose your temper, or lose it, you can't ever go back to the point before where they saw you at your worst. I have always been quite tall, and particularly as a teenager I was really athletic and I'd be like, I don't want to be this - I wanted to avoid the angry black person stereotype. I was aware of that very early on. To some extent I was like, I can't actually express how upset I am, because then I'm feeding into this stereotype and I'm less likely to be taken seriously later, so I have to be patient, and I have to try and seem very rational at all times. Even when as a teenager your emotions are all over the place and everything's happening all at once, and you're trying to figure out what to do with your life and loads of stuff, trying to make sure that I managed my emotions in that particular area was really important.

0:32:07.6 Just also being aware as well that I didn't know what was going on in someone's life. This is something that does actually relate to something that happened in London. One of the bullies in London was a black girl who really lashed out at absolutely everyone. At a certain point, my parents both independently said to me, 'You're just going to have to hit her back next time she hits you.' I was like, 'I don't really want to do that,' and they were like, 'You're just gonna have to do it.' We had a couple of minor scraps, and I didn't like doing it at all, but afterwards she stopped bullying me because there was enough of a pushback. The school obviously didn't, you know, there was all this stuff about, 'You shouldn't have done that,' and everything, but she sort of stopped. We actually started talking, and through those conversations, again, it's something I realised a bit later, I realised how horrible her mother was to her and that it was just this lashing out thing. I was like, my mum's great, she's really nice to me and she loves me and it's fantastic, and then this girl would say things like, 'My mum said that I'm really ugly, and if I don't get more pretty as I'm older, she's gonna make me have plastic surgery.' Just nasty things, and then she'd go to school and she'd lash out.

0:33:51.0 I think from a fairly young age I sort of went, well, this person's probably got something really bad going on that's worse than what I've got going on, and they're lashing out. Maybe I should just give them the benefit of the doubt. I think a lot of the time, that ended up eventually leading to me becoming quite friendly with people who initially started out trying to be bullies. Sometimes it made no difference, because sometimes people just keep going or there's other reasons for it, or there's no reason at all. It meant that my response to those things was quite, by both self-imposed necessity, not wanting to be seen as the angry black person, and that sense of going, well, they could be having it far worse than I, I was quite reserved, quite controlled in that sense. It meant that there were a lot of things that then weren't really addressed until I got older, late teenage years, and could sort of say, 'By the way, this happened,' and everyone goes, 'Oh my God, we should have dealt with that at that time. Why didn't you say anything?' I was like, well, I thought I did, but apparently not well enough.

0:35:11.4 Laurence Hillel: Thanks, Abi. You've gone into that in some depth, and yes, quite difficult at times I can see, but I can see also you've reflected about how you would react and so on.

0:35:24.5 Abi Obene: Yes, and most people were fine.

0:35:31.9 Laurence Hillel: In general, is there anything more that - I'm going to ask you in a moment, because you wrote in your pre-interview form that you shared there that your subject and degree choices were negatively influenced at times by your background. I'm going to ask you about that in a moment, but before I do, is there anything else you want to say about secondary school days and being a teenager and so on?

0:35:59.5 Abi Obene: Yes, I mean, I think that being a teenager in Devon and Ilfracombe was actually a really nice experience. Perhaps it would have still been somewhat like this in London, but there was a certain level of freedom you had, I think, just off the back of it being a relatively safe area. As long as you go around with your friends, you can stay out pretty late hanging around and stuff like that. There was a sense of getting to know everyone, but there was also still things like there's a cinema, and there was still public transport so you and your friends could get on the bus and go to the beach, or get on the bus and go to Barnstaple to go do something, or even go as far as Exeter for shopping and that kind of thing. There was a gradually increasing, as I got a little bit older, sense of freedom and of being able to be, in controlled bursts, quite independent. Which I really appreciated, and I don't know if I would have had in London necessarily, or in a bigger city. That, I really, really enjoyed.

0:37:18.2 Laurence Hillel: That's quite positive.

0:37:19.3 Abi Obene: Exactly. That was fantastic.

0:37:21.7 Laurence Hillel: It sounds to me like despite all the stuff that you talked about earlier, there was a very good and positive and enjoyable experience of teenage years.

0:37:31.5 Abi Obene: Yes, absolutely, and I love Devon. I love North Devon, I love Ilfracombe. Overall on balance, despite the heavy stuff earlier, I want to make it very clear, overall on balance it's been a very positive experience for me. Vast, vast majority of people have been lovely, but it is just the whole thing of, again, we've evolved to recognise when bad things happen so we can try and avoid them next time. It's just some things pop up in your brain, but then there's all the lovely, really nice experiences. There's all the things when people have just sort of, especially when you're a kid or a teenager, being a little bit extra careful with you and being like, 'Oh, by the way, this is going to happen. Is this okay?', and so on. Trying to check in on you and be careful, and teachers being by

and far really lovely at the school, and working really hard actually. There was a lot of conscious effort to correct themselves actually, when certain things came up.

0:38:37.6 Laurence Hillel: Just a question coming to my head in terms of friendships. Did you have mixed friends in terms of backgrounds?

0:38:49.3 Abi Obene: Well, you sort of have different groups of people you hang out with, and you're a slightly different version of yourself with each one of them. Most of my friends down here, just because most people down here are white, most of my friends are white. I was very close friends with someone who was from Mauritius as well, who happened to be in the same year. I think we might have been the only non-white people in our year. I don't think that necessarily caused us to gravitate towards each other, because we both sort of entered into that friendship group via different people, if that makes sense. I was friends with one person, she was friends with another person, those two were friends with each other, and then we all converged together and were kind of best friends, particularly throughout our teenage years. Yes, I'd say mostly white. During Sixth Form the school actually got a little bit more diverse, because we got a few students moving from different places, and then there were two black girls who were also in the Sixth Form, so I wasn't the only part black or black person, which led to some very funny interactions.

