

**SOMETHING
TO SAY _ _ _**



FOREWORD

Having something to say has quite literally become the bedrock of my career.

I remember being fifteen years old and spending a sizeable amount of my school days ‘off-timetable’, sat outside the headteacher’s office or being told to be quiet. I remember that two particular members of staff in my school were in the minority, in that they didn’t want to silence me. I remember their names: Paul Gildea and Denzel Dennis.

I remember that Denzel would make a habit of finding me and checking in on me on an almost daily basis. He’d ask how I was doing in my lessons, he’d ask about how my family were doing, and he’d listen to my answers. I remember that Mr Gildea was the first teacher who ever told me that my voice mattered and that I had a flair for creative writing. I remember that he gave me a notepad and told me to write about anything or everything that stops me from sleeping at night.

I remember that when I started writing, I found myself spending less time ‘off timetable’, less time arguing with teachers and less time being told to be quiet. I remember how validating it felt to step on stage for the first time at the Green Room with Young Identity some five years later and perform a poem in front of an audience. My poem was called “statistics” and it was all about how I was determined to become a successful Black man in spite of the challenges facing me in the wider world. I didn’t know that having something to say would quite literally open up a world of possibilities.

It felt liberating to say something that mattered to me and, in the 12 years since that moment, I’ve made it one of my greatest ambitions to support other people like me - those who represented under-privileged or stigmatised communities - to say something too.

With all this being said, you can imagine my joy when I was given the opportunity of working with the co-founders of this project on this book. Alex and Ade are two of the most inspiring and brave young men that I have met. They have worked incredibly hard on The Agency project, to create a platform for other young Black people to express themselves and give the wider world an insight into their life experiences, their fears and their dreams.

I hope that this book does just that and goes one step further in emboldening others to say something meaningful, from their heart.

Reece Williams



Contact is where young people change their lives through the arts, and audiences of all ages experience exciting new shows.

We are the leading national theatre and arts venue to place young people at the decision-making heart of everything.

At Contact, young people aged 13-30 genuinely lead, working alongside staff in deciding the artistic programme, making staff appointments and acting as full board members.

The result is an outstanding, diverse and accessible artistic programme for everyone.



The Agency
makers of **change**

The Agency is a youth enterprise project that works with young people from marginalised areas to create social enterprises, events, projects and businesses that will have a positive impact on their local communities. It uses a creative methodology developed in the favelas of Rio De Janeiro.

Delivered in the Moston and Harpurhey areas of North Manchester, and the Clapham Junction and Battersea areas of London (in collaboration with Battersea Arts Centre and People’s Palace Projects), The Agency was awarded £883,771 by the Big Lottery Fund in 2017 to grow the project nationally to communities in Belfast and Cardiff, in collaboration with FabLab Belfast and The National Theatre of Wales.



Founded by Alex Etosa and Ade Adedeji, Something to Say is an exciting new platform for young black people in Manchester aged 13-21 years old to express themselves and give the wider community a window into their life journey. We do this through a high-quality publication with compelling life stories, insightful interviews and poetry.

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Alex



Alex's Story

I grew up in the northwest of Spain in a city called Vigo. It wasn't a very popular town, but it was known for being quiet and 'peaceful'. It was there I went to primary school.

In Spain, my school life wasn't the best, as I was the only black kid there. Due to this, my first form tutor would refuse to let me play with the other kids in case I hurt them. This wasn't because I was violent; it was because the other kids were scared of me. I didn't understand why the teacher always kept me behind, but I followed her instructions, thinking it was something normal for them to treat me like that.

“Without them knowing, they were being racist.”

I remember when I moved into my fifth year. I got another form tutor, who again didn't let me play with the other kids. They used to play a game called 'family'. This is a game involving four children, consisting of one child being the dad, another the mum, then the other two being children. When I played that game with them, they'd always make me the pet dog, and they used to climb on my back and ride me. My knees would end up dry and ashy and, innocently, without them knowing, they were being racist when they said that my knees were paws.

I moved to Canada without my siblings, who wanted to remain in Spain. My Mum believed there were more opportunities there for us blacks. I went to Canada without being able to speak French or English. I went to a diverse school, which made me really happy. I saw other Black kids and I wanted to fit in and be like them, so I started asking my mum for new shoes and new clothes. I was never satisfied. If she couldn't buy me the things I asked for, I'd take my anger out on her. This was when I was 13.

At the same time, I again experienced bullying. A couple of 'popular' kids made fun of my accent and used slangs that I didn't understand. I didn't even know what the N word meant, but they used to call me it; all the Black kids I used to look up to didn't say anything, even though they knew they were being racist. It just made me angry and, again, I took it out on my mother without regard for her feelings.

My form tutor in Canada always helped me. She was always there like a second mother and listened to whatever I had to say. She was patient and, even though my English was bad, she listened. I told her about my issues at home. I explained to her that I always took my anger out on my mum, even if I didn't want to. That teacher helped me recognise that my mum was the only person who I've ever been able to speak to freely, and who had never turned against me. I wasn't angry at her. I was angry at society and the way I've been treated. I never forgot that message. I worked hard to reinvent myself. I did this by using my time to educate people around me. I made it my goal to help change young people who are scarred and angry after going through similar things to me. I want to be that person who people feel comfortable enough to speak

Ade



*Why This Book Matters
+ A poem called Why.*

WHY THIS BOOK MATTERS...

On November 5th, 2020, I lost someone who I would regard as not only a great friend, but also a family member. John was a very talented 16-year-old. Someone who would always make your day. Someone who would always put other people first. He was the perfect definition of what a human could be. We both had plans for the future. We both wanted to make our mums proud by owning our own homes. Sadly, those plans have been cut short for him. So now, I intend to fulfil those dreams for him.

Even though John is not physically with us, he will forever be in our minds and hearts. His soul will forever live on. If his tragedy has taught me anything, it is that young black voices really aren't heard in this world. The government don't care about us. They don't care about anything that we have to say. They don't want to believe that we are the faces of the future. We are the new doctors, lawyers and politicians.

So, this book is an opportunity for them. It is an opportunity to truly listen about who we are and hear about our lives. Things are changing. Power is shifting. If they want to be part of that change, then they need to hear our voices and what we have to say.

It's time to rise up.

RIP BROTHER.

A POEM CALLED WHY

Why was I brought into this world?

Why was I born on June 1st?

Why am I the first of 3?

Why did I come to this country?

Why did I go to St Edmunds?

Why was I the only Black boy?

Why did I feel uncomfortable every time I walked into the class room?

Why did I get called the N word?

Why did I get called Malteser head?

Why did I carry that anger?

Why did I get isolated from everyone else like I was an animal?

Why did I feel like an outcast?

Why did I have fights every day of my primary school years?

Why did I never get along with the teachers?

Why did no one believe in me?

Why would I sometimes cry myself to sleep?

Why did I watch my mum and dad suffer?

Why did my Grandmother die?

Why were her last words to me, "Don't kill your mother"?

Why did my Grandad die?

Why did everyone tell me I would not make it in life?

Why did I go to high school?

Why was I the big Black guy that everybody targeted?

Why did I get kicked out of school?



Why did I see my mum cry?

Why did I go back to high school?

Why did I have a stupid fight that changed my life for ever?

Why did I get kicked out of school for the second time?

Why did the police come to my house,

Scaring my little brother and asking for my mum's name?

Why do I have to be the stereotype?

Why have I been brought into this world?

My purpose is to find out why.

Mapy



Talking in Private [Schools]

It's a Tuesday afternoon. We're in Manchester city centre. It's full of boisterous high school kids from every corner of the city. What better place to meet than Burger King, the universal meeting point for all Mancunians?

