

Ben Amponsah

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PARTICIPANT: So I am a Londoner. Born and brought up in London of African Ghanaian parents. I was lucky enough, me and my twin, to be sent to public school, to an independent school down there, which I guess helped us academically. Went to Bristol University then joined the army, interestingly, for six years, I was an army officer. After that when I left there I moved to Sheffield. When I was in Sheffield, I first came to Manchester Pride, or to Pride, I can't remember what it was called back then. It would have been in 1999 I think and that's when I decided I wanted to move to Manchester and I moved from Sheffield to Manchester in 2000, that's when I came to Manchester. I just love the city, the vibe, I was really taken with the gay scene as well, although I loved the people in Sheffield it had a very small gay scene and I wanted to be around like-minded people if you see what I mean, so that was the impetus for moving and I've been here ever since I think.

[00:01:17]

INTERVIEWER: What were your, I mean, you said you liked Manchester and the scene and stuff. What were your first impressions when you first came to Manchester? Can you remember? Did you-

PARTICIPANT: Yeah yeah I do remember that. One of the first things I was struck by was the buildings, because it wasn't like the grim industrialness of Sheffield, there were some really grand buildings in Manchester which was a real surprise if I'm being honest. So that was one of the first things that struck me but then I kind of got immersed in the gay scene. I was really blown away, because I hadn't really experienced anything like that since I left London, since I'd been in London my late teens, early twenties, there was that, the bigness of it. All different strokes, all sorts of colours, it was fantastic, I was really taken with the place, fell in love with Manchester. And actually still a bit in love with it, if I'm honest.

[00:02:23]

INTERVIEWER: You talked about accessing the scene and stuff. When were you first aware of your sexuality, maybe being a bit different from the norm?

PARTICIPANT: When I was at school my, the secondary school I was at, that's when I first started playing around with other guys. But of course I was in denial, I was probably in denial until I was at university and it was really in my first or second year of university that I just accepted that clearly this wasn't just a phase and that I did like boys even though I'd tried to jimmy myself into some heterosexual relationships and it just wasn't quite working for me. So I just sort of accepted it then even though I had to go back into the closet because I'd joined the army and when I was in the army it wasn't allowed, you know, you'd be thrown out if you were found out to be gay. So I started to come out at uni and then I had to put myself back in the closet to pursue my army career, but the reason I left six years later was really because I wanted to explore my sexuality and come out really, properly.

[00:03:38]

INTERVIEWER: And how did you find, I'm from Bristol, originally, how did you find Bristol? You can say what you like about that!

PARTICIPANT: I absolutely loved Bristol, it's a fantastic city. Bristol would have been my first experience of gay clubs really, I'd never been to a gay club before I'd been to Bristol, I used to go to a couple of gay clubs down there.

[00:04:04]

INTERVIEWER: Because the scene's not that big there-

PARTICIPANT: No, no, it's not that big at all, it's kind of like you find a way don't you?

INTERVIEWER: You do.

PARTICIPANT: You find a way.

[00:04:13]

INTERVIEWER: And so how was it in the army? What was your role?

PARTICIPANT: I was an army officer so I was tent commander and troop leader which is three tanks so I was in charge of a troop initially and then when I left I was a senior captain in charge of half a squadron which is twelve tanks. So I enjoyed it but actually even whilst I was in I still had a couple of relationships but they were obviously civilians, I kept my civilian life completely separate from my army life for security reasons really. I enjoyed it for four years and then I started to feel a bit restricted, it's not very nice when you hear, there's casual homophobia quite constantly and not being able to be open about yourself was beginning to weigh heavily and that's when I decided I was probably going to leave.

[00:05:16]

INTERVIEWER: Great, so could you tell me a bit more about, so you arrived in Manchester, how did you get involved with I guess it was the LGF then?