0:40:12.2 Laurence Hillel: Not necessarily from Nigeria, of course, or...?

0:40:18.2 Abi Obene: Yes, so I can't remember if one of them ever said - one of them moved down from London. I can't remember if she ever said where her family were from. She was black British, but did know where family is from, from what I remember, but I can't remember what she said. One of them was from Swaziland, and so she'd been adopted relatively recently and moved down. We were friendly with each other because we're like, just in the sense of like, oh, hey, there's a similarity there, hi. I do remember it led to a very funny interaction in I think it was A Level English literature once.

0:41:08.0 There was this lovely girl who, again, she didn't mean this in the way that I fear it might come across at all, but she just could not see the difference between me, a relatively pale mixed race, half black person, and this girl who had come down from London who was very dark black. I remember she was like, 'I just can't see the difference. You're both black, aren't you?' We were holding out our forearms up against each other and being like, 'Can you not see the clear tonal difference between the two? What do you mean you can't tell, you can't see it?' It was like she almost

had to rewire her brain in order to properly compute what the difference was, and it was really funny. Everyone else in the class was similarly just like, 'What's wrong with you? Surely you can tell. They don't look the same, they look completely different.' That became like a bit of a joke that ran for a few months.

0:42:13.7 Laurence Hillel: I know you've talked about this before when we've been chatting over coffee, so it's obviously a kind of memory that made quite an impression.

0:42:23.8 Abi Obene: Yes, there's a couple of quite absurd things that I think happen when people get comfortable enough to just start saying things. As a mixed race person, you sort of go, 'What?' I think there sometimes is a sense of I'm not always quite sure how someone sees me. Sometimes I'll say something, I'm like, 'You are aware that I'm half black, right?' They go, 'Oh,' and I'm like, 'Maybe you shouldn't say that.' Sometimes they'll say something that's just flat out amusing, and I'm like, okay, that's, you know.

0:42:58.3 Laurence Hillel: That's interesting. I was just thinking that in a way, talking about being black, or feeling that you can talk about it or being asked about it, presumably that's better than the kind of denial or the, I don't know.

0:43:19.5 Abi Obene: Well, it's an interesting thing. I remember actually having a conversation about this in class in front of everyone with an English teacher in GCSE, I think Year 10 GCSE English literature. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The poem is called *Half Caste*, by John Agard.

0:44:01.3 Laurence Hillel: Okay, I don't know it.

0:44:03.2 Abi Obene: Oh, it's great, it's really good. One hundred per cent recommend listening to a recording of him reading it, because it's fantastic, but it's about people seeing only half of you, on account of you being a mix of two or more different ethnicities. It's very tongue-in-cheek, very humorous. A little bit insulting to that mindset, but I remember the teacher, among other things, was doing things like explaining why you can't call someone half-caste. She could tell that people were going to start using that to refer to me, or I think a kid said it and she was like, 'Okay, whoa, hold on.

Here's the history of that word. Maybe at least know the history and check with the particular person before you say that, because probably they don't want to be called that.'

0:44:49.7 I remember having a conversation with her where she said, 'What do you feel about the word?', and I was like, 'Well, I don't know. No one's ever called me it, so I don't really have any strong feelings one way or the other. If it was a regular thing, maybe I would.' We carried on having this conversation, and at one point I remember saying, because of what she was implying I remember saying, 'Well, I can't speak for anyone else other than myself, even though I'm the only person here who's not white.' There's so many people who are black or part black or who just aren't white, which is statistically speaking the majority of people in the world. I can't speak for anyone except for me. I understand why you're asking me to voice my opinion on this poem in particular, but I can't amplify my voice to cover everyone else's opinions. It was something which occasionally I remember having conversations with people about, where they'd almost expect me to be able to speak for all mixed race people.

0:46:00.2 Laurence Hillel: Yes, and I think that might have been a different experience if you say you'd been back in Streatham.

0:46:05.1 Abi Obene: Yes.

0:46:06.4 Laurence Hillel: You would have had people around you who you'd have had people who were one ethnicity or mixed, but here in this situation you're the only person. It's more difficult, isn't it?

0:46:20.3 Abi Obene: In that sense, yes, but it also just meant then it wasn't - again, as I got older I was like, it's not a surprise when these things happen anymore, and I can relatively efficiently be like, okay, here's why we either do or don't do that. Here's my opinion on it, and then we can have a chat. I don't have that thing of that shock anymore, that ice bucket over your head.

0:46:43.9 Laurence Hillel: Okay, I'm going to ask you another question that's come into my head out of your responses. I'm sitting here thinking, well, you've talked about yourself, we're having conversations about you being obviously a black person in a white class, but at the same time you're not. In a sense, you are both black and white. How did you see yourself?

How did you experience, can you remember? This is going to feed into what I'm going to ask you later, but I'm just interested to know what you actually...

0:47:19.9 Abi Obene: I have always tended to refer to myself as mixed race. If someone is then like, 'Well, what specifically are you?', I will then say, well, for a period of time I would specifically say half white, half black, in that order. Now it comes out however it comes out, because I knew what they wanted me to say, or what they wanted to know, but at the time I wanted to make it clear that both halves matter as much. You don't hear half black and then your brain switches off, because you're like, ah, that's the bit that I was waiting for, sort of thing. I've always referred to myself as mixed race, because I do recognise that I don't have the same experiences as someone who is basically 100 per cent black, nor do they have the same experiences as me. I've had this debate before where I feel like I also have to see myself as mixed race, because my ethnicity doesn't change based on where in the world I'm standing. If by some logic I am black because I'm in the UK and most people here are Caucasian or white, then surely by that logic, if I went to Kenya I'd be white, which doesn't make sense to me. Especially as a teenager I was like, that doesn't make any sense, so therefore I'm mixed race because everywhere I go, I'm mixed race.

