

6. George Saunders

- (1) I was born in St Kitts in 1931. My family background was medium class. My father was a tailor, my mother was a seamstress, and together they got married, and of course I came along and I grew up in the normal way.

What kind of house did you live in?

The house that I live in was a two up, two down type of house. We had a bathroom, we had showers, and a veranda on the outside, and benches and seats that you could sit on and enjoy the good weather. So it was more of a relaxed attitude in my family background.

How many people were there living in the house?

There were four of us, Dad, Mum, a sister and a brother.

So four in addition to you?

Yes.

And what kind of schooling did you have?

I had a secondary education on the island. All educational standard was based on the British way of life. We were taught English, and we were also taught a lot about England and the various countries that surrounded us.

- (2) I was at school for twelve years. My education was fairly basic and the teachers were very strict. You had to come to school on time, and where lessons are concerned they were very, very strict, to make sure that you absorbed what you were being taught and that you were able to present yourself as a good citizen when you grew up.

What did you do outside school?

I didn't do quite a lot of playing, because my father, being a tailor, he wanted me to follow in his footsteps, hence I didn't have the time to play cricket, football, basketball, many of the games that the boys and girls were playing. I had to be home in time for my father because he wanted me to learn the trade, as I said, and follow in his footsteps.

Would you say then that you didn't have much exercise as a child?

I wouldn't say that I didn't have much exercise, because in the mornings when you get up, in most cases you always have something to do in the house or outside, like looking after the garden or probably go and fetch things here and there. We were living about five miles away from school, and hence you have to get up in the morning, do your chores, and then run off to school and be there on time. If not, the teachers were very annoyed, and you'll be put one side if you're late and you have to tell the teacher why you're late, and if your excuse is not a good one you get lashes for it.

So you walked five miles to school?

Yes, I did walk five miles to school and back after school.

What kind of diet did you have in St Kitts?

Our diet was basic. We had rice, cornmeal, flour for making bread, and bananas, apples, pears,

(3) sugar cane, peanuts, oranges, guavas, papaya, many different fruits.

What part did sugar cane play in your childhood?

Oh that was a joy. As a kid we have great big sugar cane fields, and we would go into the middle of the field at times and we would break the cane, our teeth were very strong at that time, and we would juice the cane and eat it, and when we come back out we probably wouldn't want our dinner because we all filled up already. So sometimes our parents would be mad at us for going into the fields and eating the sugar cane and not partaking of our dinners.

Do you know of any diabetes in your family?

There is only one person in my family that has diabetes, or had diabetes, and that is my Mum. She got diabetes, I think it was even after I did. I one of the first ones in the family to have had diabetes, and shortly after, I think, my Mother, she too caught it.

Can you talk about when and why you came to England?

I came to England in 1958. I came to gather experience as most of my friends were doing in the early years. I came, as I said, from medium class family background, so coming to England was only to widen my experience and to probably share with the rest of my friends the experience that they have had.

Did any of your family come with you?

No, none of my family came with me to England. I got married in 1956, and my first son was six months when I left and came over in '58, and soon after, in 1959, I sent for both my wife and my son.

(4) Can you talk about what you did after you arrived here?

When I arrived in England it was in April. Such as this, the weather was very cold and I felt my body shivering. I said to myself "why did I leave my warm country to come here?", but as I was here I was determined to stick with it and make my life be a better one, rather than probably going back and not really experiencing what I came for.

So what did you do?

My first job, as you know I am a tailor. I tried to get work as a tailor without success, so I got my first job at Cape Hill Brewery, Mitchells & Butlers, as a cooper's labourer. I stuck it for about six months, and then I went off to work at Geoffrey Hughes biscuit factory making cream that was put into the biscuits.

And did you eat many biscuits as you went along?

Yes, I did eat quite a lot of the biscuits because, as you know, you can eat as much as you want, but you couldn't take them out. So I think there is where my diabetes has started, because I was dealing with a lot of sugar and fat, and you've got to taste the cream to find out if it was sweet enough or whether you wanted to put any more sugar in or whatever, and probably there's where my diabetes started.

So it was done by tasting rather than measuring, was it?

You measure it, and then after measuring it you taste it to see what the flavour came up to, if it came up to the standard that they wanted. So sugar played a lot, and in those days you were breathing the sugar as well as eating it at the same time, so you're getting a double portion into your body, and hence there is where I think that I have started to have diabetes.