Mapi arrives. We first met him at an event called Kids of Colour, where he sat on a panel and spoke about his experience of school. We order some drinks and sit down to talk. Before we've even spoken to Mapi, we know it's going to be insightful and interesting because he's clearly an extremely articulate young man. Even the small talk is intelligently crafted.

Alex: Mapi, tell us about yourself.

Mapi: I'm Mapi. I'm fifteen and I'm Congolese. I go to a private school. What else do you wanna know?
[laughs]

Alex: What's it like to be a young Black man in Manchester? Tell us about your experiences.

Mapi: It's fun, but it's hard at times. There's a lot of boundaries. A lot of things... A lot of racism that you wouldn't expect.

Alex: Have you experienced racism in school?

Mapi: Yeah. Especially because I go to a private school, people find it more okay to be racist. I'm one of the only Black guys, so it's not like I can really fight everyone. Well...fighting isn't the right mentality anyway, but you know what I mean.

No one in school really cares about racism because they don't see it on a daily basis. People think of stereotypes. I've had teachers asking about drugs and if my dad is about. Students as well... on a daily basis.

I've realised teachers don't really care about what you say. I remember one time I was in Form and our form tutor asked about problems that we were facing. I told her that I'd been stopped by racist police and she was like, "no, you didn't." And I was really confused... Then she was like, "not all police are racist...You just need to get it out of your head."

Alex: What's it like being one of the only Black people in a private school?

Mapi: It's long, because normally I hang out with the other Black guys, but when they're not there, I sometimes feel the need to be more "white". There are some things they don't get or won't know about or understand. It's hard, to be honest.

Alex: I know you've been to a few different high schools. Is that because of racism?

Mapi: Nah, to be honest... That's about me [laughs]. My behaviour is not the greatest and I've got a bad temper as well. I just... I've moved about a bit. I've controlled my temper a lot better, though. My parents got really upset over me getting kicked out of school, so I had to pattern up.

Alex: Obviously, you've had to mature a lot and swallow the negative things people say to you.

“The reason they stopped us was because we fit the description...”

Mapi: Yeah. I get really angry, but I tell myself I can't do anything about it, which I think makes them [those being racist] see it as okay to do it. But it's what I've gotta do.

Alex: Have you been to a school where you didn't experience racism?

Mapi: Yeah, Trinity. It's probably my favourite experience, because everywhere I look, I see Black people. You get to talk about what you want. It was just a good experience. But I wasn't there for long.

Alex: Let's look on the positive side. What excites you and what are you interested in?

Mapi: I'm into sports. Football, basketball, athletics. I'm into law. I want to be a lawyer when I'm older. I have done since I was small. I'm into music. I'm trying to be a producer, but with football and my studies... I need to chill with football because I've got exams coming up.

Alex: And what subjects are you into?

Mapi: I wanna study law at college. But right now I'm studying history, business and French... I really like French because I speak it. And maths. I find maths really easy. I don't know why [laughs].

Alex: Outside of school, what do you do with your time?

Mapi: It's mostly football or I base with my boys.

Alex: Tell me about the time you got stopped by the police.

Mapi: Which time? [laughs]. There's been quite a few times. I remember the first time I ever got stopped. I was with my cousin. It was just in front of Superdrug. They wouldn't let us go and they were asking bare

questions. It lasted about forty-five minutes. They said the reason they stopped us was because we fit the description of “two Black high schoolers in hoodies”. That’s all they said.

Alex: Do you think they’re racist because of things other young Black men have done, or because it’s them [the police] that are racist?

Mapi: I think It’s both. It depends. I’ve seen them stop people after something has actually happened. Other times, it’s just unprovoked. I remember one time I was with my boy, he got arrested... right there, in front of Superdrug... again! [laughs]. He got arrested for no reason. They put cuffs on him, slammed him and told him to stop resisting over and over. Then they put him in the back of the van and that was that.

Alex: How did you respond?

Mapi: We were shouting at first, but then we had to calm down because none of us wanted it happening to us as well. Once he got put in the back of the van, there was nothing we could do and we just went home, to be honest.

Alex: Do you think enough young Black men know how to handle these situations?

Mapi: Nah...one hundred percent not. A lot of the young Black men that I know, they get quite- not aggressive, but defensive when police question them. They get nervous and that’s perceived as being aggressive. But they... we... need to know our rights, definitely.

Alex: You’re going into your final year of high school now. How do you feel about it?

Mapi: I’m confident about school. It’s one of the things I’m good at. I’m not really worried about Year 11. I’m looking forward to college. I wanna do law and sociology. Then I was thinking either psychology or theology.

Alex: Have you thought about what kind of law you’d like to practise when you become a lawyer?

Mapi: At first I was thinking criminal law but now I’m thinking corporate because I don’t really think I’m an empathetic person. I don’t really...[laughs]. It’s hard for me to feel sorry for people, plus there’s more money in corporate, so...there we go.

Alex: Last question - is there any advice you’d give to other young Black men who are maybe the only Black people in private schools?

Mapi: Keep going because it’s hard. And don’t feel the need to fit in. Be yourself. If you try too hard to fit in, that’s when people lose respect for you. Just be you... Yeah, and keep going.

Kelvin



Talking with My Feet

Kelvin has an infectious personality. He steps through the doors of the Moston Miners Club with a massive smile, and we know we're going to have a good time. Kelvin is softly spoken, but his voice is extremely powerful. He sits upright and presents himself with a confidence that you cannot help but admire. We talk about all things football before we start our conversation.

Ade: Hi Kelvin, can you tell us about yourself?

Kelvin: I'm sixteen and currently playing semi-professional football until I grow and get my name known.

Alex: When did you start playing football?

Kelvin: I've always been in love with football. I first kicked a ball when I was two years old in the backyard. I grew up around the corner from The Hive, Barnet FC's stadium. So you could say football has always been a part of my life, but I didn't really play football seriously until I came to Manchester.

Alex: Why did you start playing seriously? Is it something you decided or was it something your parents wanted you to do?

Kelvin: [Laughs] At the start it was tough because...you know when you have a Black mum, it's just 'education, education, education'. As soon as I started to improve and lose weight - I used to be a bit chubby when I was younger [laughs] - I started to improve every year and showed that I was taking football seriously... [When I] started getting my name known on the local football scene, she was calm.

Alex: How long have you lived in Manchester?

Kelvin: Five years.

Ade: What were your biggest challenges when you first started playing football?

Kelvin: When I first started playing, it was to lose the weight that I had from a young age. I managed to lose it. With football, you've got to be fit enough and strong enough to compete.

Alex: Who do you play for right now?

Kelvin: I play for a semi-professional team called Abbey Hey FC, and I've made about seven appearances for their first team. I'm the youngest player to ever play for their first team. I might be leaving soon, because I've got a scholarship at FC United of Manchester that I start in the summer.

Alex: Tell us about your playing style.

Kelvin: I'm a versatile attacker. I can do multiple roles. I can be your big man up top, win the headers, be

strong. But I can also get the ball from out wide, cut inside with my right foot, use my skill to beat a player and shoot from outside the box... and hopefully score as well!

Alex: Being an attacking player, what do you enjoy doing on the pitch? Is it making chances, scoring, is it bringing others in to play? What's your thing?

Kelvin: I love scoring goals! I like being the man [laughs]. I also enjoy being kicked because it just shows that the defender is getting tired and I've still got energy, and that the defender can't live with me attacking him.

Alex: Tell us about your studies.