0:48:50.4 The way I see myself is I have these bits and pieces to me that I probably wouldn't have if I was 100 per cent white, 100 per cent black. Having like family gatherings and stuff, I do remember having the very sudden realisation of like, oh, I'm the only one here who looks like me. There's the black side of the family and there's the white side of the family, and then there's me, and I was like, oh. Sometimes it would be this really isolating thing, sometimes it would be this really empowering thing, and sometimes it would just be a thing. It would probably mostly depend on my mood on that day how I saw it.

0:49:36.5 If we're discussing something where we're making a bit of a political point, or particularly if I'm discussing it in relation to a culture where perhaps they might have had a one drop policy, for example, I might refer to myself as black in that context, and for jokes, because humour is you bend the rules. It's something where I see myself as mixed race, tend to use that word. If someone refers to me as black, I tend to go by the context as to whether I say actually I'm mixed race, or whether I just let it slide. It doesn't matter what the ethnicity of that person is, to me, that forms part of the context but it's not all of it. I've been referred to as black from people of all sorts of ethnicities and it's been fine, and sometimes someone refers to me as black and I'm like, no. When we're having this sort of conversation, I am not, because I think it's important to differentiate and understand the subtleties and nuances.

0:50:40.5 Laurence Hillel: Okay, I'm going to come back to this topic again later, but I want to ask you, because as you did say in your form, and I want to bring you back to this, just reminding you, you shared that your subject and degree choices were negative - this is a quote - were negatively influenced at times by your background. I'm going to ask you, do you want to say more about this?

0:51:04.5 Abi Obene: Yes, so I studied history for my bachelor's, and then later on studied cultural heritage and museum studies for my masters. I would say particularly that came out in my bachelor's, but it also did come out a lot in my master's, but the subjects I ended up picking and landing on within each of those courses, the modules you end up selecting, were very much influenced by particularly when I was 19, 20, wrestling with some internal feelings on myself as a middle class person, myself as a mixed race person. Myself as someone who specifically was half Nigerian, given the very particular colonial history and connection. Things like Benin bronzes and some of those more infamous interactions, and I think when I went to university for the first time, there were some mandatory modules you had to do. One of which was history of the British Empire, and the other two were early on, like early modern and medieval and history of the British Empire. The three modules everyone had to do in the first year, plus a couple that you picked, and then you got to pick more and more of your own preferences as you went through the course.

0:52:49.5 I'd already been having some internal feelings of being perhaps quite discomfited by some of the things I'd been, before that course, had been finding out about the British Empire. It's not really something that, at least on the history courses I was on, was taught to the extent that it should be in schools, in my opinion. At the start of the course, I remember the lecturer had everyone stand in different corners of the room saying, 'Stand here if you think the British Empire was a good thing, stand here if you think it was something on balance that was neutral, stand here if you think it was something bad.' At the start, most people went somewhere between good and neutral, and there were a few people, myself included, who went to the bad side. Some of us were asked our opinion, and then the bad side, basically we said on balance, if you consider numerically how many people were negatively affected, it's probably bad, if you're looking at people in all of the countries that were invaded and so on. Then at the end of the course we did the same thing again, and more people sort of shifted towards being bad and neutral. There weren't that many people who were in the on balance it was good category anymore.

0:54:13.0 It was sort of during that course when I was like, I have a bunch of stuff that has some colonial memorabilia and overhangs to it, like a couple of shirts that had some slightly suspect things written on them. I was like, maybe I just won't wear these anymore, and maybe I should sort of think about how my understanding of Britishness, my understanding of me, is all tied together. It was all this long period of over the course of three years really, of gradually trying to understand, did I feel guilty about certain things? Did I feel like I was unfairly being given some sort of sense of, I don't know, not privilege, but I was aware that my life was easier than some other people's. I was aware that my life was easier than some other people's because of something that I personally hadn't done, but that I still benefited from because of where I was born and where I grew up, and the fact that I happened to be born into middle class family.

0:55:20.8 Then I also had the whole thing of like, well, I can remember a lot of things, really uncomfortable experiences growing up, and a lot of these attitudes that were at least partially, in some really long form way, potentially influenced by the legacy of empire. There's a certain way in which I think xenophobia and racism and colonialism coils up and wraps around itself. It was just this really quite complicated thing that I definitely needed those three years to even start to approach, internally speaking. It was a really important time for me in that sense.

0:56:15.6 Laurence Hillel: I think I would share that with you. For me, university was the time I really - I know we're not talking about me, but it was the time when I first really began to become conscious of my Jewish background and why that was important for me to explore it and so on. Before then, it still really hadn't been a big part of my life, but then it becomes, it's like university provides that opportunity in a way, and the subjects we were doing. Like you, I studied history, so it gave you that opportunity to explore and so on. Obviously that was going on for you.

0:56:52.8 Abi Obene: Yes, that was going on, and then at the same time I was then like, I don't want to make all my decisions based off my internal angst and understanding of my sense of race and identity and so on. I also had the thing of trying to rally against that and pick modules that had 'nothing' to do with that. I was like, I don't want to be someone who comes in here and then just studies about race, because it feels like that's what a lot of non-white historians do. At the time I sort of felt like that was maybe, I don't know, a bit standard. I didn't really want to follow along with that, because I had absorbed this sense that perhaps it delegitimised that historian for focusing on something that was directly personally linked to them. Not realising that that's what everyone does

and that's an irrelevant point, but at the time I was like, I have to make sure I don't do that. Then of course I was like, well, of course you're going to study about stuff to do with or not to do with - everything's all tied together.