How long were you working in the biscuit factory?

I think I worked there for about four or five years. And I was still trying to get work as a tailor, and I started to study from London Academy, and after I passed out my exams, I started to seek work in the trade.

(5) When were you diagnosed with diabetes?

In 1964, shortly after I left the biscuit factory. I, as I said, was seeking work as a tailor, and I think after my last daughter was born, I took a job as a worker in a small tailoring concern.

And how did your diagnosis come about?

I found that I was going to the toilet pretty often and my mouth was getting dry and I was losing weight, so I thought that there was something wrong. And I went to see my doctor, and he, as it were, asked me to give him a sample of my urine, which then I did. And at the time he didn't tell me that it was diabetes, but he sent me to the General Hospital for an examination, and they did do the examination and diagnosed diabetes.

Was this as an outpatient?

This was an outpatient General Hospital in the city centre of Birmingham.

Did they say to you what type of diabetes it was?

Not at the time, they didn't tell me the type of diabetes. They put me on some tablets for a few months and asked me to come back to see them, which then I did do, and when I went back to see them, they increased the tablets. And after another six months or so I went back to see them again, and there and then it seem as though the diabetes wasn't being settling down properly, so therefore they introduced me to insulin.

Can you remember what the tablets were that you were on, or what it was like to be on them?

(6) How did you feel while you were on the tablets?

I wasn't ill, I didn't feel ill in myself because I was still going to work every day. I got up in time and I went to work on time, but somehow it seem as though the tablets didn't actually work, because after my six months I went back to see them, and they diagnosed, or think that the tablets were not working, hence they introduced me to insulin.

When you were first diagnosed with diabetes, what help did you get with diet and testing blood sugars and so on?

When I first went on to the injections, a nurse used to call at the house to give me the injection and I had to wait until she come in, probably she might get there about nine or ten o'clock in the morning, before I could have something to eat. Therefore I sort of adjust myself to her coming and waiting to have something to eat. My meals were normal meals but they put us on a ration, asking so much for bananas, so much for an apple, so much for the intake of rice and yam and potatoes and things like that.

(7) How did these rations work?

They were all written down. You had, say, one and a half rations for a ripe banana, three rations maybe for rice, two rations maybe for an apple or a pear or whatever, and those rations accumulate together to give you a meal, and that meal would be, say, ten rations. And you go onto another meal, which would probably come up to about six rations, so if you should have, say, sixteen rations for the day as a meal, that's how you have to divide them up as you go along.

It sounds as though the rations were fairly well adjusted to West Indian food, for example they included rice, which perhaps wasn't so common in the 1960s.

Yes, it was very well organised. It seem as though that they knew that diabetes was something prevalent to West Indians on the whole, and hence in the early years they begin to give us rations and things like that, knowing, or having the foods tested to know, how much rations you should have for that particular day's meal.

How did you test your blood sugar?

I've got in my hand here a Clinitest colour chart. The chart, it comes in different colours, you have blue, slight green, a dark green, a brownny colour, another brownny colour and a yellow colour. These were tested with tablets. You had to take from your urine two drops into a little bottle, and as you drop the tablet into the receiver, it bubbles, and after a minute it settles down and it gives you the different colours that is on the chart. The blue is negative, and as it goes down to another one, two, three, four different colours it comes to yellow, and if it shows yellow it means that your blood sugar is high.

And what would you do then, if you found it was high?

When the blood sugar becomes high, and it shows yellow, we increase your insulin dose by two or three measures to reduce your sugar intake, or you would reduce your intake of food to adjust your insulin as you go along.

(8) How did you find adjusting to a new diet?

I found it was very hard, not for myself particularly, but for my wife. Because of the family, they had to make two different type of cooking. And I wasn't quite happy to see my wife having to adjust herself to cook two different meals, so I said to her "make the meal as usual and I will eat what I think my rations would come to", and partake of the meal like everybody else was having.

Returning to the district nurse coming to your house to give you your injections when you were first on insulin. How long did that go on for?

I think that went on for a few weeks really, and they asked me to come back to the hospital as a day-care in-patient, and there they taught me how to self inject myself with the insulin. It was only a day. They gave me an orange and a syringe and needle and asked me to use it in the orange, to see that I was doing it correctly. After that I had to do it myself, in my own body. There were various places that they said that you can do it, in your leg, in your tummy, on your arm, in your buttocks, and various places like that. The softer part of your body is always the best to use for your injections.

