

(1) Tell me about your background.

Well, me Dad, he was a lorry driver; worked for British Road Services, travelling up and down the country, and so on. Me mother, she didn't work, as such, till she... well, later on in life, really, probably her mid forties. And she was just working in a factory, as such.

And what kind of education did you have?

It's secondary modern; we just did CSEs. I was going to stay on and do A Levels, but the situation was, me dad died when I was fourteen, so it was a case of having to get a job, really. So, I mean, the first job, it was working in a wood yard, getting the orders out for customers, and so on. And then, eventually, I moved into the hosiery trade as a dyer, and I was working there when I met Bena. That was in 1979. We met... We went out with each other for approximately two to three months, and decided to get married.

How did you meet?

We just met in the town centre. We both met in a pub, started talking, and it went on from there. It was not a very brightly lit pub, and I didn't realise she was Asian; I thought she was probably Spanish, or something like that. She's obviously got the Asian accent, but it wasn't that pronounced, at the time, which... when she told me she was Asian, I was quite surprised. But we just hit it off, you know, and things went on from there.

And how did her family react?

Well, we had to tell a lie, as such, because originally, when she came over to the UK from Uganda, they was living down south, and then they moved up north to Newcastle. And they were there for a few years, so we just said that we'd met in Newcastle, which was a bit of a white lie, you know. And they accepted it, to a certain extent. But the fact that I was English, and she's Asian, didn't go down too well. And they didn't think it'd last, but, obviously, twenty eight years later, it's lasted, so...

How did your family react?

Not too bad. They are, to be honest, a little bit racist, but they've accepted her, over the years, so...

(2) And when did you first become aware of her diabetes?

Basically, it was probably about a couple of weeks before we got married. The family, they seemed to be a bit concerned, because they thought I didn't know anything about diabetes, since... But one of me nieces, she's diabetic, so I had a rough idea what it was all about. Bena told me about it about a couple of weeks before we actually got married, but that didn't concern me, as such, because I did know something about it. I mean, the first time she went into a hypo after we were married, it was a bit alarming, to say the least, but it's something that you get used to, over the years.

What are your memories of that first hypo?

I was very frightened, because in them days, there was no Glucagon, as such, so it was a case of you have to phone for an ambulance. And then they'd take her to hospital and inject her with glucose, after doing a blood test, and so on, and eventually she would come round.

How often did that happen?

It was quite often, when we first got married. Her diabetes seemed to be a little bit out of control. But, over the years, it's got a lot better. She seems more stable now, than she used to be.

In those early days, did you learn how to spot what was happening?

Yeah, she'd have like a glazed look in her eyes. If she was looking at something, she'd just stare straight at it, and you talked to her, and you'd get no reaction. So, you more or less knew that there was something wrong. So, then it was a case of trying to get her to eat something or drink something, to try to bring her out of it.

Did that work?

Sometimes it did, and other times... It depends, really, on how far she'd gone. One of the things I used to do is tickle her feet. That would kind of like bring her round a little bit, because she's very ticklish, and then I'd try and get her to drink something. So, it was a case of "drink this", tickle her feet!

(3) Had you learnt much about managing her diabetes from her family?

Not really; they didn't seem to know that much about it. It was more or less a taboo subject, because... Well, it's a case of, they treat people differently. They tend to treat people differently as regards, if someone is disabled, then they should marry someone with a similar disability. It's very... well, to me it's strange, but it's just the way they treat their own people. Some years ago, they was trying to get Bena to marry someone who was in a wheelchair - obviously some kind of disability - and he was quite older than her, but obviously she didn't want to know. So, maybe I was a gift horse! Bena's got a younger sister, Vicki, and she was treated more as the elder child. It's like when me and Bena got married, which was before Vicki, Vicki wanted us to delay the marriage, and so on, till she got married. But we delayed it for probably a couple of months, then we thought, "well, we wanna get married, so let's get married". So we did. Then it was the case of when Bena became pregnant, Vicki didn't like that, because it was a case of she wanted to have the first grandchild. So, that didn't go down too well. But we just carried on anyway, regardless of what they thought.

What were Bena's pregnancies like?

During the first pregnancy, when she was carrying Emma, the oldest child, her diabetes was very erratic, and she had to go to hospital quite a few times,

when she was going into a hypo. On one occasion, they thought that she was hyperventilating, and this would cause some problems with Emma. But, fortunately, she's turned out okay, 'cause they did think that there may have been brain damage. But she's okay, no problems at all.

What about the second pregnancy?

That seemed to go a lot better. Not quite so many hypo attacks. And again, Sarah, she's turned out fine as well.

- (4) Can you tell me more about the signs that you look for, whether in the day or at night?

Well, at night, when we're in bed, as such, I mean, the only sign you can tell is she gets very hot. And it's literally like laying next to an electric fire - she gets really hot. So, then it's a case of trying to wake her up. If I can't wake her up, then do a blood test, and if the blood sugar's gone right down, then give her a glucose injection. Which, when you think back over the years, I mean, it's a bit of a godsend, as opposed to having to get an ambulance all the time. So, it made life a lot easier.

Can you remember, at all, when that change came, when you managed to cope yourself, rather than calling out an ambulance?