0:58:12.1 Laurence Hillel: In a way you're exploring identity, aren't you? It is the time when you are exploring who you are as an individual, and who you are as an individual is affected by where you've come from, obviously, and you can start learning more about it. I'm just interested, university time. Did you actually make any efforts to find out more about your Nigerian roots in terms of academically or whatever?

0:58:43.4 Abi Obene: Yes, so there was an Afro-Caribbean society in the university I went to, which was I think they said something like 40 per cent of their members were Nigerian or part Nigerian. Loads of Nigerians go to university, and so that was interesting, joining that and interacting with some people who had, despite the fact that there were loads of people who very specifically were Nigerian or part Nigerian, so many of us had very, very different experiences. It was interesting and it was a good way, I think, to get me out of my head when it came to my own sense of identity. I think university was very much the point at which, this is ironic because I'm sat in an interview talking about myself, but it kind of got me out of a slightly more teenager-y, more selfish mindset and going, oh, every single person is a fully realised individual. There's no such thing as a main character, I'm not all that important in the grand scheme of things. How I think about something has absolutely no bearing on what someone else thinks about something, even if that something is what it is to be half Nigerian and we both are half Nigerian, or what it is to be Nigerian or mixed race or whatever. What it is to be British when you're also half Nigerian, you know.

1:00:21.0 I think that was really good in that sense, and then in terms of it was the first time I was able to interact with a lot of people where you could share and learn about little fun bits of history and culture that you might not have been able to find out about. With family there's always that, at least in my case, there's always that thing of there was a huge tsunami of family history that I couldn't see from how huge the wave was. I couldn't see the full thing, I couldn't grasp it, it was too big. Because I hadn't been submerged my entire life, it sometimes felt like there's no possible way for me to even start scaling that concept. Then it was just things like, hey, here's a recipe for how my family make jollof rice. I was like, okay, great, and then someone else would be like, oh yes, my auntie told me this joke the other day. It would be something tied to some sort of cultural expression or

something, and there'd be these little bits and pieces and drips and drabs that came through in a way that was much more understandable, and it kind of helped.

1:01:39.3 Laurence Hillel: Did you feel you could sort of - did it suddenly kind of feel part of you in a way? You'd hear these things and you'd say, well, it actually feels as if that is part of me, even though I've not...

1:01:55.0 Abi Obene: I think it was really something that helped me feel valid as a person, regardless of how I identified and saw myself. It helped me go, okay, I'm not any lesser because I've maybe struggled to find information that felt understandable on certain parts of myself. I am British and I am half Nigerian, I am mixed race and that's what I am, and that's fine. If I find out more stuff, great, and if not and I'm living my life and I'm not unhappy, cool. One of my best friends, still one of my best friends, it was another half Nigerian guy, and he was one of the people who'd grown up only in London, but he'd grown up and both his parents had stayed together. He'd grown up buried in both sides of his family.

1:02:57.7 We often make jokes that we're basically the same person, because we have various family members with the same names and all sorts of things, and both our mums look weirdly similar and all this stuff. We often joke about that, and I learned plenty of stuff from him. Just again, little cultural things, but also people like him helped validate the fact that I wasn't any lesser because I'd had a different upbringing to some people who maybe knew more about Nigerian culture and society at that point. He was like, obviously it doesn't matter. If you want to know some stuff, I can tell you some stuff and that's fine. That was I think really important, and then of course he's just a great friend.

1:03:59.0 Laurence Hillel: One thing I'm just going to ask you, because you said, 'I'm British.' How do you understand that? What does that mean to you? You say, 'I'm British,' what does that mean? Because - no, I'm just speaking about myself, but I...

1:04:15.2 Abi Obene: No, go ahead.

1:04:16.8 Laurence Hillel: Well, it's like for instance, I see myself as British, and that means that it's partly about being accepted here and all the values of democracy and liberalism and stuff like that which I feel are really important. There's also a side of the British thing which I'd

rather not be associated with, which is the nationalism and patriotism and stuff like that, and flag flying. I'd never stand for the national anthem because it kind of it felt too, that patriotism I'm not sure I feel totally comfortable with. Also there is a bit of me which is aware that I have roots that are not British. My roots actually are Eastern European and so on, and I've got ancestors who came from Romania and from Poland and Ukraine and stuff like that, and in a way that's part of me as well. I'm just interested in what you understand as being British, when you say, 'I'm British,' as well as 'I'm Nigerian,' or half Nigerian or whatever.

1:05:41.0 Abi Obene: Well, it's a big question. There's a mix of, similar to kind of hitting that point in my late teenage years, early adult life, where I kind of went, oh, this is a thing, and this information, this new extra information, this sort of extra stuff that makes me feel good is coming through in drips and drabs. I think what makes someone in this case British, it's a mix of like some quite big, broad things like you just said, liberalism and so on, but it's also just a lot of little things. The obvious thing is I was born in this country and I've grown up in this country. I've been away on holiday, but that's about it.

I suppose what I should be saying is sort of saying British, which covers quite a few places, I definitely feel English, which is almost more complicated, I think, than feeling British in a sense. I don't know, there's cultural things, there's certain sense of humour, certain jokes and things that I think tie together quite a lot of people, but I've always seen broader national identities as just a series of overlapping community and smaller cultural identities that together vaguely form Englishness, Britishness, and so on. It's not something that I often say out loud, that oh yes, I'm British and I'm English, because I almost feel like there's a certain level of - perhaps this is like a class thing as well, because that ties really heavily, I think, into people sense of Britishness as well. As you say, not being too loud about it and not being too I suppose blatantly patriotic and so on. Also, I feel like it's very British and very English to consistently insult your government.

