

Name: Naseem Khan
Address: Two Mile Ash, Milton Keynes
Date of Birth: 1978
Place of Birth: Kenya, Nairobi
Date of Interview: 8th February, 2018
Interviewed by: Victoria Holton
Duration: 00:23:15

00:00:01

Victoria Holton and today's date is February 8th 2018 and I'm interviewing..?

Naseem Khan.

And the year of your birth, please.

1978.

Can I ask you about when you first came to Milton Keynes?

I came while I was still studying at Luton Business and Computing College and I got a part-time job at the train station in one of the cafeterias, so I came in the year 2002, in Milton Keynes.

And where were you born?

I was born in Kenya, Nairobi and I came here to study but I first came into London and then I obviously got a job in Milton Keynes and the first time I came into Milton Keynes, I just fell in love...into love with it. It was just beautiful. I think the most important part of Milton Keynes was the space and the different cultures. I was really impressed with that.

That's lovely. I was going to ask you what your first impressions were, so that's quite good. And so previously you were in Luton, were you?

In London.

Oh sorry, in London. I thought you said...yes. So...but you live in Wolverton now, where you..?

Two Mile Ash.

Two Mile Ash, but you have a business in Wolverton?

In Wolverton, yeah.

So would you like to tell us about your business in Wolverton?

Yes. Well, I was working. I was a single mother for a long time and I found it very...Milton Keynes to be very accepting of that where, as coming from an Asian background, it would have been very difficult in other parts of the country, I believe. And, while I was here, I was struggling a lot with childcare and I have no family here so depended on babysitting and a lot of childcare and it was really expensive. So I had, for a long time, sort of decided to do my own business but I just couldn't figure out what I should do. I'm a teacher by profession and I was thinking of training and then, just out of having conversation with a few friends while I travelled to Wolverton a lot because of the different food shops that are available, and I almost quickly realised that the community in Wolverton, in Milton Keynes, they were quite diverse and the culture...there were so many cultures and there was one thing missing was home-cooked food and I had comments from a lot of my friends who came to my house to eat and they said my food is really good. And I said, well, if it's that good, let me try. And then I went through a stage of cooking lots of free food for lots of people and they were trying out and a lot of the recipes were based from what my son loves and, of course, all the recipes are based from my mum. And then I was looking for a shop and I went to the City Centre in Milton Keynes, I walked to Stony Stratford, Wolverton, and I found that Wolverton was just within my budget and also the people who are living in Wolverton are actually amazing and very friendly. So I decided to open my restaurant and that's how I came up with the idea. And it's been one year now and I'm only here today because of the support of the local community who is involved and, you know, the regular customers. And that's how I started my business.

And you were going to tell us what that was like, as a single woman, setting up in business and the people that you employ.

Oh definitely. While I was... – luckily, I'm married now but I only got married after I opened my restaurant – while I was setting up my business, it was really hard 'cause obviously I still work and my income, my...a lot of my profit and stuff goes straight to the women that I employ and while I was looking for staff...'cause I wanted to cook but I wanted to also serve 'cause I really believe

in quality and customer service and immediately when I opened the restaurant, I was running it on my own and I quickly realised I do need some people; and I have some friends who I have met through other people who are housewives and we talked a lot about how we'll be integrating it into my business, and one of the main concerns was, because of the culture I come from, they're not allowed to work and if they do work they can't work with men. And I thought about it for a long time and I thought, if I can provide the local community opportunity where a housewife, who's never had a job before – most often because of the barriers of the language and the culture – they can come and work in the kitchen, I can train them as well, so they can learn some skills, and assure them the safety that there wouldn't be any men involved.

And that's part of the culture in Milton Keynes because, you know, we have to respect each culture and make sure that we embed all that into how people feel and it's...the three women that work with me right now work in the kitchen, so they don't come at the front as much. So I don't cook as much I used to when I started, so they're more of sous-chefs, and they're actually in there and now it's made a difference to their life actually and they're earning money where they would have not earned money before. And they're not very young; all of them are forty-plus. And I feel that, not only have I helped myself, I have fought a lot of the taboo that comes with the culture and a lot of the, you know, stigma that women have and luckily, I was so happy to find somebody else. Well, it was actually arranged marriage from my father but he's a really good man and he supports me hundred per cent in my business.

00:05:18

I mean, personally, I like the thought that, the women that you are employing, hopefully, their daughters will see that they can go on and have...it opens up the world for their daughters as well, doesn't it, in a way, 'cause they see that their mothers are out and working?