PARTICIPANT: I remember I was asked to be part of a sexual health awareness campaign and initially it was just posters and [missed] and first aid bag saying make sure you test regularly for these STIs and such and that was my first real experience and I got this sense that the charity wanted some more BME representation, that was the thing, they were quite a white organisation at the time. So that was, well I never felt any sort of sense of unwelcome actually and that was how I started to get involved and I remember interestingly, I was actually starting to have some therapy around the time I made the decision I really want to get involved with the LGF rather than just this poster campaign and I was talking to my counsellor because I want to give something back to the community, I think. I don't want just to be somebody who

takes from the community, I want to give something back to it, that was the driver I think.

[00:06:44]

INTERVIEWER: I don't know if you are going to be cool with this, but I'm picking up one of your bracelets.

PARTICIPANT: Do you want me to take it off?

INTERVIEWER: Is that okay?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah, absolutely. Is it this one clinking around? It will be this one, yeah I'll take that off.

[00:07:04]

INTERVIEWER: Alright so in a way you were kind of a service user who then wanted to then get involved? Quite a common route.

PARTICIPANT: Yeah yeah absolutely. I mean a service user in that I took the gay men's health packs-

INTERVIEWER: Oh so you did promotion work?

PARTICIPANT: No, I was using them. These are free condoms, that's fantastic, that sort of thing. And then had the Out magazine which I always read and so I was one of the people who was using their services. I'd done this one campaign and I just thought I'd like to get more involved really.

[00:07:45]

INTERVIEWER: So in that campaign were you modelling or were you-

PARTICIPANT: Yeah, modelling.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, I was just trying to. And how was that?

PARTICIPANT: It was good, it was good. There's still a poster up of it on the third floor I think.

INTERVIEWER: Is it? The one where two guys are kissing?

PARTICIPANT: That would be me as well. But there's another one where there's a black guy with just his top off and carrying two first aid kits on the third floor, that's me as well.

[00:08:14]

INTERVIEWER: Okay, we're also doing a little exhibit and trying to get some of the graphics, posters, campaigns, so it's kind of like.

[speakers talk over each other]

PARTICIPANT: It was just, I'd like to give something back really, and then when I started training as a counsellor that was my opportunity really to properly get involved and support the charity because I was doing bits and pieces up until that point. And that was in 2002 and I volunteered as a volunteer therapist and I've been doing that ever since actually, still doing it for the charity.

[00:09:00]

INTERVIEWER: What kinds of, and I know obviously there's confidentiality stuff, but maybe generally you could say what kinds of issues do people present with or what's your interest in terms of therapeutic work?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah, a lot of the stuff would have been around relationships. Quite a few of the clients came with some sort of coming out issues. Some came to us because they'd been diagnosed with HIV. But relationships, sexual health, and coming out, would have been three of the key areas that I encountered as a therapist for the charity.

[00:09:52]

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. And what kinds of impressions does that give you of the kinds of needs that there are in the LGBT community or communities in terms of well-being and mental well-being, what kind of sense does that give you?

PARTICIPANT: There's quite a lot of research on it and the needs are quite high, higher in fact than the general population because mental ill health afflicts the LGBT community at a factor of times six to times ten depending on which, where you're at. If you're transgender it's even higher than that, than the general population incidents of depression, anxiety, alienation, it's a real issue and for that reason the resource, which is great, one of the reasons actually that it's so great that Manchester has that counselling service because it's one of the few parts of the country where you can just actually access free counselling as an LGBT person. But the need is high and I tended to, I think because I became one of the more experienced counsellors in the mid-noughties, I tended to see some of the more, the counselling coordinator tended to send me some of the more extreme cases to try to look after. So there were some quite severe issues going on for some people.

[00:11:24]

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned the Foundation doesn't have a great record, well that it's quite a white organisation.

PARTICIPANT: It was, certainly. It probably still is actually, thinking about it.

INTERVIEWER: I was just wondering if you wanted to say a bit more about that in terms of representation within sexual health campaigns or making LGBT services more inclusive and accessible.

