Multicultural Backgrounds — The U.K.

I: I have two British citizens with me, but I'm not sure everyone would recognize that fact if they saw your names. Ayman, I'll start with you. What's your name?

A: My name is Ayman Razak.

I: And Mercy, what is your full name?

M: My name is Mercy Gill.

I: But you are British, are you?

M: I'm British, yes, absolutely.

I: And Ayman?

A: Yes, through and through.

I: And where were you born in England?

A: I was born at the Leicester Royal Infirmary Hospital.

M: And I was born in Oxford, in the John Radcliffe Hospital.

I: So you are stamped British.

M: Absolutely, yes.

I: Yes, but do you have a background that's not completely British?

M: No, I think I actually have the wrong colour skin to be a British person. I have Indian parents from India, yes.

I: And Ayman?

A: I guess at first glance, until you hear the name, I could be confused for a thoroughbred Englishman. But I think that when you dig deeper and then look at my passport, the questions start. There's no doubt.

I: What is your other background then?

A: I have an English mother and I have an Egyptian father, so it's North African roots as well.

I: Which I find actually quite interesting because I'm a Canadian and Canada is a country of immigrants basically. But maybe it wasn't that easy in Great Britain, in England, growing up with that kind of a background.

M: No, at the time when we grew up, we lived in a little village and we were the only coloured family that lived there. There were quite a few people that reacted to that. And not least the children at the school. They would often wait for us, the boys at least, and beat us up after school.

I: Beat you up after school?

M: Yes, they thought that was great fun, until one day I decided I'd had enough and I beat them up and then after that they were best… we were best of friends.

I: Now this is because you were the only coloured person in the city, you said, or village.

M: That's right.

I: But what time? Was this the 1980s, the 1990s or?

M: Yeah, it was the '80s.

I: Okay, that's quite shocking to me because I thought that a great multicultural society was England.

M: No, I think there was still quite a lot of racism at that time. At a later stage there, another family moved into the area, who were also coloured, and I also remember that boy was really teased and beat upon, on several occasions. So no, I can't say that the English were so very good at opening their arms up for people that looked a bit different from themselves, at that time anyway. But times have changed.

I: You feel times have changed now.

M: Absolutely, yes.

I: And you're proud to be British.

M: I am indeed, yes. I am British. I feel, I mean, that I am a Brit.

I: And if any other British person said you weren't, would you just beat them up.

M: Well, no, no, no. I hope I've learned something.

I: Okay Ayman, have you had any kind of similar experiences?

A: No, thankfully I think I got off quite lightly. When I arrived in England to live, because my parents moved to the Middle East shortly after I was born, I think I was a year, a year and a half old when my father and mother moved back to the Middle East. So I arrived in England at the age of 11, I think quite wet behind the ears, quite naive, really. And I think it wasn't so much perhaps the colour of my skin or even my name. It was the cultural differences that perhaps struck me most, or caused the biggest problems for me.

I: And what kind of cultural differences are we talking about?

A: I think that if you go to the Middle East, the family culture is quite different, and I felt in a way I'd been preserved, almost in a cotton wool pad, but when I moved to school in England, where it was far more boisterous, I think culturally more competitive, I think perhaps boys were perhaps more cruel than I'd been used to over in the Middle East. So I think there was quite a strong contrast, a big contrast when it came to the cultural aspects, as a child at least.

I: Did you manage all right though?

A: I think I yearned to go back to the Middle East for the first year or two. I found it very tough, a little bit of kind of bullying because I was different. I think I was perceived as being a bit softer than the other boys, for example, and it was a boys' school. So that was tough. And I think to integrate it took for me to find sport, and that was something that the kind of British boys could relate to and understand, and once I found that, and I started to get into it. Then I started to really make friends and I guess become integrated.

I: Okay, and the sport for you was rugby, I'm told. And this brought you into contact with the rest of your British comrades then.

A: Definitely, and I think it changed peoples' opinion of me, rather than being this strange person from the Middle East, it was, "Well, there's a good rugby player. He must be a good bloke." And it went from there, really. And I started to make friends and a kind of sport culture aspect, I think, is very big in England.

M: I also… I agree to what he's saying because I also started sport. I was quite sporty and I got into tennis, into the tennis club and then I also realized that I started to make friends, you know. So it did make a difference.

A: And I agree. I think it's a good way to meet other children and then people, they forget perhaps about coloured skin and they forget about cultural differences and backgrounds.

I: So then you're saying sports as a unifier brings us together.

A: Well, maybe also fish and chips as well. If you get into the fish and chips. But you're right.

M: It's an international language, I think, sports, when you think about it, that brings people together.