And where did you do your injections?

I first started doing it in my leg and then I referred to my arm, and sometimes I use my tummy or my buttocks as well.

Do you feel that you got good training from the hospital in how to cope with diabetes?

Yes, I think I did have quite good instructions as how to inject myself and how to use my diet, and I'm quite pleased with the way that they have taught me how to do various things concerning diabetes.

How did you manage your work as well as having all these hospital appointments or waiting in for the district nurse?

Well the hospital appointments, they are very few and far between, and I was self-employed early, which was in '68 I think, when I started on my own, and I hadn't to ask anyone to allow me to go. I just fill in myself and, you know, kept my appointments as I go along.

Did having diabetes affect your work in any way?

Diabetes did not affect my work in any way. I still went to work, and I do a day's work like anybody else, as long as I take my injections in the morning. I get up and I have a meal, and then I go off to work, whether it's cold or warm or whatever, so it didn't affect me in any way at all.

(9) What work were you doing?

I was a tailor. I work for different people, people like Mr Phillip Collier's in Kings Heath, and I spent about a year or two with Mr Collier before I started my own business in Balsall Heath, so that in itself was okay, it didn't affect me

in anyway at all. So my diabetes was well controlled and I continued to work, and as I said, it's never bothered me sufficiently enough as to keep me away from work, really.

How did your family react to your having diabetes?

I don't think they had any reactions at all about it. We all adjust ourselves, as I said, I never gave any particular problem. To be honest with you, I felt just as normal, you know, like everyone else really, any other healthy person, as long as I adjust myself to my diet and my injections, I was okay.

Did you ever have hypos?

I've had hypos. I know when a hypo is coming along and I always take with me something sweet, anything like a sweet, or a chocolate, or biscuit, or something like that, so that I know when it's coming along that I should have something else to rebuild up my blood sugar.

You mentioned that you didn't want to bother your wife, so you didn't really get her to cook special meals. So how did you plan your own diet?

My own diet wasn't planned in any way at all. As I said, I gave my wife the opportunity of cooking for the family and I would partake of whatever she made or she cooked for us to eat. As I said, instead of taking big portions, I'd take smaller portions, and it didn't affect me in any way at all.

So would you say you were keeping to the diet that you were given?

In a way I think I was, or probably. The diet that I was given was not sufficient to keep me going, and as I revert back to my way of eating it was a lot better, because somehow I probably have more energy to work and things like that. So it didn't affect me really, you know, the different type of cooking.

So you mean

(10) that you really chose what you ate yourself, rather than what was prescribed by the hospital?

I chose what I wanted to eat myself rather than to stick to the rations that the hospital let out for me really, and I found that it worked better, to be honest.

Did you tell the doctors or nurses that you were doing that?

I never mentioned anything about my diet at all. I just go in and see them and take my samples in as usual, and they would say "everything is all right", and "come back in another six months", or "come back in another year's time", and they check on me again and, you know, they put me off for another year or two again, you know and so forth, so it must have been working.

Did you adjust your insulin according to what you'd eaten?

Being a diabetic for such a long time, I know exactly how my body reacts, and I adjust my insulin intake according to the way my body reacts, so that over the

years I know exactly how to adjust, and how to really work my insulin intake out, in order to keep healthy.

Would that be affected by what exercise you took as well as diet?

I would think that if I do exercise I would use up a lot of energy, and for that reason sometimes I lower my insulin just that little bit, and if I am not really doing anything physically I just stick to my normal way of my insulin intake.

And really you've devised this off your own bat, you haven't been advised to do this by anyone in the medical profession?

I did it off my own back. As I said, during the years of the experience that I've had, I've learned how to adjust my insulin intake, and therefore I find that it works out quite well, rather than going to a nurse or to the doctor to ask him what to do, because eventually they are going to tell me to do the same thing, either to increase my insulin or decrease the insulin. So I know exactly how to adjust myself.

How did people outside your family react to your having diabetes?

I didn't have to tell anyone that I had diabetes. I went about my work as usual and I never said anything to anyone itself. It is only the close relations, like my family, knew that I had diabetes, and if you go out anywhere to have a meal or dinner I would eat just the same like anyone else. I didn't ask them to make any special adjustments for me, so there was no need for me to tell them that I've got diabetes.

(11) What about exercise?

