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# BIG ISSUE NORTH

THE INDEPENDENT STREET PAPER | WORKING NOT BEGGING

## GULWALI PASSARLAY

**Former child refugee  
is a pillar of strength**



# Different past, shared future

Ten years ago **Gulwali Passarlay** arrived in the UK from Afghanistan hidden in a refrigerated lorry speaking virtually no English. Authorities would not believe he was only 13. Now the Bolton politics graduate is a published author, has carried the Olympic torch and is an advocate for refugees and the benefits they can bring to their host countries



**Imagine being trapped inside a refrigerator with the light on. But knowing that the door behind you is locked and sealed. There is no way out unless someone comes to open it from the other side. Pleading for help, banging fists, shouting, screaming would all be useless because there is no way a small human voice could be heard within a unit sealed as tightly as a coffin and potentially as cold as ice.**

That was me aged 13, a child refugee.

I was huddled among boxes of bananas, hidden in the back of a refrigerated lorry, desperately trying to reach England. I had been on a perilous journey to safety for one year, during which time I had been hungry, scared for my life, beaten by police and border guards, imprisoned and had spent just over a month living in filthy conditions in the so-called Calais Jungle. As I climbed into that lorry I knew the risks I was taking but by this point I was too depressed to care. I just knew I couldn't spend another night in Calais in the cold, wet, dirty conditions of the camp, where rats and cockroaches ran over our heads as we tried to sleep on beds of cardboard.

Getting into that lorry was a deliberate act of Russian roulette. I would either make it to England or I would die. Either way I would be out of the cesspit of human misery and desperation that was the Jungle.

The year before I had to flee my home of Afghanistan because my life was at risk. My mother paid people traffickers to take myself and my brother Hazrat, who was 13, to safety. We had no idea where safety was, only that we were leaving our home. As I hugged my mother goodbye she whispered to me to never come back, however bad it got.

On the second day of the journey the traffickers separated me from my brother and that's when my real-life version of snakes and ladders began, both to find a safe place to call home and to find my brother. I travelled through nine countries, never really knowing if the next day might be my last or if I would find the refuge I sought.

So when the driver opened the door of the lorry and I realised I was in England, I could have jumped for joy. Little did I understand that the hardest part of the journey about to begin.

I was taken into police custody and placed in a cell for the next 24 hours. Custody was not new to me. I had already been imprisoned in Iran, Turkey, Bulgaria, Greece, France – simply for being a refugee. People often ask why asylum seekers don't claim asylum in the first safe country they reach, but how? I told every official I met in every country I travelled in that I was 12 years old yet I was still arrested, deported and treated like a criminal. Often I was beaten too.

The only country that did treat me as a child and welcomed me was Italy, where I was taken to a children's home. I was grateful for the kindness they showed me but by then I'd been on the road for

over the world. There was a free coffee machine. I was so hungry and thirsty that I drank cup after cup until I almost made myself sick.

I was photographed and asked to confirm my personal details – name, nationality and date of birth. At that time, my face was very badly scarred from an earlier failed attempt to climb into a truck full of chemicals in Calais. They asked me questions about that. Then I was sent back to wait. Several hours later my number was called and I went into another room where a man asked me if I wanted to claim asylum. I said yes. I answered his long list of questions as best I could but I had been awake and hadn't eaten for over 24 hours. I hadn't really slept properly since the Italian children's home six weeks earlier. I asked the man if he could help find my brother. He laughed and asked me if I knew there

## **She smiled and said: "Gulwali, I believe you." Those three words changed everything for me**

almost 11 months and my mental state was in a bad way. There was no translator in my language of Pashtu and I couldn't understand what they were trying to say to me, which left me confused and frustrated. I had also recently discovered via a smuggler that my lost brother was alive and on his way to Britain. All I could think about was trying to find him. If it hadn't been for that I would have been so grateful to stay in Italy and in the home, but I didn't have the language to explain any of this. So after two weeks there I jumped from my third-floor room, made my way to Rome and from there to France and Calais and, in 2007, England. In my childlike naivety, I hoped it would be only a matter of hours before I was reunited with my brother.