It does, it does, especially when they've actually...a couple of them have actually sent their daughters to university but they've actually got them married. Obviously I don't want to mention any names 'cause I don't want to get them into any kind of trouble but, they've...a couple of daughters have gone to university but unfortunately they've been married and one of them, I was talking to one of them telling her, "Why don't you come and work in the restaurant? Start off slowly at the front. I can train you." I don't gain much, in the sense of 'cause I need skilled people, but when a lot of customers who come to the restaurant appreciate the fact that we're trying to run the place with the opportunities that we have and these women would have not had an opportunity before. But I believe that, by them seeing, if I can do this... Yes, the difference is I was educated but I was lucky because I came from

Kenya so, you know, I was educated, but where they were coming from they didn't even have basic education. But I am trying to tell them – and they can see – if I can do it... And I did it on my own without any support from anyone. Plus, opening the restaurant and I'm really proud that I didn't take a loan, you know. It was savings, it was borrowings from family and I managed to do that just, you know, single-handedly. So, if I can do it, so can they. And what we are trying to achieve is, which I want to develop a club now where a lot of the housewives can all come together when the restaurant is closed and we can talk about some stuff, which would be like...

[Short break in interview]

So you were just telling us about this club that you might like to do after hours and what kind of things you would discuss with the ladies.

Yes, we have managed to get a few groups together from the ethnic minority and we're just, at the moment, discussing – we're going to be meeting for the first time on Sunday – and I've asked them all to bring skills that they have, whether it's knitting, whether it's baking and what I want to do is, I want to integrate that into the community and see where we can have some kind of a barter trade system to start with – so, somebody would knit a dress and somebody can make a cake – so that the women who have been housewives for a long time, they can actually start thinking, 'I can do this from home'. But, of course, the legislation is there, you know, so they need to get certain certificates, especially the cooking ones. So I'm quite happy when I've told them I can set them up for the online courses for food hygiene.

For Milton Keynes, this is an area where these opportunities are there but nobody's looked at them at the moment and this is why it's very close to my heart, 'cause I wouldn't be here today if I was not living in this city 'cause I believe, anywhere else, with the taboo surrounding, you know, divorced single women and especially what I've had to beat through to open the restaurant – and it was quite amazing how some of the local traders were viewing me when I first opened. They had lots of questions, when I opened, you know: "Are you single?" or, you know, "Are you divorced?" and it was like, "Why are you even here?" you know, "You're a woman." But I went through all that and, you know, it's been really good and it's only because of the support of the local community.

[Brief pause to discuss technical issues]

I mean, personally, I think that you're a pioneer, really, because I think you're making such a difference and I think that is brilliant

'cause I think whatever gets people out of their homes and into the real world is really important. I think it's a really good...breaking down barriers with...in people. I think you're doing a really great thing here.

Thank you.

Right, where shall we go with here? It says here, what about examples of difficulties that you faced in your first year.

00:10:05

I had lots of difficulties. The most difficulty was, some of the local businesses, the questions I was getting and I was getting lots of phone calls as well, saying about, who am I 'cause I'm not from wherever they are, you know, I'm from Kenya, so I have no family, you know, 'Who's my family?'. And then there was a couple of people coming, trying to buy me out when it was really good, I'd only been there for two months. But that wasn't the idea, that I wanted anybody to buy me out. And then, of course, there's lots of competition so I also had a lot of phone calls saying, "If you're charging eight pound I'm going to charge six." And I was like, "That's absolutely fine."

But the most amazing part was that all these difficulties, while they were happening, I was still managing, somehow, to cover my costs. So, I've never had to, you know, tell the ladies who... – lovely ladies who work for me – I can't pay you, which is really amazing for me and, yes, you know, the barriers have been there but, you know, somehow I've overcome them. They've been quite difficult, especially the competition.

We did have somebody turn up, as well, two weeks ago, wanting to check the kitchen out and, because he was male, he felt he can just walk in and, you know, I had to stop him. You know, "Who are you? You can't just walk into the kitchen." He wanted to see how I make the naan bread, so I had to tell him, you know, "If you want to learn how to do that maybe you can pay me and I can teach you. You can't just walk in."

So it's been quite hard, especially being a woman. We had the same thing last night as well. At ten o'clock some, you know, men did turn up and because they were from some culture where they wasn't accepting a woman saying, "I'm closed now, I need you to leave," and they wasn't moving so I had to call my husband. But immediately he came, you know, they dispersed. So I...but they wasn't local people, you know. It was the local community, you know, they've been absolutely supportive.

