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Date of Interview: September 2019



Kriss Akabusi is often referred to as a British Legend. He's sporting achievements and enduring presence in the hearts and mind of the British population are undeniable. Even more compelling, is the fact that he has achieved this from the background of spending his early years navigating through the care system. While Kriss never allowed his background to define him or hold him back, he has never forgotten where he came from and

is a passionate supporter of young people who have faced challenges – most especially those who have been in care.

It's in light of this, that Kriss has supported Phaesporia and that I recently sat down to speak to him about his past, Phaesporia and the support that young care leavers as other young adults require:

S: Many people describe you as a National Treasurer; for people that don't have an awareness of your sporting background and the role that you've played in British athletics, what are the key highlights that have led to that reputation?

K – Going to the Olympic games in 1984 having only been in athletics for 5 years and coming away as an Olympic Silver Medallist in the relay. It was a revelation to me that from my background I could achieve something that magnificent.

During the 1990 European Championship, I broke David Hemery's longstanding British 400m hurdles record. David had broken the record in 1968 and it was a

world record at the time.

Thirdly, being part of the World Championship team in 1991 that beat the Americans. It wasn't expected by anyone else aside from us, but a little bit of innovation, creativity and changing things around and for me to have the opportunity to anchor in the team was massive.

S – Most people will most specifically remember you for the 1991 World Championship team. I've been to athletic events in recent years and still see your name as the British 400m hurdles record holder.

K – *It's amazing. I cannot say enough Susan, it's 29 years ago. I can't believe it.*

S – I guess, unfortunately in some ways your sporting career didn't last forever.

K – *No and it's good. The great thing about sports is that it makes way for young people. You can't hold the limelight forever, you do wilt, you do fade, you die.*

S – So what do you do now?

K – *I mainly describe myself as a professional speaker, I do corporate events, workshops, keynotes, and seminars. Award events. I'm currently augmenting my studying at master's level, existentialism, and phenomenology.*

S – I want to back to your past a bit as I believe it's directly relevant to what we're focused on today. What was your childhood like?

K – *I was born in Paddington, London in 1958. My parents came from Nigeria to the UK in the mid-50s to study. I lived with my parents until I was four. I have the sense that they wanted the best for us, however, I didn't feel secure. I went into corporate care, prior to which I had a series of foster careers.*

Going into foster care, I believe was a way of my mother and father trying to do their best for my brother and I. they had to go back to Nigeria. Nigerians really looked up to the UK as being the motherland. A place to get educated and take information back home. So, I think my mum and dad left my brother and I here so that we would get the best of the British education system, With the view that they would go back and contribute to their community, and we would follow– 16, 20 years later and contribute to building the top like the pioneers had done.

S – It's a long time ago, but do you remember your first day in Corporate Care?

K – *Definitely.*

S- How did it feel?

K – Relief. I wasn't scared. It had been a long journey. I'd got used to being handed about. I'd been from one foster parent to another. I'd been in what must have been in a children's home before the official children's home. I could have only been about 4 or 5. By the time I got to Village Road which was about 1966/67, I was 8 nearly 9. I'm looking forward to it, I'm not scared. I got there with my brother late at night, tired. Straight to bed. I was relieved. Happy People made a fuss over us. New kids' syndrome. I haven't got anything negative to say about that really. There were other things that happened later on.

S – What was being in care like?

K – The challenges for me being in care was that you're nobody's person. You're just one of many kids. You're also very different. That creates a culture of its own. You don't have the family culture. You don't know what you believe. You don't have your own morals, virtues, and ethics because you're just one of many kids and what they called uncles and aunties. I'm not sure what they call the careers now, I now know as I look back, they were very young themselves. These guys are late teenagers, early 20s they are not very old themselves. They've got someone above them who is late 20s, early 30s, but they were youngsters themselves. They were doing a job. Their heart was in the right place clearly because they were working with children, but what I realise is that they themselves were not really skilled at being able to provide that special skill and attention. There are 20 kids, four or five aunties or uncles doing shift work. They couldn't spend any serious amount of time with one person. As long as you eat your food, brush your shoes and make your bed people leave you alone.



Kriss in the summer of 1972 in the Children's Home

S – is there anything that could have made that experience better?

K – We had Social Workers; your Social Worker came once ever 3 or 4 months. I think if I had an aunty or an uncle who visited me regularly; regular being a couple or three times a month and I might go to their house once a month. For example, if I had been with a Nigerian family and I got to understand the way Nigerians do things. The food they eat, the clothes they wear, the culture they've got; that may have made me feel more proud of my skin and ethnicity. Although there were a number of black children in the home, they were from all over. Most from the Caribbeans, some of them mixed race. I could see a misidentification with myself as I was going older. It's no one's fault, I'm not trying to blame anybody, but there was this misidentification.