Kelvin: Studies! [laughs]. They're going fine. The only subject I'm struggling with is science. I'm on target with the other subjects.

Alex: Do you struggle to balance football and studies?

Kelvin: Yeah. Obviously, I'm still sixteen and it's GCSE year. With football, I'm travelling up and down the country to play matches and getting in late. It's difficult. When I travel with my teammates to a match, I try to revise. But, yeah, it's difficult... Like, you're tired from playing football and travelling, and when you're tired you don't always revise well and take in what you're studying.

Ade: I know you've had a couple of injuries in your career so far. What were the injuries and how did you overcome them?

Kelvin: [Laughs] I'm currently injured right now. I've had three knee injuries. I've had a fractured wrist and I've dislocated my shoulder twice. But each time, I've managed to overcome them. It was difficult. I've cried at times because of the pain and the disappointment of it. I like playing football, so it's hard to be injured and not be able to play. But I've always had good people around me to support me to bounce back from my injuries.

Ade: Who are you inspired by?

Kelvin: Well, being Portuguese, it's got to be Cristiano Ronaldo. He constantly works hard. Even if he's injured. Like, for example, in the 2016 European Championships when he got injured in the final, he went into the dressing room, came back out and was basically the assistant manager for the rest of the match! He was on the sideline, encouraging players, and that's why I try to be there for my team when I'm injured. Last week, I couldn't play for my school team because I was injured, but I was cheering my teammates on. Yeah... Cristiano Ronaldo... He just works so hard. There's this story that Patrice Evra [the decorated French footballer who spent eight years at Manchester United] told. Cristiano invited Patrice to his house after training. Cristiano was like, 'Let's go for a swim'. So they swam. Then he was like 'Let's have a workout in my gym.' And Patrice started to complain and was like, 'Why didn't we just stay at the training ground?'. It just

shows how hardworking he is, constantly fit, always eating the right things...

Alex: There are others, like your little brother, who look up to you now. How does that make you feel?

Kelvin: Obviously, having a little brother who also plays football... He looks up to me. We are two completely different players, but I try to give him advice and guide him to the right things. He's young and he doesn't know what to expect. I never had that guidance when I was younger, and I want to motivate him and show him he can do it.

Ade: How does the scholarship work?

Kelvin: We'll be training every single day and playing two matches every week, with education fitted around us. Everything is just based around my football, so I won't have to worry about making my education fit in around football... it's just gonna be implemented for me.

Alex: What subjects do you want to study?

Kelvin: P.E... anything physical to be honest. I'm looking forward to the BTEC course. I'm hoping that even if I don't make it as a footballer... I can use the BTEC to coach, or I can travel round to academies to inspire young players and show them what they can achieve in the future if they keep their head in the game.

“You've got keep your head up”

Ade: What words of advice could you give to young people who want to become footballers? What would you encourage them with to keep their heads up?

Kelvin: There are lots of challenges that can make you feel low in football. Injuries...getting released by an academy like I was at Oldham Athletic. Being subbed off... You've got to keep your head up and be ready to show your manager that your name should be on the team sheet and that you just wanna show everyone what you can do. You've got to be willing to be a better player and show you can climb up the divisions and play at a higher level. Someone who has done that recently is Jamie Vardy. He went from playing against FC United in non-league football to winning the Premier League and playing for England at Wembley.

Alex: Where do you see yourself in 5 years' time?

Kelvin: I've not really thought that far ahead, but hopefully playing football professionally.

Alex: Thanks for sharing your story with us. It's been great chatting with you.

Olivia



Talking on Stage

Olivia Lee is the big sister that many of the young people in Manchester didn't even know they had. With experience, skills and a personality that defies her age, you can tell that Olivia was born with something to say. Here, between her many jobs and projects, we finally got the chance to sit down with her and hear more about her journey.

Ade: Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Olivia: Hi, I'm Olivia, I'm 19 years old and a Project Assistant on The Agency Project at Contact. I'm also a Project Assistant for Young Manchester, and I'm leading a piece of research for them at the moment. I run my own events, I do a bit of dancing and deejaying... [and] hosting... I just like to keep my life a little fun, as well as working!

Alex: How was your time in school and college?

Olivia: So, high school was really crazy for me because I moved around a lot prior to high school. Then, when I'd been in Rochdale for a few years, I went to a high school called Kingsway Park, which at the time was on two different sites, Springhill High School and Boulderstone High School. We were based on the Boulderstone site. In the first year... I was really bad. I used to get chased of the headteacher. My aim for every single lesson was to make the teacher's life hell. I was very angry. I'd been through a lot of things that were out of my control. I'd been bullied a lot and I moved around a lot, so everything was always temporary, and I was just very angry. I was frustrated because I had no control over anything, so I literally just wanted to have control in the lessons.

There were one or two teachers that I didn't try it with because they'd just put me straight. But other teachers... There was one lesson. I went into it with the aim of making the teacher swear at me because I didn't like her. So, I pushed her and pushed her and pushed her. Then she swore at me. And I was like, 'Yes! I achieved my aim!'. Then, whenever she tried to speak to me, I'd be like, 'Awww... You swore at me.' I'd be really sarcastic and annoying.

Then my mum set up a trampolining business just before going into Year 8, so we moved to Middleton. Within the first week of me being at my new school, I was on red report, I was in inclusion... I'd had my phone taken off me. I couldn't get away with half the stuff I could at Boulderstone. I'd go on rampages in the corridors and smash up things. It wasn't until one particular teacher pulled me aside and said to me, 'Yeah, go do it. Smash things up. Go wild.' And I was like, 'Huh? I don't wanna do it now that you're telling me I can do it.' She really helped me... I can genuinely say she has a place in my heart, and I never thought I'd say that about any teacher. I have time for her because she didn't judge me or label me as naughty or put me through the system... She just listened to me.

My little cousin was also born at that time. He's my world. He became a reward, so like, if I behaved at school, I got to see him. My family helped me a lot, too. They'd give me money and rewards if I was good at school.

At the end of Year 9, I started to turn things around. Year 10, I was a Guardian Angel, which meant I got to go into Year 7 classes and help out with stuff, and I really turned things around. One thing that always helped was having someone to talk to. I always try and say that there's nothing wrong with asking for help and attending counselling. We're all human and have emotions but we don't always get taught how to deal with it... So, counselling is a great way to learn how to deal with your emotions.

In Year 10 and Year 11, I tried really hard in my studies. I'd go into school before it started and revise. I'd come home from school and revise. I just revised all the time. I'm not naturally academically smart in that sense... I can't just read a page of a book once and then it sticks in my head. I have to revise for it and do it in really creative ways - using colour and stuff.

I left school with 1 A, 6 Bs and 2 Cs. When I was thinking about college, it would have been easier to do BTECs, but I went with a bigger challenge and decided to do my A-levels. I chose physical education, business, photography and music technology.

Alex: Was college different for you?

Olivia: In 2015, I went on NCS (National Citizenship Service) and I intentionally went on one where I didn't have any of my school friends or anything like that. I focused on being one hundred percent myself and, the thing with high school is, it's really difficult to always be yourself. A lot of the time, when you wanna be yourself, you fear how people are going to react, but when you're with people who have never met you before...you're just "you". Do you know what I mean?

I carried that through to college, you know, being myself. I made a completely new group of friends, which was cool. First year of college was alright but... I've always had things going on in my life, which is difficult to deal with. Around this time, my mum's business didn't get the funding and so that was a difficult time for the family.