That's great. We already discussed why you employ women and non-English speakers 'cause you're giving them the opportunity to come out of the house. Are they...do they...are you helping

them with their languages and... 'cause is that part of the job, that they are presumably speaking more English, are they?

Definitely. One of them could not speak much English at all and she managed. It did take me six days but we did a food hygiene course online and it took six days to do it but it was part of translating a bit, understanding. 'Cause it is...some people take it for granted, a level two level of English, but it's really difficult for somebody who can't speak. She'd really managed and she just about passed so that was really good. I do also employ a couple of local girls who are sixteen years old. They're still in school but they just come and work for me every weekend – haphazardly really; I think when they need the money. But yes, I'm trying to also employ young people, if they're interested. I have advertised, as well, for extra help but it's one of those things, I can't guarantee the hours, 'cause I'm not that busy at the moment.

Actually, David was saying to me that you did a Christmas meal this year for people who were on their own. So could you tell us something about that?

Well, it's not nice sometimes to, you know, say things you've done, only because I don't...my religion doesn't allow me to but I'm not giving any names so that's okay. It's just that while, through Christmas, because it was so badly snowed as well, I just put a note out there, you know, if anybody needed any food and I was quite overwhelmed with a lot of people who responded back about, their mum is stuck, or their father, and I supplied some food and I did go and deliver some as well and it was just part of, you know, if people are helping me, I want to help them as well. And we are in the process of allocating a night where we're going to do a charity night for the MK bus shelter, which is really important to me. And I've also just spoken to the director of the museum today, that we can work together to also do some kind of fundraising for them, for here.

That's lovely. That's answered all the questions specific to you and your business.

Thank you.

Is there anything else specific, 'cause I'm going to ask general questions about Milton Keynes, sort of stuff? Something regarding her business that you would like me to ask?

No, it sounds wonderful. I'm going to come to your restaurant.

It does sound wonderful; we're all coming to your restaurant.

And I don't sell alcohol so that's a good thing.

So, have you got any special memories of Milton Keynes, or your time spent here?

My first memory is coming here on the train and I really actually felt I'd come in a forest because, coming from London – I was living in central London – it was quite fresh and I have actually very fond memories of the centre being built right in front of my eyes, 'cause I've been here almost more than...nearly twenty years now; and there was no Hub, you know, all that area was very clear; and I remember actually going to the market when it wasn't very busy. And the amazing memories I have is, you know, going to the Willen Lake and see how every year the amount of people coming has increased and the...how the diverse...culture is diverse so much where, before, there was diversity but not as much. And then the different shops that have opened, you know, with different ethnic foods and how the local community has accepted people, you know, whereas I've lived in other areas where, you know, we always have problems but I've been very welcomed into the community of Milton Keynes, definitely.

00:15:30

Oh, that's good to hear. So, are there any sort of organisations or societies or clubs around Milton Keynes or is it that you're always so busy with your business? Or are you a member of any societies or..?

Well, I...my son goes to the Cubs in Crownhill, so we try and do...support them as much as I can, and I have tried to develop a lot of...I haven't just started helping people just 'cause I open my business, I have been doing a lot of stuff while I was even working in, or helping local women whose children have not been allowed to go to university because of the culture and have convinced the parents as well, let the girls go to university. So that has been all part of my job while I was working and...But I'm not specifically belonging to any community because I want...you know, we're all equal.

Yes, that's really good. So, about Milton Keynes, I think you've sort of said what the successes are. Are there any particular successes or failures in Milton Keynes that you really would like to highlight?

[Laughs] Apart from the bin collections, which is a nightmare, but no.

Just the bin collections?

But no, I think the negative part of Milton Keynes is how people perceive some things and make it into a big issue. There's lots of positives rather than negatives in Milton Keynes and if you look

at the negatives that are there, especially the homeless, that's something that the government needs to work on and we can just support the government rather than complain about the council all the time that, you know, the council is not doing this, the council are doing that. We need to do our part while the council is deciding the budget 'cause unfortunately they will do what the budget says. So somebody can't just remove money out of the pocket. So I think there's more positives and people just sometimes look at the negative and really make them into...there's worse things happening in the world. Milton Keynes is such a beautiful place for opportunity and I think we can make the negatives into positives. So I don't really think of anything negative in Milton Keynes. Even the cows are beautiful...
[Laughs].

So, the last question here. So, how do you see Milton Keynes developing over the next fifty years?