Next day the police handed me over to immigration. I saw the sign outside the Dover Immigration Removals Centre and panicked. Would they send me back? I was given a ticket with a number on it and told to sit in a waiting room. It was full of hopeless, scared faces from all

were 60 million people in this country.

I was handed over to social services and taken to a nearby hotel. That evening I walked the cliffs of Dover. It was raining and cold but finally I could taste freedom. I could see Calais on the horizon and felt so sad for the poor souls still stuck there.

After 10 days, I was taken to Folkestone in Kent for a social services age assessment. There were five officials sitting around the table. I didn't realise that these people would define my future. I was questioned for hours about my family, my journey and my education, and asked to name streets in my home city of Jalalabad. At the end I was given a piece of paper. It had my name on it but they'd spelt it wrong, even though they had the ID card the Home Office had given me in front of them.

They told me the panel did not believe I was 13 and that I was in fact 16 and a half. It was the strangest thing, having the essence of my identity challenged. They were calling me a liar. Nothing I told them mattered. They'd made up



Above: Passarlay (second left) with members of his family in Afghanistan (2002). Right: "my ultimate moment of Britishness". Photo (p10): Sarah Lee

their minds beforehand. I was so upset I ripped the piece of paper up and threw it at them, then I started to cry. I had imagined the UK to be a place of justice and humanity. A place where I would be treated fairly, but this wasn't that. There is nothing worse in life than not being believed.

It was a few weeks before I understand the impact on my asylum claim of that age assessment. By saying I was 16 I was denied the chance to go to school, a foster family or care home. I was granted a temporary leave to remain of one year. I spent three months in Kent in a social services unit for under 18s. There I was given classes in British culture and taught how to shop, buy food and manage budgets. This was very helpful in understanding how things here worked, and I was grateful for that, but it was hard to relax and focus because I still had no real idea what was going to happen to me or if I could stay.

After that I was given independent accommodation with an adult asylum seeker. It was difficult. I was bored and lonely. The age dispute rumbled on. I was determined to prove I was telling the truth but no one seemed to want to listen.

The only bit of good news in my life was that I was reunited with my brother. He had been living in Manchester and I went to join him. It was there that my second life chance at life began.

I had been told about a place called Starting Point, an education unit for international new arrivals to the UK, many of whom were asylum seekers. I

went and knocked on the door to ask if I could be admitted. The headteacher Mrs Kellet listened intently to my story. Then she smiled and said: "Gulwali, I believe you." Those three words changed everything for me.

I was given a smart uniform I loved. It made me feel like a proper student and gave me even more impetus to learn. I would arrive there in the morning tired and hungry and the staff made me toast, tea or hot chocolate. It was safe, caring and compassionate. I studied English along with basic science, maths, art and sport. The idea behind Starting Point was to give someone a grounding for a few

weeks before they entered mainstream education. But because of the age dispute I wasn't allowed to do that. I stayed there for a year. These wonderful teachers fought on my behalf, conducting their own age assessment, which we used to overturn the original one.

Finally, the age assessment was overturned and on 6 June 2009 I was allowed to go to secondary school attending Essa Academy in nearby Bolton. I struggled at first. My language skills were still basic and I was intimidated by the size of the school but I was determined to cope. I was put into a German class when I could barely speak English. Making friends was hard because I was still traumatised and I felt different

to the other pupils. I hated PE – changing my clothes in front of students was awful and against my cultural norms. I tried to explain to the PE teacher, who let me change in his office. Worst of all, because of my poor language skills, I was put in the last academic set for everything. Many of the pupils in my sets lacked motivation or wanted to cause trouble, but I was dedicated and wanted to learn.