1:09:02.6 Laurence Hillel: English humour is satire, isn't it?

1:09:04.4 Abi Obene: Yes, and there's a certain level of again being quite tongue-in-cheek, quite just sort of, I don't know. It's quite difficult to express, I think.

1:09:22.5 Laurence Hillel: You also talked about a negative concept, not just the patriotism which I think we share, but a little bit of the Empire bit, which obviously you wanted to stand in the, 'It wasn't such a good experience for me.'

1:09:38.2 Abi Obene: Yes, I think that's complicated because there's an obvious historical interaction between two parts of my identity in that sense. It's strange when I see and hear things about the effects that one half of my identity had on the other, and that effect seems to be largely seen as negative. I'm kind of sat here as someone who is of both of those things going, well, I mean, because of where I happen to have been born, overall I've passively reaped some of the benefits of that. Economically speaking, the empire was great for the UK, and I'm here as, again we are not wealthy, but I am someone who has had the opportunity to go and study, and who has been able to get work in a field which is very competitive, very difficult to get work in. I've definitely had some benefits of some help with that, that some other people just don't. I'm aware that I'm very lucky in a lot of senses. I don't think that really answers the question as to what Britishness is, and I don't really think I can tell you.

1:11:09.4 Laurence Hillel: No, I mean, it's a big debate. I'm interested in what you saw, what it felt for you. In a sense, my next question in a way we've been touching on already, but maybe you have more to say on this. Has your sense of who you are in terms of ethnic or cultural identity changed over time, and if so how?

1:11:39.2 Abi Obene: I think it has. I think I definitely have gone from when I was younger feeling like I was a mix of two separate things, to feeling like I'm one whole thing. That one whole thing isn't the same as those two separate things. I'm trying to think of how to...

1:11:58.6 Laurence Hillel: Yes, illustrate.

1:12:00.3 Abi Obene: Yes, how to illustrate this. I think when you're younger, particularly when you're a child, but also teenage years and so on. A lot of your sense of self and your experience of life is from other people providing things for you and other people telling you things, and almost acting things out for you. When you're at the point in your life where you're doing a lot of absorbing culture, a lot of absorbing what people are telling you, and you haven't let it sit yet because you need to be a little bit older to maybe conceptualise it or have a bit of time to go through it, I think it often felt like I

was being given these two almost unrelated sides that I did understand were two parts of me, and there was a sense of home in both of those two sides. The times when I felt alienation as a young person, or a younger person, were because someone was specifically trying to make me feel like that, or because I'd have that sudden realisation of, oh, I look a bit different, don't I? Over time, those two halves, I stopped seeing a need for there to be a clear line between them.

1:13:40.7 I also think that you can have what might seem to be contradictory perspectives on the same thing. I don't think that particularly when it comes to either things that you can consider to be a bit more abstract, or certain concepts or your understanding of self, I don't think you have to pick A or B. It can be both, and if in your sense of self one plus one makes three, that's fine. That can work, so for me in different situations I might describe myself in different ways, I might see myself in different ways. Sometimes I will purposefully talk about myself in a way that is in relation to something else, so if there's, I don't know, if someone's talking about something to do with their own heritage, and say they talk about their Scottish heritage for example, it might be that I relate to them or discuss my Nigerian heritage with them, because there's a certain sense of, oh hey, maybe we both have a bit of a thing about our English heritage and that's kind of a way to do some relation. Sometimes it's the other way around and so on, and I think that's something where it's fine now for me to be like, well, sometimes I feel more half black, sometimes I feel more half white, sometimes I'm just this mess, but I like the mess. I like all the rough edges.

1:15:31.2 Laurence Hillel: There's the richness, isn't there, in that diversity?

1:15:32.4 Abi Obene: Yes. There's like a texture to it, and it's nice to be in a place where it feels comfortable to have that texture. Even when sometimes people say, 'I don't understand how you can think of yourself as British and as Nigerian. I don't understand how you can think of yourself in that way.' To me, it makes sense. It doesn't matter really that there's a contradiction sometimes.

1:16:02.1 Laurence Hillel: If you think about it historically, the Romans came here, a lot of the Romans stayed.

1:16:09.3 Abi Obene: Yes, we're all a mix of whatever.

1:16:15.7 Laurence Hillel: The Saxons came here and they stayed, and then they're sort of a bit this and bit that. Yes, I agree with you, I think that's right. Would you say your interest in your roots has grown over time? Is it something you feel, 'I've dealt with that now'?

1:16:45.0 Abi Obene: I think it's a never-ending journey. I don't think I'll ever be like, oh, that's fine. I think that it's gone from being a point of desperation, of as a kid sometimes being a bit lost at sea and trying to figure out, what can I grasp on to that is me? To just being like, oh, that's nice. Sometimes you hear or see something that makes a home in you, and it turns out that's something which you maybe could have had all along. Now that's less a feeling of despair at the time I've lost, and more of a joy at going, ah, I have this new thing now.

1:17:26.5 Laurence Hillel: Okay, do you think, this is again questions coming to my head. Do you think that is to do also, and you can say no or yes. Do you think that's something to do with the fact that we as a nation - I'm not sure if that word, but that Britain has become more confident or more identified as a multi-ethnic society, and because of that it's almost like it's grown more comfortable with that? I know that there are elements in society who don't like that at all, but we have moved towards where it's become the norm for leaders of political parties to come from non-white backgrounds and so on. Do you think that has helped?