I worked so hard in the first year of college, but it wasn't reflected on results day. I just looked at my marks, sat in bed and cried. Second year came, and my granny suggested I should go and get a dyslexia and dyspraxia test done in college, because that may be the reason my grades don't reflect the effort I'd put in. It turned out that I had a form of dyspraxia which affects my processing, focus and organisation.

That meant I got extra time for exams etc. Second year of college was better, but it was still hard because my Mum wasn't well. There was one time where I came home from college and she just flipped out on me. It was two days before my final PE exam and I had all this revision I had to do. My revision notes ended up being ruined and I ended up staying up until like 2am trying to revise.

The exam came and it was hard because I knew I'd failed before I even started, and it wasn't even my fault. I got extra time for the exam, but I also told the teachers what happened at home and the exam board gave me some leeway... I think I must have failed that exam so hard because I was so tired and stressed. But... I

got a C, overall. I got an E in the first year, so I'd really improved a lot.

When I finished my A-levels, I found out my granny had been diagnosed with cancer. She didn't want to tell me in the middle of my exams.

Alex: At what point did you know you wanted to get involved in the arts? How did that come up?

Olivia: Well, I knew from the age of maybe 12 that I wanted to manage events and artists, because I started going to music gigs and I'd always watch them and want to know what was going on behind the scenes. My mum also ran her own trampolining club inclusive of all people, mixing those with additional needs with mainstream people. I spent years working and helping my mum out, and gained a passion for helping to change people's lives. I gained a lot of experience outside of school, which helped to empower me before working for The Agency.

In 2016, I joined KYSO (Keem Youth Shout Out). It was the day before carnival and I was at a party in Salford with my friend. There were these lads dancing, and one of them came up to me and spoke to me. He was supposed to take my number, but for some reason it never happened. I saw him the next day at carnival and he was the one creating the moshpits! We swapped numbers and he told me I should come to an event. I ended up going and that's when I met all the other KYSO members.

Straightaway, there was already a rumour that I was a dancer on Britain's Got Talent and I just had to go along with it! People just make up things - "that guy's Stormzy's cousin" - [laughs] and everyone just goes along with it. Someone even made something up about Kemoy. "You know the 2008 Olympics? Yeah, Kemoy ran in them!".

I knew I liked the people because it was a laugh. So, I'd go to loads of events with KYSO. In the second year of college it was hard for me to stay in and revise, because there were so many events to get involved in. But my granny and my mum made sure I stayed in and revised, so that I could have that freedom when I finished college.

Alex: So, would you say you've achieved the goals you set for yourself when you were younger?

Olivia: When I look at it, over the past two years, I think I've achieved a lot of the goals I set for myself when I was 12 or 13. I'm asking myself "what's next?" and "what's driving me?"

Ade: What is next? Where do you see yourself in the next six years?

Olivia: You know what? I honestly don't know. I find that in the creative industry, opportunities come up all the time. Maybe international opportunities will come. My contract for The Agency runs until 2020, so when that comes I might feel like it's time to move on to something new, or I might feel like I want to renew my contract.

Ideally... I'd like to achieve something big, like working with Scooter Braun.

Alex: Who are your role models and who do you look up to?

Olivia: Not even in a cheesy way but... my family. They ground me and help me. My granny has played a massive role in that. Sometimes, when you're passionate about something, you get an actual feeling in your body... When I watch Scooter Braun, he excites me and I start getting gassed. I'm thinking about so many things that I could accomplish and achieve. It fuels me.

It's about the people you have around you. Like, Kate Bradnam (Agency Lead Facilitator) teaches me so much. You need people around you to guide you, inspire you and give you advice.

Alex: You mentioned your granny, your teacher and Kate. Would you say that it's powerful women who you look up to the most?

Olivia: I guess so. Women who can handle situations well or who have experienced different things and developed resilience. They don't need to have even gone through a bad time. I think we need to get away from that thing of defining people by their past.

But also, you guys inspire me. My job inspires me!

I think... if it wasn't for my family, I'd probably be in the hood somewhere selling drugs or holding weapons for people. All kinds of stuff. But my mum moved me out of those areas to stop that. I've got a family that made me believe in myself, and I want to be that person for other young people who don't have that support system in place.

Like... you may not have a support system, you might have problems at home but I want to be able to say, "Get involved in The Agency and I'm here for you". I just want to empower young people in whatever way. It inspires me to do this kind of work.

Alex: When you work with people that you know or who are a similar age, how do you keep it professional?

Olivia: Well, this is one thing I really had to learn when I started my job at The Agency. I realised I knew Yomi (Oderinde, Founder of 3 Points) and Samuel (Remi-Akinwale, Founder of Amplify). Then I knew Faidat (Ope, Founder of EmpowHerr) from a party we were at 2 months before!

If we're in a session, we can still joke and stuff, but there's things that we can't speak about in the session... We have to keep it professional. It's differentiating the environment. It was harder when I first started the job, because certain people would have my personal number because we're friends... But they'd call me on my personal number on a Saturday evening and be talking to me about work things, and I'd have to be like

“Actually... we’re friends, but I’m not working now.”

But luckily, nobody has ever crossed the line. It’s okay to have banter and be yourself... just as long as it’s a balance, because we’re in the workplace.

Alex: You’re a young, mixed-race professional. Do you feel you’re treated differently because of this?

Olivia: I’m not sure if I’m answering the question, but I’m okay with being different... Like, I always knew that I never wanted to be in dresses, when I was a kid. You have to be willing to be different and out of your comfort zone. You have to get used to feeling a bit like people might judge you or say things, but it’s okay because you’re comfortable in your own skin. I realised that if you “just do you, the right people will surround you” and treat you the right way.

Ade: Do you think working for an organisation like Contact has helped you become more comfortable in yourself?

Olivia: Absolutely. When I came for my interview, I dressed up really girly. I didn’t have my bandana on or anything and I felt really uncomfortable in my skin that day, but I had to look professional. But, now, I’m happy that I can turn up to work in trackies and wearing my bandana [laughs]. I’m quite a practical person. So, when I go to work, I know I’m going to be there for hours, so I want to wear something really comfortable. If I’m going to an event, I’ll dress up a bit differently but... because Contact has a culture that embraces that, it’s good for me.

Alex: Can you tell me about your project?

“I want to use what I’ve got to develop other people.”

Olivia: I’ve developed so many tools and I don’t just want to keep them to myself. I want to use what I’ve got to develop other people. This is why I’m putting on a female empowerment event. A lot of young women I speak to think that the only way they can get backstage is to dress looking all pretty and nice for the artists, but I want to say to them that you can be yourself and be in those environments as the photographer, stage manager, events manager, artist liaison, DJ, anything they want to be! I want to make them aware of the barriers they may face when they come in to the industry, but also how you can overcome those barriers. Also, to inspire them to know that they can be the DJ on the line-up and not just the women with the DJ. They can be the host. You can break those barriers.

Ade: Thanks for taking the time to speak with us.

Samuel



Talking Transition

Ade: Tell us about yourself. How old you are, what you're doing...what your hobbies are and stuff.

Sam: I'm Samuel Remi-Akinwale. I'm 18 years old. I'm a young Nigerian British bi-national. I class Manchester as my home because it's where I spent my formative years. I've been here since I was eleven. I'm currently on a gap year. I like playing sports: basketball, badminton and athletics. I like being out there, experiencing new things. Trying new things. I've taken an interest in musical theatre recently, which is quite weird [laughs] but musicals do it for me. I'm just enjoying life and trying to learn as much as possible.

Alex: What are you doing with your gap year?

Sam: Right now, I'm working. I'm trying to build my skillset: doing things that I think will better me as a person. I'm working for a charity called Young Manchester, which funds other organisations within Manchester that deliver youth work. And Amplify.