Slowly but surely, I made friends and got involved with school life, joining the school council and becoming a prefect and ambassador. I was moved up a set and allowed to take GCSEs. No one expected me to get one but I got 10.

## I know that the British values of tolerance, justice and fairness do exist

I didn't want other refugee children to experience what I had experienced, so I asked the teachers if we could develop a better system for other refugee kids to help make them feel more comfortable at the start. The school supported me and I became an ambassador helping new international arrivals. The headteacher organised a community cohesion conference where other schools came along to hear our model so they could implement it themselves. It was amazing. Just these few small steps could really ensure that other refugee children started school empowered, motivated and inspired.

In December 2010, I was placed into foster care, three years after I had arrived.



It gave me stability, warmth, love and family – the things I needed the most. It was my best experience in the UK and without it I know I could not have achieved so much in my education. My foster family not only opened their home – they opened their hearts to me.

A lot of my assumptions and stereotypes were challenged. For example, my foster mum Karen worked and dad Sean stayed home to look after the kids. I found this really odd at first but I got used to it and Sean was so helpful to me, showing me how to cook different foods from all around the world. They made an effort to buy me halal food and both took time to ask me about my school day and help with my homework. Trusting strangers, especially ones from a different faith and culture, was hard. But they made me feel at home so I did. Building a relationship like that takes time and there has to be willingness on both parts to make it work. But we became a family and I loved them both.

When I turned 18, social services told me I had to leave. I would have loved to stay with them until I had finished my second year of sixth form. I was back on my own again, but this time I had my foster parents' continued friendship and support as well as that of Mrs Brodie, a teacher I had become close to at Starting Point.

At Bolton Sixth Form college I became a student governor and sat on the school equality and diversity committee, which ensured equal opportunity access to all students. I also got involved with outside activities, sitting on the Children in Care Council, the Children's Society Youth Council, the British Youth Council, the NHS Youth Forum, the National Scrutiny Group, which examined government youth polices, and others. This youth voice work played an important part in my integration, giving back to the community but also, crucially, it made me feel like I was part of the fabric of British society.

I felt I had finally made it in this country when I got a place to study politics at Manchester University. Never in my wildest dreams when I crouched hidden in those boxes of bananas did I imagine my story in the UK would end with that. During freshers week I was so overwhelmed I almost had panic attacks but I knew how lucky I was to be at such a leading institution.

Now that I have graduated and am a published author I finally feel settled here in the UK. One day I hope to return to Afghanistan because it will always be my home, and home is home. Most refugees are desperate to return to their home countries once it is safe enough.



But until that day the UK is my second home and a country I love. Despite everything I went through with the authorities in terms of proving my age and my story I know for sure that the British values of tolerance, justice and fairness do exist. They exist in the people who live on this island. In my darkest hours and most uncertain days it was individuals – teachers, foster carers, youth workers, social workers – who kept me going and urged me on. The system did not value me but these people did. They gave me a sense of belonging and a mission that was what was missing in the system. But I know I was lucky because many refugees do not find that. And for them integration is so very much harder.

My ultimate moment of Britishness came when I was selected to carry the Olympic torch through Britain. I've never loved my adopted home more than at that moment. But I'd never have done it if my Mrs Brodie had not encouraged me to apply. It is because of people like her that I want to do all I can in my own life to

help and support other vulnerable young people.

My calling for now is to contribute to British society as best as I can by working hard to be a spokesperson for other refugees, by talking about the issues surrounding immigration, integration and multiculturalism. I hope by telling my story I can help people from both sides of the debate understand and come together.

There is so much negativity about refugees. But I want to prove that if given the right support, help with integration and encouragement to share their skills and talents refugees can become valued members of their host society. We may have a different past but that does not mean we cannot have a shared future. ■

*The Lightless Sky by Gulwali Passarlay is published by Atlantic Books. This article was originally commissioned by New Writing North (newwritingnorth.com) for Durham Book Festival. Overleaf four more care leavers pen letters to their younger selves*