1:18:24.0 Abi Obene: I don't think it's made much of a difference to me. In terms of day-to-day life or whatever, it's always nice to sort of see someone when you're walking down the street going, oh, hey, same hat. Again, like those two black girls joining the Sixth Form being like, oh, hey. That's kind of nice, but it's beyond the surface-level thing, I think personally I'd feel basically the same regardless. Perhaps it's because I think that people, you kind of tend to learn to understand and build up your own community around you, and that community has always, broadly speaking, been very welcoming. While I will see statistics that say exactly what you're saying, and when there are things like the more recent riots and so on, and then the counter-protests to those. While that shows what the majority of people think, which is they sort of go, we don't want to be discriminatory. We don't want you to say that we as a country are going to discriminate against people just because of where they originally came from, or what colour their skin is, or what religion they follow, or whatever point is being raised as being a supposedly a bad thing. I'm aware of those in an analytical sense, but it hasn't actually really impacted my life.

Telling Our Stories Finding Our Roots

DEVON'S MULTICULTURAL HISTORY
ILFRACOMBE

1:20:15.5 I think some part of it is just the whole thing of going back to my mum's friend saying to her when I was a little kid, it's important to get used to being one of many and one of the only, there is a certain, I think, level of thick skin you also develop. Which some people would point out maybe in an ideal world isn't necessary, but there's not that much, in a good or a bad sense, that really tends to impact my inner sense of self. I've kind of felt that I need to make sure I make a conscious decision to let something in, to let it impact me, because otherwise I'd spend a lot of my life being very distressed about a great many things and I wouldn't be able to cope.

1:21:08.5 Probably the most recent thing that did impact me, that kind of made me go, I need to emotionally try and get a handle on it, was the Black Lives Matter protests with George Floyd. That really, really emotionally impacted me. That incident, watching him, well, watching him die and then being told by my manager, 'Okay, but go back to work though.' What does that matter, go back to work? Sort of going, well, I guess I do have to put food on the table and pay my bills and keep going. At the time, right after that video was released, before the big protest really started kicking off, going I can't afford, as a person who lives in a society where you have to try and make do, I can't afford the luxury of being sensitive sometimes. I have to consider myself almost separate to certain things and try to make a more conscious decision to let things in or let things out, I suppose.

1:22:33.3 Laurence Hillel: But that sounds to me, I see it quite almost defensive, a bit.

1:22:39.0 Abi Obene: Yes, I'd say so.

1:22:41.7 Laurence Hillel: It's like you've got to protect yourself. It sounds to me like you were, I mean, what happened to George Floyd, you obviously felt, may I say, as a black person in that moment. Tell me if I'm wrong.

1:23:00.5 Abi Obene: No, that was - yes, that's right.

1:23:01.5 Laurence Hillel: As a black person in that moment, I'm identifying with what's happened to him, and I'm shamed, I'm sad and grieved and angry and all this kind of thing. Also I hear you saying, 'My manager didn't really understand that.'

1:23:20.8 Abi Obene: Yes. It was just a very particular thing that I kind of went, you know. For me, I think since then I've noticed that both in the positive and in the negative, when things change in a

broader sense, when something happens that shakes things up, overall, as you say, I think it's defensive and I don't necessarily think it's a good thing, but I find myself very divorced from it all until I make an active choice not to be. You see more and more horrible things every day, and I think that was just the straw that broke the camel's back for me in terms of I can't keep feeling and I can't keep being so affected. I can't keep changing bits of who I am quite so flexibly right now, because I don't know how long I can keep changing bits without just overall losing more and more, until I can't support myself, until I can't stand, until I can't handle everything. Sorry, I took your very positive thing and made it horrific.

1:24:40.2 Laurence Hillel: No, I think that's interesting, because you've talked very positively about your identity, the good things about it, but actually I think what you're now saying is there is also a vulnerability, and that's part of me as well.

1:25:03.2 Abi Obene: Yes.

1:25:03.9 Laurence Hillel: That's who I am. Yes, I can understand that. Okay, you've probably covered, it feels as if you've covered - I've got just two or three more questions which we've really touched on actually, but there may be something more you want to say. You've lived in Ilfracombe for much of your teenage and adult life. How do you find you relate to the local area, and how do others relate to you?

1:25:35.9 Abi Obene: Ooh. I was here through my teenage years, went off to university, lived and worked for a bit in Bristol, and then COVID happened. I came back here because my work had gone remote at that point. I came back here because my mum is here, and she said, 'Come back, I have a garden. We can go for walks on the coast path. If you stay in your small flat in Bristol, you're going to go stir crazy.' I went, 'Yes, fair enough,' so came back, and then during COVID did a master's and changed careers into more actually using my degrees, as opposed to just sort of working. I've had a few years of almost hopping back and forth, because the master's was elsewhere then I came back, and then got a job in this local area and so on. Certainly I feel like every time I've come back, I've noticed there's been a change and I've sort of been like, oh, it feels a bit different in a way that you don't really notice when you're here all the time, because everything's kind of more gradual.

1:26:48.6 I feel like in particular in terms of the area, the landscape, how I relate to it, my emotions towards it are incredibly positive. Going up along the coast path, going for walks and hikes

and climbing around and so on in the forest, along the beaches and everything, has always been a really lovely part of growing up, and of being an adult here as well. Just sort of, oh, I just need a bit of fresh air, and just going off on a wander. I think in terms of the people, all of the people who I know with any level of regularity in my life are lovely. Certainly I feel like I am both from London, but also from here. These are the two places that I would say are my home. As much as I'm fond of some places, like I love Bristol as a city, I think probably this particular pocket of north Devon and particular part of south east London are kind of like my two places, which are very juxtaposed in terms of they're quite different. Maybe it says something, and then in terms of how people relate to me, I don't know. I suppose you'd have to ask them.