Ade: What was your transition from Nigeria to England like?

Sam: It wasn't as drastic as other people have experienced. Mine was a bit more smooth sailing. I visited England when I was six, for like tourist stuff [laughs]. I visited again when I was eight. In 2011, I had the choice of whether or not to stay because, originally, I had a plane ticket back to Nigeria. I chose halfway through my trip to stay. My family was going to settle here... everyone apart from me. Then my mum put me on the spot and was like, 'Are you going to abandon your little brother like this?' The distance between him and my older brother is ten years, so he wouldn't have that older sibling [me] that can help in that way. So, I felt it was important to stay in England and settle here. It was calm. I came in and I was the kid in the lowest sets at school, for some reason. I was a bit angry about this.

Alex: What were the challenges you faced at school in England?

Sam: Underestimation. Being put in the lowest set was hard. Like, I didn't initially understand sets until two weeks into it. I was like, 'Okay, so I'm in the lowest sets? How does this work?' I didn't even know how the grading here worked. It was like 4A, 4B, 4C, 3A...it was complicated! I didn't feel education mentally challenged or stimulated in the lower sets at all. And I was learning about the culture. Having to learn new slang like 'what does safe mean?'. 'What's so safe about safe?' [laughs] I was so confused!

Then, there was also being seen as Black. I've said this before and I'll say it again...when someone first referred to me as 'Black', I looked behind me, genuinely thinking the person wasn't referring to me! And then...I was perplexed. I thought something was wrong with them like, I thought they were colour blind or something. In my mind, I was like, 'I'm chocolate, or worse-case scenario, dark brown.'

This whole new concept had been dashed into my life and I tried as much as I could to assimilate into the culture... like meeting friends who were also Nigerian... But I realised a lot of them were in the lower sets too. It made it easier because they were transitioning too. But I had to make sure I moved up sets, because I felt like they wouldn't have mentally pushed me.

Ade: You mentioned Amplify earlier on. Can you tell us more about Amplify?

Sam: It was a long process to come up with the idea! I was on The Agency and I thought with the methodology: I wanted to change the world with a big idea and £2,000 funding. I thought £2,000 was a lot of money at the time [laughs]. It is, and it can go a long way, but my ambitions were vast.

I focused in on the thing I wanted the most and that I felt connected people, and that's music. That's how I created Amplify. Amplify is all about amplifying the voices of young people, by inspiring them to create music that reflects their identity. At the time I was an aspiring musician, I was learning new songs. I was in love with Emeli Sande's music and I was learning 'Where Is The Love?' by the Black Eyed Peas on the piano.

That was the kind of music that I wanted young artists who took part in Amplify to be able to create. But also, I had those days in the courtyard at school, where I heard young rappers doing their thing...I even brought rappers into my Agency pitch with me. They had talent, but when I spoke to them, they never really had an ambition to be a musician. It was a dream that they didn't think was possible. I wanted to create this opportunity to give them a first step into the music industry, as well as up-skilling themselves and having a good time. Like, almost creative activism... changing the world one track at a time.

There are layers to it... It was deep. There's a lot that happened within that time. I did The Agency in Year 10, Year 11... By that time I'd already developed into an activist kind of person. I wouldn't call it problems... but I had challenges, because I was still new to the country and the culture. I had no introduction lessons to the

“We have to pass down the learning through the generations.”

norms of how to behave in this country or anything.

It was inevitable that I'd face certain things in this society. Like, coming to terms with the fact that I'm seen as Black in this country, and I'd have to feel okay with that because there's a whole community of people like me, and they were the support network I needed to tap into.

Alex: You went to college, right? Were the challenges in college different to school?

Sam: Well, firstly, I only let the bottom set thing in school last for eleven weeks [laughs]. I brought in my own grades and showed them that I scored top ten, so it was cool after that.

Ade: What struggles have you faced and overcome as a young Black man?

Sam: For me... it's the realisation that I'm a Black man in this country. It's something I still struggle with. It's a mental battle. Do I fit into this prescribed title that others have built for me and want me to fit into... with the labels comes stereotypes and structural things that are set up to challenge you?

It's an ongoing thing and not a lot of people understand that. With other cultures, they already know where they are in this society. Sometimes, I feel like we as Black people can't write our own narrative. As a young Black man...there's certain things that people expect of me, like I have some Batman backstory... [laughs] and I do but... I don't like being judged.

I was never switched on to racism. I would never raise the red flag and be like, 'This guy is being racist.' I was not that guy. Even if someone was being racist, I'd just think they were being prejudiced with me.

But...there was one thing that changed my mind about racism. I was in a perfume shop with my friend Etse. Etse walked in as I was speaking to the lady in the shop, trying on some Jack Bauer 24 fragrances and he pointed at me and said to the lady, 'Remember this face, he's gonna be the next Prime Minister... He does so much for the community...?', He was gassing me up. I was trying to play it cool but I felt good about myself. You know when your friend is bigging you up and you feel good?

I didn't buy the aftershave... I was probably broke or something [laughs] and we left the store. We carried on looking around the shops, and there were more of us by now... Other friends came.

Two police officers approached us and were like, 'Are you the guys from the fragrance shop?' I was like, 'No. We've just come from the trainer shop.'

They said they'd been following us all around the Arndale [shopping centre]. I didn't know because they weren't in uniform. I thought I was observant [laughs].

One of the officers said, 'We've been following you because someone reported that you said 'Remember this face... it's the face of the next Jihadi?'. I was like 'What?'. That's not what was said!

I took it as a joke because I knew we never said that. Maybe it was about timing, because the Manchester bombing had happened two days before that so the lady in the shop was maybe still afraid after that. I recognised that and I felt really bad, and I wanted to go back to the shop and explain to her that we never said that. I wanted to know where she got that from 'Prime Minister' to 'Jihadi'. Even if you count the syllables in your head... it doesn't add up. How can we move from something so positive to something so negative? You could imagine how angry Etse was, because he wanted to gas me up, but it got brought down to something dirty and disgusting. Like, what had brought that into her mind? For me, that was a crazy experience.

I handled it quite well. I knew I wasn't in the wrong, so I was calm. I even said to the police, 'you can Google my name', which gassed me up! When I walked away, I realised this could have ended in a different way. There were armed forces in Manchester at this time, so imagine they were the officers that responded. Imagine Etse was a bit irate and acting a bit off. I'm not saying the police here are trigger-happy, what I'm saying is we've seen lots of examples of Black men being targeted by the police for doing nothing... or, well, allegations.

I was quite fearful afterwards, because my friend broke it down to me that I was quite fortunate that it ended in the way that it did.

Ade: Where do you see yourself in the next five years?

Sam: I wish I could answer that [laughs]. I really don't know. Well.. actually... I want to cut my hair and I only cut my hair when I feel like I've achieved something great [laughs]. I wanna finish my degree. I want to have my own successful social enterprises and to have a large-scale impact on a wide range of people.

I want to work with the United Nations and have a big impact in terms of global goals... sustainable development goals, which are the goals the world wants to achieve by 2030... I want to be at the forefront of that. I want to make things happen.

I want every action that I take to have an impact on people. I want my actions and my words to change the way people think. I'm not asking you to change too much... I want people to question things, be more critical and think about the way they address the world around them in their own individual lives.

We've all got to start from somewhere. I want the next generation to be revolutionaries, to understand the power in their words and actions, and take collective responsibility to address the problems in the world around them... We complain and complain and complain... but what are you going to do about it?

We have to pass down the learning through the generations. So, for me, the next five years is about helping the world to not make the mistakes it keeps making. I want to bring everyone along for a life-changing ride.

