

The debate about black boys needing more black role models is gathering momentum. So what happens when a black boy is raised by a white father? Ayo Osibogun, 29, explains how his relationship with his white foster father helped him to become the strong man he is today and to face his demons. By Cynthia Lawrence



My white father, MY ROLE MODEL

My mother was one of many people who came over from Nigeria with her family to look for a better life. However, when my dad walked out on us, she was left to support two young boys alone. She had a cleaning job in the morning, a day job at the Metropolitan Police and another cleaning job at night, so she wouldn't come home until about 10pm. Because she was unable to look after myself and my brother, we were placed in separate foster homes.

I was two years old when I was placed in my first foster home, where I stayed for four years before moving to another home. My foster parents didn't have any biological children, so they chose to foster. At the time, I didn't have any real understanding of what was happening. All I knew was that I had a real mum and that my white adoptive parents, Joe and Maddy Parry, were my family.

In terms of black role models, I didn't have any

at that age, but my foster father Joe was a great model and the closest thing I had to a father. He worked as a JCB driver and was a hard-working man. I can recall going on a lot of outings together, particularly on special occasions. He took pride in dressing smartly and looking sharp wherever we went. We would also go and visit people and we would have fascinating chats in the car while he drove. My foster family was very welcoming, and everybody in the community knew and loved them. It gave me a different view on what family means.

Growing up in a small village in West Sussex also meant that I was the only black boy in the school. As a child I was very blind to racism around me, but in school I had to endure being called names such as the "little golliwog" and being told to "go back to where I came from". Whenever Joe and I went into town, we would always get stared at, and I felt the tension from those who didn't like me. My foster family would always defend and protect me. However, at the same time, I was also popular because I was the only black boy. Since I felt so alone, I'd compensate by ensuring that I would make friends with everybody.

Sadly, it was only when I became an adult that I realized that my desire to be accepted by everybody came at a huge cost. I was hiding a shocking secret: being sexually abused as a child. I cannot recall how old I was or what happened; all I knew was that it was a friend of the family and at the time, I didn't know it was wrong. It was only through a counselling course years later that I spoke out about the abuse. Being a black man, it wasn't something that I could express easily, and I had to deal with it when the time was right, which was when I reached my early 20s.

I had blocked this out as child by not telling anybody, not even my foster father, whom I adored and came to love greatly. My relationship with him grew alongside my desire for a father figure. He would discipline me when I needed it, loved me when I needed to be loved and was always there. He was someone I looked up to and who I could see was committed to taking care of his family. Even when, aged eight, I returned to live with my mother, Joe would always stay in contact and visit us.



You hear some stories of black children fostered by white families who feel lost. But in my case, I was made to feel comfortable with my identity, no matter where I was. Fortunately, my mother would always come to visit and whenever she did, she would always cook African food. My foster parents really enjoyed the food and would try and make it themselves to expose me to my Nigerian culture.

Ironically, after growing up in West Sussex, I eventually settled in Brixton, the melting pot, which was a big culture shock. Here I started to learn about the different African and Caribbean cultures, and I was surprised to learn how many factions there were to being "black".

I met my biological father for the first time in Nigeria when I was 16, but I didn't feel anything. As far as I was concerned, he could have been anybody. When he passed away in 2003, I couldn't attend the funeral. Although everyone was asking me to go, I felt I could not go to somebody's funeral that I had no knowledge of. At the same time, I don't feel any anger towards him. In fact, my father gave me the best gift that he could have given me by walking away and showing me how not to raise a family. I have learned from him that if I have any children with a partner, whatever the situation demands, I have to be there for them.

On the other hand, when Joe died in 2006 it was extremely painful for me. On the Thursday I received a call where I was told that he had cancer and only a couple of months to live. I had planned to see him the following weekend, but they called me on

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that Saturday to tell me that he had passed away. I was devastated – more so because I hadn't told him how much he had meant to me and why I loved him so much. When I went down there, I sat in the funeral home with his body, holding his hands, and I talked to him for about 45 minutes. I felt I had to tell him, even though he had passed, how much he had meant to me. He changed my life. Without him, I don't know where I would have been.

The counselling and coaching encouraged me to reflect about where I am from and how to be a strong black man. I had to understand who I was because of my different upbringing: I came from Nigeria, but I was brought up by white people in West Sussex. Luckily for me, I've had a supportive birth mother and foster family. Now I have a stronger understanding of my identity.

In terms of my sexual abuse, I came to the realization that what happened to me wasn't my fault. All I could do was either be a victim or fight back. The way I chose to fight back is by helping young people who have experienced abuse by making them aware they have somebody to talk to. Under the moniker of Mr Gorgeous, I dedicate my time to empowering people to believe in themselves and feel

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Speaking at an event organized by Urban Synergy, the mentoring resource pool



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gorgeous within. I do this through a "Gorgeousology" programme enhancing people's internal reflection.

I believe that my foster father definitely enriched my life by giving me a rounded view that allowed me to understand different cultures. I will always be grateful to him for teaching me important life lessons such as how to be confident and comfortable within yourself. No one will love you like you love yourself! 

For more information on Mr Gorgeous and the Gorgeousology programmes, visit www.gorgeousology.com