1:28:37.7 I'd like to think that people have fairly positive perspectives on me, just as I do on them, and certainly I've got a lot of really lovely friends here. Particularly from when I was a child and teenager growing up from school, but also just people who I've got to know since then. There are some really extraordinary people here who are often working very hard to make a difference to things, to help their local community, to help support each other. Devon, North Devon and Ilfracombe in particular, unfortunately has always been a place that's, I think, economically and financially been a bit of a struggle for a lot of people. I've definitely felt that, as my field of work is not something to go into when you want to be rich. You very much go into it because you think it's important, because you like it. That's why you go into it, and I think just that sense of as long as I can work and see friends and family and be happy, that's what I want. I think that slightly slower pace, almost, of life is something that I really appreciate around here. I don't think I'd get it somewhere else. London in particular feels quite fast. I'm sure I'd adapt, I'd get used to it again really quickly. I always do whenever I go there or whenever I go to Bristol or anywhere like that, but yes, it's nice to have the pace here.

1:30:35.0 Laurence Hillel: Yes. Okay, that makes a lot of sense. Another big key, but again you've touched on it, but I'm just interested if you want to say anything more. You obviously have an academic interest in culture and identity. Do you want to say anything more about that and where you want to go with that, if you want to?

1:31:04.6 Abi Obene: In particular, I think I became aware of my interest, particularly my academic interest in culture and identity, when I was doing my masters, so only a few years ago now. As it was a masters, you had an enormous amount of control over what particular topics you were focused on. Although obviously everyone left with the same degree on paper, everyone had such different

focuses. There are different places in which you can literally find work because based off your experience, because heritage, culture, history, those sorts of things are very, very broad. I found myself drawn naturally to the understanding of and assessment of and I guess appreciation of smaller cultural institutions that were really focused on providing something for their local community in providing a third space. A space between home and between work, something else that could be owned and appreciated and utilised by the local town, village, community of people, etc.

1:32:29.3 I found myself gravitating towards studying those sorts of institutions, those sorts of community groups and those sorts of areas, and then using those almost as a lens to peek out into the communities that they served. It made me realise just how important I found those places and how often I had actually benefited from those places before I really registered that that's what they were. Going down to the local museum a lot as a kid, going down to the library a lot as a kid and so on, and just enjoying having this sort of space that kind of felt it was mine and kind of felt it was owned by everyone else as well. It was this nice communal centre, almost, so my focus has always been on slightly smaller cultural institutions and how they serve people. I feel like when you get to a certain point, somewhere like the British Museum for example, it doesn't really feel like it's owned by the people who go to visit it, unlike a small local museum.

1:33:59.0 Laurence Hillel: Okay. All right, so what would you say is your particular contribution to that? I mean like down at Ilfracombe Museum, or the Burton Art Gallery where you work, what do you bring to it?

1:34:20.3 Abi Obene: Well, my particular areas I work in, in both of these places, or have worked in the case of Ilfracombe, most of it is focused more on what I find interesting, but might not be interesting to some people. The nitty gritty of working with items and artefacts, in particular the researching of them and so on, and literal physical care as well. Cataloguing them, re-cataloguing them, stuff that could just be boring number crunching, but to me is interesting because of the context that they're in. I think the places within which it allows my interest and focus in sort of cultural heritage and community to tie in to my work, is in ensuring that those objects and those items that form the backbone of museums, galleries, etc., are appropriately catalogued and cared for and researched. It illuminates things about local history, local heritage, that were previously unknown. It opens up avenues of conversation with members of the public about, again, parts of their history they may not be fully aware of. It allows for you to help form a space around these conversation pieces. You kind of

want to, and one of my focuses is trying to entice people in by saying, 'Hey, did you know this surprising fun fact?', or, 'We have the first copies of this particular artefact.'

1:36:16.0 Getting people in to marvel and wonder at parts of themselves and parts of their identity that maybe they weren't fully aware of. I suppose it's just a lot of trying to give people, to tie it back directly to something that I had, that sense of those little drips and drabs. Much like me as an undergraduate in Bristol being given, 'Hey, here's a recipe from someone for this thing that you might like,' or, 'Here's a funny little cultural thing you might not know about,' or, 'Did you know that however many years ago this is what was normal back in Nigeria, or this particular part?' 'Oh hey, I'm also from the same cultural group in Nigeria as you.' Might not have anything else in relation, but hey, we're both from this particular ethnic group. Being able to do that same thing of like here's the drips and drabs, you can make them into whatever you want. Perhaps they'll be important to you, perhaps they won't be. Perhaps there will be something else that comes along later that's important to you, but it allows people to develop a fuller and bigger context of themselves, their community, their local area.

1:37:26.8 Laurence Hillel: Do you feel that because of your mixed background, that actually means you have a slightly different take on somewhere like Ilfracombe Museum, or is that irrelevant?

1:37:46.2 Abi Obene: I think it's relevant in the sense that definitely some of the artefacts you sort of go, oh, why is this here? There's always that sense, but I think also in a more positive sense, possibly also in the sense that it was a place where you could just sort of go and be welcomed. Particularly in the first six weeks of us moving down here when I was nine, before I'd been able to go to school and actually make friends my own age again, being able to just go to that place and have someone welcome you in through the doors and say, 'Have a look at all the weird and wonderful and funny things we have around here. I'll sit and have a chat with you.' I think that was the thing really.

1:38:38.0 Laurence Hillel: You felt welcome.

1:38:39.0 Abi Obene: Yes, you felt welcome.

1:38:40.6 Laurence Hillel: Well, it's a bit like libraries for me, a place I felt at home, beyond home.

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1:38:47.8 Abi Obene: Exactly, so I think that's why, and although I'm not so customer facing in my jobs in the day-to-day, the small ways in which I do help with that are just getting some of those things to entice people in. Like, here's a fun little thing, come in and say hi. I think that's where it ties together.