We moved to this house in 1996, and as far as I can remember, I don't think we've actually called an ambulance out since then, because it was around about then when they introduced the Glucagon, which, like I say, is a bit of a godsend, really.

What training had you had in giving injections?

Bena taught me how to do the injections not long after we got married, as regards giving her insulin, and so on, and the amounts that she was using, and so on - which varied in... well, morning and evening dosages. And as regards to Glucagon, I mean, that was pretty straightforward. We just used to have two containers, one with the water in, and one with the glucose in. But now, the syringe has already got the water in, so you just inject it into the glucose vial, then draw it back into the syringe.

Have you ever received any training or information from the medical profession?

No, not really. I mean, you get the occasional leaflets, and so on, but nobody actually sits down and says "well, this is how you do this, and this is how you do that".

- (5) Looking back to when you first got married, did you have to make many adjustments to accommodate Bena's diabetes?

Not really. It was a little awkward to begin with, but we just, well, made our own routine for doing things. Obviously, she had to eat regular times, and so on, a certain amount of food, and snacks now and again. But basically, just a routine that we fell into.

Did you change what you ate?

Myself? Not really. She tended more to change from what she ate, because, obviously, coming from an Asian background, it was a majority of Asian food that she ate. But, eventually, she got round to cooking English meals, which didn't take too long. Some of the meals were not very good, but I was able to cook, and show her some things, and so on, so it wasn't too bad, really.

So, did you both eat the same?

Yeah, yeah, we both ate the same foods. She didn't start eating meat till she actually met me, because she was completely vegetarian. But she got a taste for meat, and every other meal, now, we've usually got meat of some kind.

Did you have a sweet tooth?

Yeah, well, I like quite a lot of sugar in me tea, and so on, but I don't bother with biscuits, or anything like that, as such.

Can you talk about how you felt in the early days, leaving Bena alone with small children when you went to work?

I was a little bit wary at first, and I tended to phone home quite a few times, during the day. And if Bena didn't answer the phone, then one of the children would answer, and I'd just say "is Mum okay?", and they'd say "oh, yeah, she's okay". Then I'd say "can I speak to her?", and they'd say "well, she's putting the washing out" or something like that. So, then I knew that she was okay.

Was she ever not okay?

Yeah, on a few occasions, so then I would just say to the boss, you know, "I've got to go home. My wife's diabetic, I don't think she's too well", which... they weren't too bad about it. But, after a while, they weren't very happy.

Because it happened often?

Yeah, it did do, when she was younger, but, like I say, it's a lot better now.

(6) What kind of preparation did you give to the children for managing their mother's diabetes?

Well, they tended to recognise the symptoms, when she was going into a hypo, like the glazed look, and so on. And they would go to the fridge and get some milk, and sometimes get some water and put sugar in, and give her that. If they were not able to get hold of me by the phone, then they would phone for an ambulance. And eventually I would come home, and I invariably got there on time, and we were able to sort it out, and so on.

How has her diabetes changed over the years?

It's got a lot better, in respect that she doesn't have many hypo attacks now. As I say, when we were first married, it was quite often. But the, like, tell-tale signs that she would recognise - I mean, she used to get like a tingling in her

lip - but that seems to have gone now. But when you notice that she's going into a hypo, she has, like I say, this glazed look on her face. So, you tell her to have something to eat, and she tends to resist a little bit, because she doesn't realise what's happening. But now the penny's dropped that, you know, she's got to have something to eat, so she will get something to eat, or I'll fetch her something.

Has her diabetes affected your ability to go out for meals, or see friends, or anything like that?

No, not really. We go out a couple of times a month, for a meal, and so on. And we still socialise just as much as before, really?

Has her diabetes been a worry for you, over the years?

In general, no, but, I mean, there's been the odd occasion. It's like when she's... I've had a phone call, when she's at work, and she's had a hypo attack. I mean, they've got someone there that's first aid, and so on, but they've no real experience as regards diabetes. So, they end up calling an ambulance, and so on. So, I get a call to say that there's an ambulance on the way, and so on, whereas I could just go there and give her a glucose injection, and sort it out there and then. But...

(7) What happens when you arrive at the hospital?

Well, she's in the accident and emergency, and she's taken through to a private cubicle. They do a blood test, and then inject her with glucose, according to the blood test result.

Do you ever get the impression that they mind, or have minded you calling out an ambulance so often?

Not really. They've never been upset about us calling for an ambulance, and so on. They've been reasonably good, over the years.

Which members of the family have been most involved in managing Bena's diabetes?

Well, meself, when the children were younger, but as the children have got older, they've been able to cope. The two children, Emma and Sarah, they've been coping with Bena's diabetes since they were about nine or ten. They've got more confidence in what they were doing, and so on, with regards just giving her something to eat or drink.

What would be your message to any man who was thinking of marrying somebody who'd got diabetes?

Don't be afraid. A diabetic person is just the same as anybody else - they just need a little bit more help as regards to diet, and so on. I mean, me and Bena, we've been married twenty eight years. We've had no serious problems, as such. There's been a few ups and downs, same as any other marriage, but we're still together.