Alex: Thanks for taking the time out to talk with us.

Yomi



Talking on the Court

Our interview starts with a conversation about Dave's debut album PSYCHODRAMA. Yomi bumped into him at the train station a few days before our interview. He didn't get a picture, but Dave did throw his peace signs up. According to Yomi, you can't tell him nothing because he met Dave. Turned up late for work? Yomi knows Dave. Didn't do the dishes? Yomi knows Dave.

After an impromptu singsong covering 'Location', 'Disaster' and 'Leslie', we get into the conversation.

Ade: Tell us about yourself, Yomi.

Yomi: My name is Yomi. I was an Agency participant in 2016. I created a project called 3 Points, which is basically about bringing people from different areas of Manchester together to play basketball. Through 3 Points, they get to network, showcase their ability and develop their personal skills.

I was successful at the panel stage of The Agency in 2016, delivered my first tournament in April 2017 and, since then, I've just been continuing the project and building on it. I'm currently on a gap year.

Ade: What was your experience of working on the Agency like?

Yomi: I think my year group of The Agency was really interesting. We had some really interesting characters. There were people with really varied projects and ways of handling processes. It was really interesting... because we all had different ways that we like to approach things, but we had to put that aside and fully give in to The Agency methodology, because it has a very particular way of doing things. It was an experience! The skills they give you indirectly... it's weird... you don't realise until you step out into the real world and you start seeing that what you learned in the sessions is useful now... useful here.

Alex: What elements of the methodology were most useful to your project?

Yomi: There's a lot of focus on the compass. There's this concept of direction and always coming back to your compass, which can show you the way. They made us create a compass which was really personal to us as individuals. It's quite easy when you start a project to allow yourself to be drawn into other things and forget why you actually started your project in the first place. I remember my compass quite well. The territory is North Manchester. The desire is to bring people together, allowing them to just 'do them' and have fun.

Without the compass, you'd lose sight of what you're trying to achieve.

Ade: How does your desire link bank to 3 Points?

Yomi: I've always liked the chemistry that is created when people get together. When just a few people are in a space, there can be a positive vibe and it can get lively. I've always been into sports and, at the time I started 3 Points, I was playing a lot of basketball. I figured I might as well try to smash the two things together - my desire to bring people together and my love for basketball.

Alex: What is 3 Points and where did the inspiration for it come from?

Yomi: We noticed that in Manchester there was a very big divide between young people from the north and south... The east and west didn't even really get involved [laughs]. There was an economic divide... [and] a social divide.

In general, it felt like young people from north Manchester didn't really go to south Manchester, didn't know what was going on in south Manchester and didn't feel welcome in south Manchester. And vice versa with young people from south Manchester. Also, a lot of the good things - the sports clubs, the funded projects - it was all in south Manchester. It felt like if you were from north Manchester, you were disadvantaged from the get-go. We never had any of these benefits that the young people from south Manchester had. I told myself it was up to me to bridge that gap.

There's a lot of basketball happening in south Manchester and not so much basketball happening in north Manchester. I was like, 'Okay. Let's start in north Manchester, build a network of young people that know each other and are comfortable with each other, and then bring them to south Manchester.' Kind of like, you're still with your north Manchester friends, but now you're mixing with people from different areas that you've never met before. We didn't want anyone to feel uncomfortable, but to get them to interact with a new territory. The people who came without knowing many people, they'd get to make friends.

That's what we're doing.

We did our first tournament in north Manchester and our most recent event in Powerhouse, south Manchester. I'm coming across lots of new faces, and it's exciting because that's what we set out to do from the get-go.

Ade: Where do you see yourself and the project in the next few years?

Yomi: I've got a three-year plan for 3 Points. The plan is that in 3 years' time, we'll be doing a residential basketball tournament. Two to three days, over a weekend. It's gonna be national. Young people from London, Birmingham, Liverpool, Leeds, Newcastle, Leicester and Sheffield all being brought to a student campus at one of the universities in Manchester. The first day is just socialising because this is people

who have never met before. It's gonna be a massive culture clash... The difference between Manchester and London is already mad [laughs]. The lingo is different, the way they move is different... everything is different. So, the first day is just about them getting to know each other. We'll put people from all the different cities in random teams.

The second day will be random games. It will be light-hearted and give the players on the teams a chance to get to know each other before the actual tournament starts.

The third day is all about the actual tournament. But it won't be hostile, because the young people will have had the chance to get to know each other a little bit first. And also, because the teams are mixed, it will break down the whole London against Manchester or Birmingham against Leicester vibe.

That's the plan. I've already started making plans to achieve that.

In five years? [laughs]. It's really gonna be mad! If the three-year plan goes well and the inter-city tournament bangs, then I want the five-year plan to be international. It can go anywhere.

“Without the compass, you'd lose sight of what you're trying to achieve.”

Ade: What are you doing with your gap year?

Yomi: I'm currently working full-time for the Cooperative Bank so that takes up most of my time. I'm still doing the 3 Points tournaments too, so it's a lot of balancing at the moment. Putting aside time and fighting with the desire to procrastinate so I can get things done... I'm constantly working.

Ade: Where did you grow up? Did you see opportunities to get involved in sports in the territory?

Yomi: I grew up in Moston and there were no sports. I remember north Manchester before the Factory Youth Zone was built. There was nothing. I didn't know about White Moss Youth Centre back then, and I probably wouldn't have gone there anyway, because it's too far from where I live.

There was nothing. Sports? [laughs] You can do PE in school... rounders, after-school dodgeball. You go to the park if you're lucky and you're allowed by your parents.

I remember the area before FC United built their stadium. It's opened up a lot of opportunities for young people who play football in the area. But for basketball... Ade, you play basketball... You take two buses and travel for an hour to play two and a half hours of basketball. Can you see how inconvenient that can be? Especially if you're also studying too. What about if you have church? It just means you won't get to play the sport you enjoy playing. And that can kill your energy.

Alex: You mentioned that there wasn't much to do when you were growing up. What stopped you from getting involved in negative behaviour?

Yomi: My mum would kill me! [laughs] You think I had time for that? I was in church, every Sunday. Every Saturday, I was at home, cleaning. It was my upbringing. I know not everybody is fortunate enough to have that... it's not as common as you'd think.

I know guys from my high school who are on a different path right now, doing very different things, and a lot of it is about boredom. There's a quote: 'an idle mind is the devil's workshop'. If you're bored and have nothing to do, it's easy to say, 'let me just go and galivant in the park, let me just burn this bin. Let me just break this bus shelter'.

That's why some young people are acting up and terrorising the community. There was a time when the Factory Youth Zone staff asked us to come in because the young people in Moston were running around with knives. They were scaring people in Harpurhey. People didn't feel safe to come into the Factory building.

Ade: Do you think the government are listening to the voices of young Black people and taking on board the things they're experiencing?

Yomi: I think we need to look at the bigger picture - and it's not about education. In north Manchester, education is very vocational. The schools in north Manchester aren't the best in terms of grades. Colleges in north Manchester, where are they? This is what I was talking about before when I said there's a big divide between north and south Manchester. If you want to progress in education, then you probably have to be in south Manchester. South Manchester is where all the good things seem to be. If that doesn't get tackled in the long run, then there's gonna be more problems. They need to see that there are pathways to progress. Otherwise, they're gonna carry on being jobless and terrorising the neighbourhood.

If you give most kids a book or something to be passionate about, they'll absolutely smash it. And that's what I've noticed. I always hear that young people are lazy, aggressive, loud... but if you give them something to be passionate about, you'll be amazed at what they can do. Every young person has potential, but they're not really given the tools to make something of the potential.