PARTICIPANT: I mean, yeah, it's a good point Mike, because Village Haven, there's quite a few people in the BME community working within, I don't think in terms of volunteers now there seems to be quite a good mix actually, much more so than when I started with the charity but I don't think it's because the charity hasn't tried, but there was a BME group that I helped to set up, again in the mid-noughties, which has now fallen by the wayside. I can't remember what it was called but it was explicitly for BME LGBT people. Part of the problem is reluctance for people to be involved, because it would effectively out them, a lot of people from the BME community are just not out, that's the long and short of it. I've done a lot of work with people from the Asian community who aren't out and don't intend to come out and so they're having to live these double lives, so the culturalisation thing seems to be a kind of an issue. I never got the sense from the charity that the charity wasn't trying. We went out when the North West was going on, they had loads of magazine covers of myself, other black guys on, you know. So there was an effort and of course I was the chair of the board for two years.

[00:13:35]

INTERVIEWER: In terms of the kind of sexual health campaign, the modelling campaign, what was it? Do you have any? Let's go back one step actually. Do you have any memories of when you first heard about this thing, HIV?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah, gosh, I do actually. Because I was nine or ten I think. It was the early eighties wasn't it?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

PARTICIPANT: No, actually I might have been eleven or twelve. Probably twelve actually. I remember clearly that coming out and I wasn't really aware completely yet that I was gay, I remember this momentous portentous advert, don't die of AIDS, and that great big slab crashing to the ground, it was just horrendous to be honest. But then of course as my sexuality dawned over the next few years, you know, oh no, that was the real worry. You know, I don't, even though I started messing around with boys from the age of about twelve or thirteen, I didn't actually have proper sex as in penetrative anal sex until I was twenty? Twenty-one? At uni. I think there was probably some of that concern and fear about it all.

[00:15:02]

INTERVIEWER: Kind of internalised?

PARTICIPANT: Kind of an internalised fear. So you might argue that the advert did its job! Because I was absolutely really cacking myself about contracting HIV and it wasn't even really until, because even actually when I was at university, I don't even, I don't even at that stage think I knew much about it. How it's transmitted, how you can protect yourself, all of that nitty-gritty stuff I didn't know until I was involved with

the LGBT Foundation. Then I went on courses, refreshers, training courses and all that which were put on for volunteers and the Trust, the charity, and I became very knowledgeable about it all.

[00:15:53]

INTERVIEWER: Great. You're going to hate me but can I move the mic?

PARTICIPANT: Is it?

INTERVIEWER: It's catching on the necklace.

PARTICIPANT: Do you want to shift it? I can't see myself.

INTERVIEWER: Maybe if I move it over here?

PARTICIPANT: Is it making a sound?

INTERVIEWER: It is, it's just when the metal hits the metal-

PARTICIPANT: It clinks?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, because it's quite sensitive, you pick it up and yeah. That's okay. I'll come back to you if it's not.

PARTICIPANT: Okay.

[00:16:36]

INTERVIEWER: Okay, cool. And you don't have to talk about this if you don't want to. So the Don't Die of Ignorance campaign and you were saying in a way that that kind of scared you in a sense.

PARTICIPANT: Very much so.

INTERVIEWER: How do you think it affected your sex life? What were you comfortable doing and not doing?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah. I think it did because I was quite repressed about the whole anal sex thing really until, I'm just trying to think, yeah probably until I left the army. I was almost thirty really by the time I was having regular sex of that sort. I think a lot of it was just, there was a bit of repression going on there, I have almost no doubt about it. I did have boyfriends before then but we just never went down that route. I don't think I would allow it to happen. Too difficult, too painful, that sort of stuff. Too risky.

[00:17:50]

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember any of the, you kind of saw the adverts, do you remember any of the other media? What was the atmosphere like at that point in

time for you and growing up in terms of attitudes towards AIDS and HIV, do you remember anything around what people were saying in the street and the papers and the media?