1:39:07.2 Laurence Hillel: Yes, that sounds good. Okay, is there anything you want to share about being coordinator for this project?

1:39:17.6 Abi Obene: I think it's been an interesting journey. There's been a lot of moving parts to do with the project, and it's been an interesting way to learn more about the local community, about Ilfracombe history. There's all sorts of things that we've stumbled across that I had really no idea about, and I've lived here for however many years. Moved here at nine, and there's things that you feel like you should just know. After one of the volunteers like yourself, you sent me that document of all of the different residency research, and I went, oh, my God, I didn't know any of this! It's remarkable, it's really amazing, so I think it's been fantastic. Sometimes it's been a bit difficult trying to find out more about bits of history that have been hidden away, and trying to balance all of the different parts of the project. It's like spinning a lot of different plates at the same time, but that's part and parcel of I suppose this sort of work. It's been very, very rewarding and interesting, and I'm really excited to pull everything together.

1:41:02.2 Laurence Hillel: Yes, I agree, I think it's been a really rich thing to do. Not just here, but the other areas and the research as well, so I agree with you. A couple of final questions, and these are the sort of tying up. Out of your knowledge and experience of your life up to now, and you've talked an awful lot about it, some good, some bad, it's been a mix. What, if anything, do you want to share with others? I.e., what is it that you want to say? Out of all that experience, what do you want to say to others as a sort of legacy?

1:41:51.8 Abi Obene: I think I would just want people to be curious without being unkind, and to be open, for as long as they possibly could, try and be open to the things that the world is trying to tell you that you could learn and pick up. As you said, some part of me is quite defensive out of necessity at this point, and some part of me also mourns the fact that I feel like I have to be this way. I think being able to be open and be vulnerable is a really great and powerful and important thing, and I think that if more people were able to be curious and kind and thoughtful and open to all sorts of things,

we'd all be in a really, really good place. I'd like to think that in some way, some part of this project might help someone through learning something about their local area, or the people who have lived in the local area. I'd like to think that it maybe does that for at least one person. I think that's really important to me, and maybe one day I'll open up a bit more again, feel able to do so.

1:43:27.0 Laurence Hillel: Yes, that sounds very personal, and I think that sounds quite rich, what you're asking people to do, and I can see where it comes from. Okay, last question. What is your proudest achievement up to now?

1:43:43.7 Abi Obene: Oh, gosh. My proudest achievement. This is going to sound very nerdy and very silly, because it's not really to do with anything deep or meaningful or anything to do with my work really. I'm a massive nerd, and I love playing and running tabletop RPGs. I might lose some people here, I'm really sorry.

1:44:23.0 Laurence Hillel: You've lost me!

1:44:25.8 Abi Obene: Yes, so it's basically collaborative storytelling. One person sits down and makes a world, and a bunch of other people then sit down and you all play in it together.

1:44:41.9 Laurence Hillel: Okay, is this like *Minecraft* or something?

1:44:45.1 Abi Obene: No, not quite. It's not a video game, you're sat at a table together.

1:44:49.0 Laurence Hillel: Okay, so it's actual, live.

1:44:51.7 Abi Obene: Yes. One of the most popular games for this is called D&D, or *Dungeons and Dragons*. The person who starts the game or makes the game world is called the game master, or dungeon master, and the other people are players who'll make a particular person, particular character, some sort of hero or just a normal person or whoever. They'll play through this game world having adventures and all sorts, running businesses, being heroes, being villains, being whatever. I think weirdly, some of my proudest moments have come from introducing people to this game of make-believe, because it is a very freeing experience. I think as well, it is one of the few times when I

opened myself back up again. I think it's something where you can see people, they revert almost into a more childish, more happy, more open version of themselves.

1:45:50.0 You can get the most crotchety, grumpy person, get them sat down and playing this game. They might make a joke character or something, and within five sessions of the game, they'll be crying openly about this person as they sacrifice themselves for the sake of others and so on. I think it's a really fun, really creative and emotionally open experience, outside of just being a great way to hang out with friends. It's also a great way to make friends, and I've built a lot of bridges and introduced a lot of people through this game and by this game. There have been a lot of people who have said that finding this creative game, which a lot of my work goes into it as well; it's very historically grounded, the ones that I run, but they'll say things like, 'Through funding this game, you've helped me turn away from thinking some pretty dark thoughts. Through finding this game, I've found something that gives me something to do and to think of that's a positive thing in my life.' Some of those responses have really made me feel proud, because it's felt like I've had a really tangible, really positive effect.

1:47:22.4 Laurence Hillel: Just clarify, is this played online or is it played around a...?

1:47:26.7 Abi Obene: It can be both. Traditionally it's played all around the same table. A lot of my friends were scattered across the UK and further afield, so we'll hop into a voice chat basically and all play. It's been something that, yes, lots of positive things.

1:47:45.5 Laurence Hillel: Yes, you feel some good stuff has come out of it.

1:47:48.2 Abi Obene: Good stuff, fun stuff, sometimes very silly stuff, sometimes really riveting stuff. It's been a way in which helped people say goodbye to family members, real-life family members that have gone, unfortunately. It's been a way for people to explore the sense of grief surrounding parts of their life changing, and it's also just sometimes the entire game is a big metaphorical joke. When people realise at the end what it's actually about, to make them really laugh. Yes, I'd say my proudest achievement is continuously trying to be a better game master.

1:48:36.4 Laurence Hillel: Thanks, Abi. That's been a really rich interview, and I hope others will think so too.

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1:48:46.0 Abi Obene: Thank you ever so much for interviewing me.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT - 108 MINS]