I know a lot of people don't like the roundabouts but I think they would...they'll have to increase 'cause the roads are getting better and I'm hoping...I have a vision of another hospital just to reduce the pressure on the NHS And I think the land we have, a lot of...there'll be a lot of houses and lots of industries coming here as well. 'Cause it's only twenty-five minutes if you take the Virgin train to London and I think people are going to be moving here a lot. And I think part of that is going to be also people looking at the opportunities and developing the skills that Milton Keynes has rather than employing the skills from outside of Milton Keynes, which people are not recognising at the moment. There's a high unemployment rate so I think those skills need to be put somewhere as well and that's something the government need to look at like, you know, increasing more apprenticeships. But there's a lot of opportunities for more industries to develop. Unfortunately Coca-cola has gone but that's nothing to do with Milton Keynes, that's just something that's happening all over the world. But I think that somebody will take up the opportunity and develop further industries in Milton Keynes. And I see it being one of the fastest, especially with the people...the car coming where you don't need anybody to drive it as well and the robot will delivering stuff as well. I think it's...technology-wise, we're really going to go high; really high. Definitely.

I think that's a nice ending. Has anyone got any other questions?

I was just going to ask about...obviously you come from Kenya and you brought that cooking with you. Are there any other aspects, I mean, music, dance, any other aspects of your culture that you feel you've brought to share with people in Milton Keynes?

Unfortunately, the culture I come from, as a woman I was not allowed to do a lot of things I would have loved to do. You know, the swimming, the...I love swimming and...but one thing I did bring with me was the fight of my mum and my mum is one of those people who has stayed in the culture, being a housewife, but always told us, "Get educated, become independent," and if I didn't have that in my head I would have not been where I am today, I would have just stayed in my first, unfortunate marriage and just been really unhappy. But what I feel I've got is the power of freedom that, apart from the cooking, that's the fight that my mum has, especially with her even fighting a cancer, the fight is still there. So I've brought that with me as well, the skill of, no matter what happens, things are always looking...always looking at the positive side of things rather than the worst. And I feel I can give that passion to the local people, to other people, rather than...and I think that's a very important skill. Personal development, I call it, that's what I'm saying when we are...when we start opening these clubs, it's all about personal development, about the confidence and the possibilities which are endless.

00:20:34

Yeah, I think it's so important. I think you are doing some good stuff there. Really, really important to get people out of their houses and get them into the world.

Definitely. If I get the opportunity...

Giving isolated women... [Unclear 00:20:48?]

I think if people can stop looking at the taboo surrounding why women are not allowed outside the house, 'cause it's not religion.

No.

You know, my mum and dad took a very big step to send me in this country and they had to fight a lot of their relatives for me to get here. I can practically have legged it here when I got the opportunity so I think, once people see how positive it is for a woman, or anyone, to get out and get educated – 'cause education is an amazing thing – and that's what I'm trying to pass on to my son, you know, my son is nine but he can make an egg. My husband can't because he was never brought up to be in the kitchen. And that's stuff like that that we need to promote more, rather than, you know, just stick in that closed cupboard and people really, if you look at...I believe ninety-nine per cent of the women who are housewives in our culture, if they actually bothered to just come out of the house, you'll be surprised about the skills we have. We wouldn't be able to...need, really, to start looking for skills in another country. And I'm not being racist to anyone, I'm just saying, equally everybody, we have a lot of skills; loads of them.

As you say, a lot of it is community...it's a community concept, it's not necessarily religion, because you are free to do so many things more than your community probably allows you to do and you're showing them that; you're showing them when they are allowed to come out.

Yeah.

And that's great, just breaking down little bits at a time, just to give them that bit of freedom.

Yeah, and I think because one of the biggest things of my personal fight was being a divorced woman, 'cause I left my husband. That was a big thing. It's never happened in my whole family so, you know, I was classed as the black sheep, which I'm quite happy with, and, you know, being classed 'I'm a divorced woman, so I must be a bad person', you know, the way people perceived me, they looked at me. But I'm very proud, you know, I'm very proud of my...I have my self-respect. I'm not judging anybody but everybody has their own life but, you know, I've proved it and my parents are very pleased; and I want to please God, I want to please my parents and, most importantly, I want my son to idolise me, not as a somebody really important but somebody who fought and, you know, it's successful, especially the education bit because that's what's missing in our community, is the education.

Fantastic

Thank you. Thank you.

We needed to speak to somebody like you, didn't we?

Oh, thank you.

We've had a lot of guys in so it's really nice to get some women in who are changing things.

00:23:15

END OF INTERVIEW