I was advised that I should take exercise, because if you don't exercise, you find that your body would not be able to use up the insulin that you have got intake of, so that your exercise gets your body free to move around. If you sit down too much and you find that you are getting too stiff, you've got to get up and make some sort of movement in order to be, your muscles, not seizing up but working along with your body.

So what kind of exercise did you take?

I do a lot of walking and running - not too much, because if you're taking your insulin and you're running, you're using up all your blood sugar and hence you'd find yourself in difficulty. So you could take a fair pace of walking, or a slight jogging, for about a couple of miles, or something like that, and if you find that your blood sugar has gone down, you always have a sweet or something like that with you so that you can build your blood sugar up again and get starting again.

Can you remember changing the method of testing your blood sugar?

Can you talk about the different ways in which you've tested your blood sugar?

There are two ways of testing your blood sugar. One is with a strip that you pass through the stream of your urine, and the other one is a blood test that you

use from a little machine. You take a couple of drops of blood from your finger and you place it onto the machine, a tab on the machine, and the machine more or less tells you exactly the amount of sugar that's in the body. With the strips, the strips is only colour strips in itself and it gives you different colours, but with the little machine that has been issued to you, it tells exactly the amount of sugar that's left in your blood.

And which method do you usually use?

I use both, but I mostly use the machine, because that in itself give you more a correct way of knowing the amount of sugar that's in your blood.

But you do still use strips now in 2004?

I still use the strips. They are being issued to you through your doctors, or from the chemists. You can use them, probably, during your midday or evening, just before you go to bed, or anything like that. So it's preventing you from having to prick yourself so often, but as you use your machine, your machine, as I said, gives you a more accurate way of knowing the level of your blood sugar.

(12) What complications have you experienced?

I haven't had a lot of complications really in itself. In the latter years, I have found out that my muscles are becoming slightly weaker, and at times, when I go to have my usual annual check-up, the doctor would probably test me with a needle or with a feather and ask me if I feel the thing on my body. Sometimes, in certain places, you can feel it and in certain places you don't feel it, so it seem as though it begins to take effect after a certain amount of years, in itself. As I said, it's over forty years now and you can't expect that everything is going to be hunky dunky as you go through, but I'm still grateful I'm able to walk around. I'm not in a wheelchair, as it were, but who knows what the future takes on.

Any other complications with eyes or heart?

Not really. I am at the hospital, the eye hospital. I go to see them annually and it seems to be pretty steady, I haven't had any major operations in that respect at all. I can still see properly. I can thread a needle without having to use glasses or anything like that, so my eyes are fairly good.

Have you had high blood pressure?

I have had high blood pressure, and my doctor put me on some tablets just to lower the blood pressure. It's only this morning I went to see the nurse actually, and I think she said it's a hundred and eighty over sixty, which is high in itself, so she's asking me to use my tablets in order to lower the blood pressure a bit more.

Does most of your treatment come from the local GP's surgery or from a hospital?

In actual fact, it's between the hospital and my doctor. My doctor's a very good doctor, and sometimes the hospital will have to put you off for a year, and it means that it's a long year before you go back to see them. But in between that,



my doctor gives me a six months check-up to see how things are going before I go back to the hospital in itself, so I'm quite pleased in the way that I'm being treated.

Who do you see at the hospital?

I see a doctor who specialises in diabetes. As you go to see them they, you know, just check you out, check your toes, check your blood, and ask you various questions as to your way of life and things like that, you know, so it's okay.

Do you see a nurse or a podiatrist?

No, I haven't seen a nurse or a podiatrist to be honest. I always go and see a doctor in itself.

What do they say about your feet?

Well they haven't said much about my feet. They ask me to look at my feet, they look at my feet, but they only check me with the needle and to see my reaction by using a feather on my leg, or they might probably probe my knee and ligaments and things like that to see that they're okay, but they've never really said I should do anything particularly about it. Occasionally I go and see a chiropodist, who would cut my nails and, you know, keep the feet pretty clean and things like that, but nothing more than that to be honest.

(13) What do you think the secret of your good health is?

By eating the right thing and taking exercises. I find that, as I say, I measure my intake of what I eat. As you know, you can't have sweets, cut the sweets out completely. But at times, as I say, I'm fortunate enough to know when I'm getting a hypo, and I always carry something with me so that I could build up my blood sugar again. And I try to keep it as level as possible, so that I've never really had any problems, as it were, living. To me, diabetes is one of the best anyone can have, rather than having something like cancer or anything like that, because, I mean, you can adjust yourself where diabetes is concerned and you still can get about your business, just like everybody else, so I'm grateful it's not cancer.