The Agency is different, though, because it gives you the tools to really express yourself and become the best version of yourself that's possible. The more that the community - and I mean the community; I don't like pointing a finger at the government - push young people to get involved in projects in the area, the more they'll be able to shine in their lane with their passion, and express what they wanna do.

Alex: Do you think that your parents have a bigger responsibility than the government in shaping the people that we become?

Yomi: Yes... but also, think about it this way. You spend six hours per day at school... There's nature versus nurture. In the beginning, you spend all of your time with your parents, and they can instil good principles in you, and then when you go to primary school and high school, you spend less time with them, and it's up to you and your environment to decide what kind of person you want to be. Your parents are there to teach you things, but if you're spending six hours every day at school with people who don't think they have any opportunities and there's nothing to do... [if] they don't think school benefits them and that there's any point, then that's going to affect you.

Your parents can only guide you up to a certain point, and it's up to you to make a decision for yourself. You can hear what they're saying, but still do your own thing. I hear you telling me to revise, but I'm still going to galivant until 6am. It's really your choice.

That's what it's all about.

Ade: Thanks for taking the time to talk with us, Yomi.

Faidat



Fighting Talk

Alex: You said you came from somewhere...where did you come from?

Faidat: I was born in Nigeria and lived there until I was four. Then I moved to London and lived there until I was fourteen, and then I moved to Manchester. I've been here ever since.

“you might think ‘colour has nothing to do with it’, but it actually does.”

Alex: Where was the first place you went to box?

Faidat: The first place I went to box was Champs Camp [Phil Martin Centre] in Moss Side. I really, really liked it there, but I'm not gonna lie to you... I felt like they didn't really know what to do with me. The coach said they'd never had a female boxer there before, and I was like 'rar' and I thought he was joking but... like, you could tell they didn't know what to do with me. I think they had a very closed circle of fighters and I wanted to do something... but I felt like I wasn't getting enough attention. So I went somewhere else.

Alex: Do you coach boxers?

Faidat: I don't coach now, but there was a time when young high school girls would come in to the gym on a Saturday morning. I'd be training and the coach would let me take the sessions, and I found it really, really fun. It made me think of going into coaching when I'm older because I would have loved to have a female coach myself. I love my coach, don't get me wrong! [laughs]

Ade: Did you feel uncomfortable being the only female in your gym?

Faidat: Yeah, I did, and I think I'll continue to be. I think that, sometimes when I can't do something, they're gonna look at it like it's because I'm a girl... I'm just fat, mate! [laughs] It's got nothing to do with being a girl! Like, there have been girls that have gone through that gym, like Maria, like Ellie... who have done bits. I'm talking National Championships. They've done amazingly well. So, me not being able to do something is not about me being a girl.

When I finally got the chance to spar, some of the guys either didn't want to hit me that hard - so you never get to know how it feels to be hit - or they wanna hit me really hard to teach me a lesson. Being the only girl in the gym makes it hard to find someone in between. It's weird. You have to make sure you're wearing the right bra in the gym. That's the reality because you don't want to draw any attention to yourself. You just want to stay in the background. But how are you supposed to excel when you're in the background? So I

was like, I don't care! Let's get stuck in.

Alex: When you're boxing, are there any insecurities?

Faidat: One hundred percent. I feel like when it comes to performing, I wanna curl into a ball... I can't hack it. When I'm trying to do something and there's a lot of people watching you, I feel like there's a lot of pressure... with me being the only black girl in the gym... and you might think 'colour has nothing to do with it', but it actually does.

I'll throw a jab wrong or whatever and I'll take it so hard... but men, they don't have that much pressure put on them. It's invisible, unspoken pressure and, trust me, it's there. No one says it out loud. When I'm sparring and I'm doing something wrong, it gets to me. It's like... 'I know this stuff, why can't I just get it right'... It's hard.

Alex: Do you use those feelings to push yourself?

Faidat: Absolutely. I think the one thing with boxing that you have to have is heart. That's the first thing I was taught. I remember when I first started. I might not have been that good or that skilful, but my coach said I'd go far because I have a lot of heart. The first time I ever sparred with girls... they both beat me up. Twice... double whammy [laughs]. In the space of like ten minutes. But I stood there and I took the punches and I threw back. I didn't care. I was just thinking 'you're not going to bully me out of this ring'. That's the beautiful thing about boxing, it schools you. I could take these women on in the street, but in the ring, it's a different thing. It's disciplined. It's their domain and they have the skill. They've been doing it for years. No matter how strong you are... you need to have the skill, you need to work hard and you need to be fit.

Ade: Where did the inspiration for the EmpowHer project come from?

Faidat: Funny story... I was the last person on The Agency project to have an idea. I feel like I wasn't looking into my actual desire. I'd only just started boxing and I didn't know how far I wanted to go with it. I looked deep into myself and I asked myself where I wanted to be in a few years' time. I asked myself what was stopping me, and the answer was female inequality in sport. It was right there in front of me and I wasn't even looking.

Like... my first boxing gym didn't have a female changing room or shower. I had to travel for an hour to get home before I could even shower off. The gym I train at now is a store cupboard. For some girls, it can really put them off...

Then, in the long run... I'm never gonna make as much money from boxing as AJ (Olympic gold medallist and world heavyweight champion Anthony Joshua)... not in this lifetime, anyway! That's the thing... there's not as much money in boxing for women. I feel like we have to work twice as hard to get half as far. For what?

Like, with women's boxing, it feels like there's only room for one. If you ain't Katie Taylor, you ain't nobody. With female boxing, women can be catty. They get at each other because there's not enough women at that elite level.

Realising that these are the barriers are in front of us challenged me to help get more young women into elite levels of sport. Like, girls are always encouraged to take part in sport, but who is pushing them to get to the top? To make a future for themselves...

Alex: Do you think your younger self would be happy with where you are now?

Faidat: One hundred percent. When I first started it was hard, and I told myself, 'This is gonna be one of those things I'm not gonna finish, init?'. That's why I'm really happy with my boxing and Empower. If I could say anything to my younger self, though, it would be try harder! I wasn't sure that I'd achieve anything with boxing, so I didn't try as hard as I should. Like, I look back at the improvement I've made in the past few years... it's crazy. You've got to keep at it. There have been times when I've got home from training and said I'm gonna give up... then I find myself at the gym the next day getting punched in the face like an idiot! [laughs]

Ade: Who are your sporting inspirations?

Faidat: Stacey Copeland is one. She's super cool and, for me, there's nothing I love more than someone who has secured their bag and come back to where it all started for them, helping other people. She's got this saying, which is 'pave the way', and that's the only way we're going to make a change for females in sport.

Oshae Jones. She's so fast! I watch her videos and see how she hits the pads and she's just like 'bam bam bam bam!'.

“You have to motivate and inspire yourself.”

Then, finally, there's Claressa Shields. She's the first woman I saw boxing. Two-time Olympic champion, and now she's looking to fight Christina Hammer, who is a big name. Claressa Shields is something else. Like, she didn't come from the bottom... she came from the bottom. She had nothing. She's from Flint, Michigan, where their water is yellow. She's made a name for herself and what I want to learn from her is about confidence. Her confidence is through the roof. She believes nobody can beat her, and that's where I wanna be. No matter how good I may be at boxing, my confidence isn't there yet. So, yeah, I really admire her.