PARTICIPANT: My overriding impression was, my overriding recollection really was that if you're gay you'll get AIDS, that's what I remember. I don't remember, you know, no one said it to my face because they didn't know that I was gay but that was the what was going around, if you're gay, you'll get AIDS, no doubt about it. And when I did come out, so I'd just left the army, so people worried for me on that score. Close friends, relatives. It's like, we can protect ourselves. But there was very much a sort of, now we're talking late nineties, there was still very much that sort of, if you're gay, you will get AIDS, basically. Not even HIV. You will get AIDS. Because I had, people were not even making the distinction, not in that decade really anyway, and I didn't really seem to be making it either thinking about it.

[00:19:30]

INTERVIEWER: That's something a lot of people have said really, that AIDS kind of eclipsed HIV.

PARTICIPANT: It did, it really did. Any sort of, so, I'm just trying to think when the film, Philadelphia came out, because that was the-

INTERVIEWER: Was it in the nineties?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah, it was mid-nineties. But even therefore films and any sort of media depictions were, if you were gay, you would get AIDS. I mean it's a great film, Philadelphia, but dies of AIDS doesn't he? It was just difficult, difficult, difficult. I can imagine that there were a lot of us from that generation and the generation before and the generation slightly after us, who were pretty frightened about the whole thing, understandably, but that would have affected all sorts of things.

[00:20:35]

INTERVIEWER: In terms of [missed], you came to Manchester, you got involved with the Foundation a little bit. Did you get a sense then of the kinds of responses that there had been to the epidemic and to sexual health? What was your impressions of that?

PARTICIPANT: From Manchester?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah from Manchester, in terms of the campaigning and activism that was people responding I guess-

PARTICIPANT: Yeah. I think we're now into the early noughties. I think people were paying attention. People were paying attention to the deeper message about testing and stuff like that, do you know what I mean? You protect yourself by testing. You use a condom, if you're not going to use a condom make sure you're in a monogamous relationship, there's all of that sort of stuff. I think people were paying attention but there was still a lot of people who were blasé is probably the best way I

can put it. Gaydar arrived on the scene, if you remember, and there were still people who would insist on not having protected sex with a stranger. So it was not getting through to everyone but I do think some of the messages and the campaigns that came out of for instance the LGBT Foundation were very to the point and they got through to people I think.

[00:22:08]

INTERVIEWER: So when you say to the point do you mean in your face?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah, in your face, definitely.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think, how did you feel about that?

PARTICIPANT: I thought it was great. I remember one of the Prides, some of the literature was quite explicit! There was a cheeky sort of line which you could take either way. But it was good, it was good, there's no point in beating about the bush with some of this sort of stuff.

[00:22:49]

INTERVIEWER: Could you just say a little bit more about, do you remember, could you describe, the time that you modelled, the two times that you modelled for the campaign?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: What did you have to do, did you just have to show up, where was the studio?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah, well the first one was, oh no, I think both of them were both next to the BBC, I think, bit next to Princess Street, bit further down the road-

INTERVIEWER: Not the Sidney Street?

PARTICIPANT: Yes, yes, Sidney Street. That was it exactly. Yeah you know, just turned up and was told what I needed to do. There was a cameraman, and suchlike, if I remember correctly the guy who was running the sexual health campaign was also the counselling coordinator. So that was how I got to know him and then I got involved as a therapist myself. Both the shoots that I think I did were there, at Sidney Street.

[00:24:05]

INTERVIEWER: And how was it? What did they ask you to do?

PARTICIPANT: It was great. It was fine, take your top off and carry these first aid boxes. So that was one of them, and then another one was me and this other black guy and we were kissing and that was also a campaign for sexual health and it was basically showing different LGBT couples could be two black guys, one black guy

one white, two large guys, bear type guys, two twinks, they had the full range going on which I thought was great.

[00:24:42]

INTERVIEWER: Cool. And how did you feel seeing yourself on these things?