I've noticed that you have some difficulty with walking. Why is that?

I don't think that it has anything to do with diabetes itself. I had two operations in the past twenty years, and that is pertaining to a spinal cord injury that I've had. I noticed that when I bend my neck down that I was getting shockwaves leading down from my neck straight down to my legs, and I was told by the doctors that my spinal cord is touching against the vertebrae itself. And the operations that I've had was to put that right in itself. So I think that it's not completely cured, because they've said that they can't do anything more, and it means that as I'm getting older that it's affecting my walking, as it is now. So I don't think, within myself, that diabetes itself has caused me not to be able to be as mobile as I would like to be.

(14) Have you noticed any differences in the way you've been treated by the medical profession over the years?

There is only one little thing that I've noticed, in that your waiting time seems to be a little bit longer, but other than that in itself, I haven't seen anything different in itself. I'm well treated from the time I was diagnosed as a diabetic, and I've got no complaints about the medical trade at all. In actual fact, I praise them quite a lot, because they seem to look after the patients very well. I've no encounter with any of the other nurses or doctors or anyone, and I'm quite pleased with the way how they treat me, to be honest.

There have never been any mistakes in your treatment or loss of medical notes, or anything at all?

No, not to my knowledge. I was first diagnosed, as I said, some years ago, and I attended the General Hospital, which was situated in the middle of Birmingham. And they've changed from that hospital now to various other hospitals, and my notes seems to go wherever hospital that is treating diabetics, the notes have been taken there. I also go to the Selly Oak Hospital, and the notes seems to follow me wherever I go, so there is no problem with my notes at all.

Which hospitals have you been treated at?

At the moment I'm being treated at the Selly Oak Hospital, I go there annually for them to check up on me, and I also attend the QE, but that is for a different reason altogether really, that's nothing to do with the diabetes itself.

(15) Have you noticed any changes in attitudes among ordinary people, non medical people?

Diabetes in itself, I think a lot of people nowadays know about diabetes itself. And there are various programmes, where people are being told that they should go and see their doctor if they find that they are doing things that are not quite normal, like probably going to the toilet or being thirsty, or things like that, and they go and see their doctors. They're being urged to do things as to make themselves be aware of diabetes itself, and by doing that, be able to know exactly how their lives should be adjusted to whatever aspect there is.

So you find that people know about diabetes more when you say you're diabetic?

There are a lot of people who know about diabetes, as I said, nowadays, because it's more publicised. And if you tell someone that you're a diabetic, you're not treated as a leper any more, because there are so many people that have diabetes these days that it's not something that is hidden really, so, you know, you're accepted wherever you go.

You say you're not treated as a leper any more. Were you ever treated as a leper?

Well sometimes people would think that because you're a diabetic, because you're having to adjust yourself to taking your insulin and things like that, they

might think that you're a burden and you're having to adjust your meals and things like that, but not nowadays really. Everybody accepts you as someone else, just like anyone else, you know, as a healthy person.

Did you have any experiences of feeling that you were a burden early on?

Not really, no. As I said, it was only my close relations knew that I was diabetic. I didn't tell everybody or anyone that I am diabetic in itself, so, you know, I didn't have a problem there.

Do you tell people nowadays?

I don't really walk up to anyone and tell them that I'm a diabetic, to be honest. If I'm out or have a meal or anything like that, I sit down and have a meal just like anyone else, and it's only my close relations who know that I'm diabetic.

(16) Do you have any message for somebody who is diagnosed with diabetes now?

Diabetes is not a death sentence, it's an awareness of the way your body works, and if you adjust yourself to the way your body works, you can live your life span just like any other healthy person. There is nothing to be afraid of, as long as you eat sensibly, exercise sensibly; you can live your life span just like any other normal person. Don't be afraid of having diabetes, it's not a death sentence, it's an awareness, so that you can know before anything goes further. As long as you're being diagnosed in the early years you're able to adjust yourself, and you can live your lifespan just like any other normal person.

So do you feel that diabetes has changed your life in any way from how it might have been?

No, diabetes hasn't changed my life in any way at all. I still go about normally, like everyone else. I eat and drink like anyone else, I have a glass of wine, but I limit myself to what my intake is in itself. And I still have been able, not being impotent, so I sort of adjust myself, as I say, then I found that life is just as normal as possible, no difference at all.