This is gonna sound weird, but in terms of motivation, I don't think anybody motivates me to do better. I have to do that for myself. Nobody is gonna come to my bedside at 4:30am and tell me I need to go for a run. You have to motivate and inspire yourself. It's about looking forward, deciding how far you wanna go and making that happen. I love Nicola Adams, but I'm sure she's not at my door waiting to go training with me!

Alex: What are your ambitions as a boxer?

Faidat: Firstly, I think that if you focus on the next goal that's in front of you, you can't lose. I'd love to win an Olympic medal or even a Commonwealth title, but if you look too far ahead, you miss what's right in front of you. Do everything one step at a time, one thing at a time. If you do, you can't lose.

Alex: You recently had your first fight. How did it go?

Faidat: It was mad. Mad! [laughs]. It was mad because I'm very close to my coach, Samson, and when I found out I was fighting, I also found out that my coach had to be at a funeral on the same day. I was close to pulling out of the fight because I was like, 'This is my first fight. I need you there.' But he didn't let me pull out. He told me that if I'm serious, I've got to do this. He said I can't keep all my skill in gym and not show my ability.

It was hard because I felt like I wasn't really close with any of the other coaches from my gym. With Samson... it feels like I'm his priority. I think... the preparation... Well, I should have sparred more! I only sparred twice in preparation for the fight.

Then, the day of fight came and when I saw the girl I was fighting... I knew she was about it, I knew we were gonna throw down! We smiled at each other and all that, but there was something about her that let me know she's been doing this for a long time. Just the way she carried herself. But, I blocked it out of my head.

Right before I got in the ring and I was doing some pad work with the coach, he was like, 'You've got a good left hook, you should use it more!'. And I was like, 'And you're telling me this now? Two minutes before I'm about to get in the ring...'. I felt like I wasn't ready for the fight, but I was just going in there to try and do what I needed to do.

Then when I got in the ring, I listened to what my coaches always told me about using my jab and my one-two. Then, boom... The first connected with my head and I was like, 'Okay... This is gonna be a fight.' It looked like two men fighting outside of a pub! On my life! That's what it looked like.

What I did wrong was let her put me on my back foot. I forgot everything I'd been taught and I forgot that I was physically stronger than her. She might have had more experience and more skill, but if I could have just thrown some heavy shots, she definitely would have been on the back foot. But after that first blow, I was like, 'Woah...what was that?'

She was throwing shots at me and my corner threw in the towel... I think they could see she had too much experience for me. I feel like, now, I'm okay with them throwing in the towel but, personally, I would have liked to have at least got through the first round, go back to the corner and get some advice from the coaches... That's what Samson would have done. That's why I appreciate my coach so much... He puts me through it. He cares about me and makes sure I'm okay, but he makes sure I go through it and work to my limits.

I was completely fine after the fight. I didn't look like I'd been in a fight. My brothers didn't understand why the towel got thrown in because I was fine. If you looked at the other girl... she had bruises, she was marked.

So, I had mixed feelings. I know that I could have done better. Even though it was my first fight. This is gonna sound moist, but I felt like everyone was watching me... like, I feel like the people in my gym doubt me so I wanted to show them what I could do. I wanted to do well for Samson because, together, we work so hard. He puts in the work to make sure I know what I'm doing, so with that fight I felt like I disappointed myself and disappointed him.

When I got out of the ring, one of the coaches was like, 'I think it was a little too early for you. We should have trained you for another six months and then you would have been ready.' I was a little angry because, firstly, he let me get beat up [laughs] and secondly, he only told me he didn't think I was ready after the fight. But, I shook it off.

I didn't cry at first, I was just like 'rar... cool. We move, init.' But afterwards, I was upset because I didn't know why I let it all phase me. I let the pressure get to my head. But I'm glad it happened now and not later.

When Samson came back into training, I felt bad... like I'd let him down, but he told me it was cool and that he was proud of me. He talked me through the things that we needed to work on and reminded me of the skills that I've got, but didn't use in the fight.

It's important you have buddies in your corner who will tell you the truth. There's a guy in my gym called Ryan Robinson and he's Lennox Lewis's nephew. He doesn't know it, but he's like an older brother to me. I love that guy, I really do! After the fight, we just sat down and we talked. He made me realise that it happens to every boxer. People have lost at National Championships before. I just take losses really, really hard. He told me I've just got to trust the process. A lot of people don't do that. They spend years in the gym without fighting, then get in when they're good. Zelfa Barrett and Lyndon Arthur too. They've been really supportive.

Ade: What did your mum and dad say when you started boxing? As a young Nigerian, was there resistance?

Faidat: My mum backs everything I do. I swear. She's always been behind me. Her number one thing is,

as long as my education doesn't suffer, I can be anything I want. So, she was cool with it... until I started coming home with little cuts and bruises [laughs]. Or when I would come home exhausted, she'd be like 'Faidat, are you sure you don't wanna cut training?'

My dad is a funny guy. He told me I should play football or basketball, but I know if I do well with boxing, he'll be like 'I told you that you should do boxing! Well done!' [laughs]. But, when he knew I was serious about boxing, he was cool with it.

The people who are the most uncomfortable about me boxing is my extended family. Like, I remember being at a family gathering and my uncle pulled me aside and was like, 'You need to stop this. If it was your brother, I wouldn't mind. There's no money in this. Who's going to marry you?'. It's a cultural thing.

I was at the nail salon with my sister a few days ago and I told the nail technician I wasn't getting my nails done because I'm a boxer and she was like, 'Oh. Are you a lesbian?'. I was like 'Woah...' [laughs]. Like, what's the correlation? I get that question a lot! I'm not gay, but it's the connotations of a sport that is associated with domination, if that makes sense. Like, they think that's what my character is like outside of the ring. But I'm the opposite. I don't take many things seriously. I like to laugh and I don't even like arguing... it's that deep.

Alex: What advice would you give other young women looking to become boxers?

Faidat: The bigger you get, the better you get... the more naysayers you're going to have. One day, you're gonna face one of your biggest opponents and their fans are gonna be your naysayers. What are you gonna do then? You have to get comfortable with that. One thing I've learned is you need to be careful who you listen to. If it's not your coach, take what people say with a pinch of salt. Only listen to people who know your craft and what you are capable of doing.

Ade: Thanks for the encouragement and thank you for taking the time to share your story with us.

ACKNOWLEDGE- MENTS

In creating this book, we'd like to thank Something to Say Producer Reece Williams, Agency Project Manager Steve Vickers, Contact Head of Creative Development Suzie Henderson, Agency Project Assistant Olivia Lee and Agency Lead Facilitator Kate Bradnam, without whom this book would not have been possible. Thanks to Roma Havers for proofreading for us.

We are indebted to our contributors who gave their time, energy and stories to Something to Say. This book would have remained an idea if you weren't so kind in agreeing to be a part of the project.

We'd like to thank our fellow Agents who have supported us to create this book and have been there with us on our journey. We'd like to celebrate the positive Black role models in our communities and in the media. Your excellence empowers us to stand up and say something.

Finally, the biggest shout out probably goes to our parents. Thank you for the love, nurturing and support you give us.

This is for everyone who has Something to Say.

Alex Etosa & Ade Adedeji

Co-Founders, Something to Say

SOMETHING TO SAY _ _ _ _

First published 2019 by Contact
Oxford Road Manchester M15 6JA
Manchester

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Created by Alex Etosa and Ade Adedeji through The Agency (Delivered by Contact), *Something To Say* (Volume 1) captures the voice of young Black Manchester. Through a series of intimate interviews, it provides an insight into the lived experience of its exceptional contributors. Injustices faced, hopes carried and accomplishments celebrated, *Something To Say* provokes much needed conversation, cutting through the noise of stigma and stereotype.