S – So how did you find out that you would be leaving care at 16 and what you would be doing next?

K – in the last year at school all the kids are doing careers weeks and so people are going to ask you what you are doing. There was also a lot of activity going on in the background that I wasn't aware of. I remember in my last year of school, beginning to apply for jobs. Being aware that I couldn't do them. The job itself wasn't a problem, but I would have had to look after myself and live on my own. The idea of a bedsit – no chance! My social worker was good with me as he realised my fears and one of the uncles who had been a soldier told me I could do a lot worse than joining the army. They took me to the Army Careers event. It was a no brainer.

S – I'd like to move on to talk about Phaesporia and young people today.

I've been fortunate to have been able to tap into your knowledge and expertise over time. Right from when I started thinking about Phaesporia and the setup of the Programme for Care Leavers and ultimately young people estranged from their families. One of the first things we spoke about was the name – Phaesporia, The Enlightening Programme. Can you speak to the significance of the name?

K – I love reading about the Roman world. Hermes is the bearer of light. It's about creating new spaces and new openings in the lives of young people. The idea about Phaesporia and Hermes is that when you invite Hermes into your life, he creates new spaces and light can enter those new spaces. Suddenly, it contaminates in a positive sense, the whole room.

S – Now we were fortunate to have you as a guest for the last day of the pilot for the programme. I can say the group definitely loved having you and we continue to draw on

the knowledge from what you shared.

K – Fabulous

S – It would be lovely to know what your first impression was; walking into the room and meeting the young people

K – I do love meeting young people and do a few programmes myself.

Initially... how open everyone was – open to engagement. The desire for knowledge. The probing questions. The people really probed and wanted to ask questions. The variety of different people you had in the room from different places. Some of the stories that came out, you could see the traumas.

We all have ideas, but there was a sense that this was real work going on here and its priceless work. It's not a numbers exercise. You are working with real hardcore people with some issues and if anyone of them could turn their live around or catch the beam of light, it's going to send them on a phenomenal trajectory. It's worth it, it's real stuff. This is not you getting paid for a corporate gig.

S – I know its early days, but from what you've seen, how well are we doing in living up to the name?

K – To answer that question, you're probably going to need 2 or 3 iterations and more and some case study on those that have been there and see what has happened.

What I think Phaesporia has done very well which is no easy task is engaging at grass roots level with kids who really, really are facing a major choice which they will make by default or design. They are going to make choices fully agreeing; being aware – cognisant of the decisions they are making or by some kind of instinct that is going to impact their lives forever.

S – We know your story and it could be said that you're the exception to the norm, but on the other hand, I wonder, what are the possibilities. What type of impact could these young people have on the world that we live in given the opportunity?

K – There are looked after children in all sorts of phenomenal positions. You've got politicians, entertainers, poets, philosophers, educators, businesspeople, legal solicitors. So being a looked after child is not a death sentence. It's not an insurmountable obstacle, but it is one challenge that you've got that others don't have and the biggest challenge that you've got is that transitional period from 16 to 24. If you can bridge that gap from 16 to 24 and come out with some sense of who

you are, what you really want in life and connect at a financial level. Great you are going to make it, but it's that – really finding your feet. Not all at once, you don't have to be at 16, 18, 20 and know everything. You've got to connect into something somewhere where you've got an infrastructure, a system a person that's got your back you will fly.

S – And when you speak of them developing a greater sense of themselves and being connected, those are the things Phaesporia is working on, so we have the group events, we have the 1:1 meeting Coaching sessions, we're developing the alumni network for those that have the programme so they always have always have somewhere to go to.

We are hoping to connect them with mentors as well and there are a few other things I could mention. It would however be of value to find out from you, what additional things do you think we could do or could generally be done for them?

***K** – What I believe will be important for Phaesporia down the road will be to have a key group of suppliers and committed friends who will provide an outlet. For example, if you had a group of businesses – retail, automotive, construction who said – we're prepared to give your young people a chance if they show these capabilities via Phaesporia, Phaesporia would be a preferred supplier. That would be great.*

The altruistic reason for doing this is because you recognise, they are all our children, invest in people, but the self-interested thing is if you don't look after some of these people now, they might become problems to society.

I tell you what you could do as well, instil in that young person who has benefited, when you get to 24, come back and help the programme.

You're doing fantastic work Susan and what I'll say to you, thank you because you can see it's not just something of the cuff, you're actually invested in it and you're defining yourself in relation to it. It's very important that you've made that commitment to Phaesporia and Phaesporians.