PARTICIPANT: It was good. I didn't feel like, you know, but it was good that I was doing something to promote good sexual practices, good sexual health practices and suchlike. And there was another one actually that we did for the Commonwealth Games actually, I did a shoot for that, welcome to our diverse city was the strapline but that wasn't specifically about sexual health.

[00:25:13]

INTERVIEWER: Okay, cool. Alright, could you say a little bit more about your involvement with, so you've also got involved with the management of the Foundation-

PARTICIPANT: Yes, like the board-

INTERVIEWER: Yes, so how did you get involved with that?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah, I'd been working for the charity for a couple of years as a counsellor and a position, oh you know what, I was asked. I was asked if I wanted to join the board, thinking about it. It wasn't something I was actually looking for but I think that actually answers your previous question about you know, or what I was thinking about, the charity was really going out of its way to try to get people from the BME community involved and I had already been working for the charity and they asked me do you want to come and be a trustee? So I started as a trustee and then not long after I'd been doing that the deputy chair position became available and I went for that and then from there I went up to chair so yeah. So it was really good to be part of the strategic direction of the charity and I've kind of worked for the charity ever since, as I've said I'm still a counsellor and I'm now doing the Village Haven shift lead which is fantastic as well. So that's how I got involved and it's a charity which is very close to my heart and probably always will be to be honest.

[00:26:49]

INTERVIEWER: Great, could you say a little bit more about the Village Haven work?

PARTICIPANT: I certainly can yeah. The Village Haven is a static help point. So the Village Angels have been running for some years now, they roam around the Village on Friday and Saturday nights assisting people who have become intoxicated, drink or drugs, who maybe have been assaulted, who have lost their friends, maybe they've run out of mobile phone charge and they used to help them actually on the streets but last year they tried a static help point where people would be located actually within the Village and the Village Angels could bring people back there or people could be brought there by other people who were in trouble or intoxicated or suchlike. So I saw an advert go out for volunteers for the Village Haven a few

months ago and I thought oh yeah, because I'd been meaning to volunteer for the Village Angels anyway for a while but I was probably put off by the wandering about outside part. Nice in the summer, not so much in the winter. I saw the Village Haven thing and thought yeah I'll go for that. It's fantastic, we do some great work, it's pretty intense at times because we get some people in some real shocking states, but it's a really worthwhile job.

[00:28:21]

INTERVIEWER: That kind of brings me onto the question I was talking about earlier, where sometimes there's issues of self-respect and self-worth that might feed into sexual health and safer sex and I guess sometimes not always drug and alcohol can be involved with that. How do you see? Well I guess let's start with, do you see drug and alcohol use as a particular issue amongst LGBT communities?

PARTICIPANT: Yes. I think we just like to party harder, don't we, than the general population? There is a lot of research to show that that is actually the case, that the drug and alcohol use is significantly higher amongst the LGBT population than it is amongst everybody else. Now being a counsellor, I don't have a problem with drug and alcohol use, but what is an issue of course is when people get into dependency or they're misusing drugs and alcohol. So I'm all for a good time but what we're seeing as the Village Haven is people who have really taken it to an extreme, they're completely out of it, they're a danger to themselves or on some occasions to other people. Interestingly enough whenever I've got talking to some of these people once we've got talking to them enough, you know, this is just people who are intoxicated there's usually a mental health problem there behind it. There's usually a mental health problem and actually that makes sense doesn't it? If you're struggling emotionally and psychologically you're just going to, you're using alcohol and drugs to take you away from that, rather than just high or drunk, you get completely wasted. So yeah it's been, the work with the Village Angels has been a real eye opener but as a counsellor for the LGBT Foundation you know, I'm seeing this anyway within my therapy sessions. People are misusing drugs and alcohol as a way of getting away from their own unhappiness really.

[00:30:55]

INTERVIEWER: And then do you think there are any connections to be made between that and sexual health or safer sex? Is that something you're aware of or not so much?

