OLDHAM FOSTER CARER RECEIVES MBE FOR INCLUSIVE YOUTH AND COMMUNITY WORK

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Promoting diversity and tolerance across generations

This Fostering February we find out more about Oldham foster carer Tariq Rafique, who has dedicated over 20 years of his life to helping some of the most vulnerable children and young people in the area to reach their full potential.

Having started out as a youth and community worker from school leaving age, Tariq has since worked across two of the town's school academies, as well as taking up a leadership role with the **Oldham Race Equality Partnership** (OREP), all with the primary goal of breaking down existing social barriers.

He has now been officially recognised with an MBE for his services to promoting an inclusive and diverse community within the multi-cultural Greater Manchester town that had previously seen ethnically motivated riots in 2001, with Tariq playing a key role in bringing disadvantaged children and young people from various ethnic backgrounds to learn and grow together.

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We sat down with Tariq as he explained his inspiring journey so far, which has led him to his latest challenge of becoming a foster carer with National Fostering Group agency **Alpha Plus**.

How do you feel about receiving an MBE?

> *"I'm honoured and privileged. This is mainly because I'm grateful to the people that have nominated me, because it means that they've been recognising the work that I've been doing with them across the board. Whether that's working in communities, schools, colleges or in a youth club".*
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> *"I would like to feel that I can share this award with all the people that I've been able to make a difference to, especially young people who are some of the most vulnerable in society".*
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> *"Because I live and work in Oldham, I will often meet someone two or three years later in a shop or in town and I'll ask them how they're getting on before they say that they've just finished their apprenticeship, or doing something that they've always wanted to do:*
>
> *'Even if it's five or ten years down the line and you ask them about their journey, it's really rewarding to find out that you've had some kind of positive change with them'.*

You received the award for your work in promoting inclusivity in the community...

> *"Yeah, it's working within the community across a range of different issues. In 1988, I kicked off my life of working in the community. I was only 16-years-old then and had always been active in school in terms of being a team player, including playing for the school football team and getting involved in anything that could make the school that I went to a better place'.*
>
> *"From doing voluntary and part-time youth work, I went on to Bradford University and did a Diploma in Youth and Community Work. I then came back to Oldham in 1992 and was a full-time youth and community worker for around six to seven years, before going back to university to the University of Manchester, where I got a BA Hons in Social Policy'.*
>
> *Afterwards, I then worked for Oldham Race Equality Partnership, in which I became director. I did that for ten years. Those ten years were really challenging, especially when you consider that we had the Oldham disturbances in 2001. Communities were being torn apart, so we had to do a big piece of work around trying to get these communities to get back together again'.*
>
> *'Part and parcel of this was to bring together two very segregated schools, one which had a very large white intake and one that had a very large Asian intake. This was two struggling schools that we brought together on one campus to form a single school, which was called **Waterhead Academy**'.*
>
> *'It was a first for Oldham really in terms of bringing two diverse communities together. I worked on that project and I've been governor of that school for 12 years, dedicating a fair amount of my time to ensuring the school delivered on its pledge of creating a place where people from many diverse backgrounds could come together'.*

Overcoming the social barriers of segregated communities

> *"The biggest barrier to people getting on together is ignorance and stereotypes of each other. I really believe that once people come together and really experience each other's way of life, that it dispels a lot of myths that are out there'.*
>
> *'When people live in segregated communities, what they see on telly or read in the papers, at times it kind of creates that friction and shututes a person's way of thinking'.*
>
> *'I also went to work at **Oasis Academy** as a consultant from 2013 until 2015. Oasis was a similar school again, with very diverse makeups in terms of everyone coming together on one campus. I took everything I had learned from Waterhead and transitioned that over to Oasis'.*
>
> *'It's always very rewarding when you see people from different walks of life getting on and making mutual friendships, irrelevant of their ethnicity'.*

How do you manage your time as a foster carer while carrying out the rest of your work?

> *'I stepped back from my work with the Oldham Race & Equality Partnership, so that kind of opened up a few other doors for me in terms of fostering. I also cut down on my consultancy work at Oasis Academy, which really gave me the opportunity to look at fostering in a bit more depth'.*
>
> *'It was in 2017 that I had my first fostering placement with Alpha Plus, and from then on I've never looked back'.*
>
> *'I really enjoyed it. It's a different aspect of care in terms of what I'm used to in schools. It was definitely a new training curve for me, especially in terms of working with other agency staff such as social workers and people from a whole range of different medical backgrounds to try and get the best out of an individual in your care'.*
>
> *'The training that I've done to support me and my family has really done wonders. It has not only given me an insight into people's vulnerabilities, but also how you can make a difference in a person's life'.*
>
> *'Currently I've got two siblings who are eight and nine, who bring a bit of spark to my life! They can sometimes be demanding but like I say, that is part and parcel of the nature of the work'.*

Foster carers as role models

> *"I hope I can play that kind of ambassador role of helping people in terms of understanding each other better, but also to help challenge ignorance and stereotypes of people where it's required".*
>
> *"For me, I think it's about promoting positivity across the board. Whether it's someone from a different ethnic background, someone with a disability, high dependency needs or displays challenging behaviour, it's just all about helping the people that are most vulnerable in life".*
>
> *"Through my role as a foster carer now, it's also about making people more aware of the importance of foster care and how we need to step up to the plate around making sure that we provide a high level of care for the people that really need it".*

Standout moments

> *"It's very hard to pick on just one story, but I think for me I think that the Waterhead story is unique in that Oldham was going through some very difficult times in terms of the friction that was getting bigger and bigger, which led to increased tension in the community".*
>
> *"The Waterhead Academy project was just a massive project in terms of just getting people to not only come together and learn together, but also do a whole range of different things together".*
>
> *"They would go to Blackpool together and on other school trips. Some were part of the student council debating certain issues. And to see students coming together, getting on, making a difference to where they live and challenging ignorance in their own communities was such a big achievement".*
>
> *"My cohort was those children who were at risk of being pulled out of education or going into crime and serious involvement in drugs. It was about working with those individuals who were at the bottom end of the ladder".*

Making a difference to the lives of people in the community of Oldham

> *"You would need to ask the foster children, because every time we would go into town to shop on a Saturday, they initially say that they don't want to go and say "The amount of people that shake your hand...we start off shopping at 9am and still end up shopping at 4pm!"*
>
> *"If would ask these people if I have made a difference I would like to think definitely so, it's good to be acknowledged, but also know so many people in the town that you've always lived in".*

Future plans

> *"For me personally, I think that the next challenge is about opening up the world of fostering, especially to people within the Black, Minority and Ethnic (BME) community".*
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> *"I think that we still need to do some work with regards to fostering in the BME community around inclusiveness and accessibility, saying to them "You can really make a difference to the lives of so many people".*
>
> *"It's not as daunting as people think it is and it isn't so challenging that you might not be able to do it. I think it's about dispelling a lot of the myths that are out there in terms of the stereotypes around fostering".*

Click the video link below to watch our full-length interview with Tariq.

Do you want to make a similar difference to the lives of vulnerable children and young people in your local community? Enquire to become a foster carer with us today and start your highly rewarding fostering adventure!

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