PARTICIPANT: I think so. I think that it's very much connected and I think that in a non-judgmental way just making sure that people are aware of sexual health. One of the things that strikes me I think is that people can be very blasé about their sexual health if they're not very happy with themselves. Of course we live in a complicated world now with PrEP and people with HIV being undetectable so it's not a simple matter of make sure you wear a condom anymore, it's become much more complex, the whole situation. But again therefore the message needs to be even stronger, be informed, make sure that if there is any doubt in your mind, make sure you protect yourself. I'm just conscious of the time, I can just actually extend my parking, sorry.

[00:32:02]

INTERVIEWER: Is that ten?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah it's ten o'clock.

PARTICIPANT: I can extend, I can give you another ten or fifteen minutes but I need to extend my parking otherwise-

INTERVIEWER: I'm so sorry!

PARTICIPANT: It's alright. Otherwise I'll get into trouble. Right six minutes, extend, there we go. The good thing is that you can just do it, if I just put another-

INTERVIEWER: We can wrap up then.

PARTICIPANT: Yeah I'll do another fifteen minutes, that's fine. That's okay. Yep, extend parking.

INTERVIEWER: Sorry about that.

PARTICIPANT: No it's okay.

INTERVIEWER: Technology is amazing.

PARTICIPANT: It is, it's good isn't it? It's great in fact. There we go, payment done! Because there was a warden wandering around when I parked up, you just get done. The minute your parking is done they'll be on to you like a flash.

INTERVIEWER: I was actually at the Foundation and I parked-

PARTICIPANT: Around there it's difficult as well. Was it on Richmond Street?

[00:33:00]

INTERVIEWER: And I actually got a ticket but it was sent through the post because it was just in the Aytoun Street car park. I was waiting for someone so I went back into the car but then I didn't realise that it's all done by camera so it didn't matter if I was sitting in the car. Like if you've gone over a little bit, you know, it was really old school thinking. Cool, anyway. Alright, so, I had a question. So you mentioned in a way that safer sex and sexual health stuff has become more sort of complicated in some ways. How do you see it maybe going forward, the kind of future of sexual health? As you mentioned you've got PrEP coming online maybe-

PARTICIPANT: Shortly.

INTERVIEWER: And treatments for prevention meaning undetectable stuff like, how do you see the future unfolding?

PARTICIPANT: It makes it, it does make it a lot more complex, the scenario. I think it's even more important to press home the message of be informed sort of, because of course there are things about PrEP is great for protection against HIV but it's not going to protect you from any of the other STIs that are around. It shouldn't necessarily mean that people cast off the shackles as it were, because you've got to be, the message needs to still be, be mindful of your sexual health. There's a lot of STIs out there, some of which, like gonorrhoea for example, which are proven to be quite resistant to antibiotics or whatever. So I think it's important to keep hammering that message home which is be informed, and if there's any sort of doubt, make sure you protect yourself. We continue obviously, the LGBT Foundation to provide services like the counselling service so where people are really struggling with themselves or maybe with partners or whatever, they've got some sort of access to support. I think it's a combination of those things which continues to be needed so far from saying the struggle is over because we've now got things like PrEP, no no, people need to continue to stay on their toes really and on their guard, that's the thing.

[00:35:57]

INTERVIEWER: Okay, great. Is there anything we haven't covered? Anything that we haven't mentioned that you'd like to talk about?

PARTICIPANT: No, not really.

INTERVIEWER: If you had to kind of sum up the kind of work that you've witnessed but also been involved with in terms of campaigns, what would you say? What would be your take home message?

PARTICIPANT: It would just be, I think the take home message is be proud of who you are but be informed, don't let your guard down when it comes to sexual health and if you're doing that because you're struggling with how you feel about yourself, get some support, go and speak to someone, speak to a therapist. That would be my twin message really.

[00:36:59] End of transcript.