

Transcription:

AL: Hello, my name's Asifa Lahore. I'm Britain's first out Muslim drag queen, and I am a Croydon resident. I moved to Croydon in December 2015, to the lovely area of South Croydon - which I absolutely love - and I want to tell you a little bit about myself.

I was born in 1983, in Southall, West London. I was born to a British-Pakistani family. My parents were born and bred in Pakistan and came here in the '60s and the '70s. So I was born essentially to an immigrant family. And I knew very early on that I was different - and I didn't know exactly what was different about me - but by the time I hit puberty I realised that I was a man that liked other men (or should I say boys that liked other boys?) [laughs]. But obviously coming from a Muslim background, I knew inherently that somehow this was wrong, and it's only when I was 16 that my sister, who was ten at the time, she read my diaries - and I was annoyed at her for reading my diaries - but she realised that I was gay and she said "look, I totally understand, just don't tell mum and dad because they won't understand". And when I was sixteen, and my sister realised, it was that summer that I actually began attending the Brit School. And that was my first connection with Croydon. The Brit School for me came at a point in my life where it was the first time where I actually felt surrounded by other queer people - other gay men, other lesbians. No transgender people, some Bi people. But you know, it was the first time after secondary school - I went to secondary school near Brixton, where I was like ... I got a lot of homophobic bullying, and the reason was I was just so effeminate, and I was called batty boy, chi-chi boy, and I just assumed that I was gay. And I went to secondary school at a time when Section 28 was in place, and the school could really do nothing to support me, and so I had to put up with five long years of constant bullying and constant put-downs, both verbal, physical, you name it. So when I came to the Brit School, I was actually surrounded for the first time, not only by out queer people, but also a very supportive and expressive environment. And I have really fond memories of Croydon at the time, where you know for our Christmas shows we would do stuff in the Whitgift Centre, we would be performing at the opening of, you know, the Croydon Christmas lights at the time. I was at the Brit school between 2001 and 2004, and I really really enjoyed my time there. And I thought that when I left the Brit School that would probably be the last time I would be in Croydon, or have a link to Croydon.

But actually, after I did university, my first job, and I say quote un-quote "job", after leaving university was - I actually managed to get a temp position at the Croydon magistrates and county court and it brought me back to Croydon, so my first full job was in Croydon. And, you know, while I was working, I was also dealing with the issues of coming out. I think by that time I had already been out, I came out when I was at university to my mum and dad. Being from a Muslim background is so difficult when you identify as queer because we don't have words in our languages for gay, lesbian, bisexual. The only words that we have are really derogatory words for the transgender community. Now, for me, whenever I would go back to Pakistan as a child, I would see transgender people dancing at weddings, begging on the streets, some doing odd

cleaning jobs or odd restaurant work. And I was aware of this community and while I would go to Pakistan I would feel such an affinity to these trans people. But every time I would come back to the UK, the only thing that I felt was visible were people that were being gay or lesbian or bisexual, and transgender people in the UK were even non-existent, or super super invisible to me. And obviously this was the time before the internet, so I just thought that, in the UK, being gay and bisexual and lesbian was like being transgender. I didn't realise that, you know, there was a huge trans community in the UK - and also in Croydon at the time - because to me being trans was equal to being gay, because those were the only people that were visible to me.

So yeah, I came out to my mum and dad at university. And ... [pauses] I was taken to the imam at my local mosque, I was taken to the ... GP. And the GP really stuck up for me and said you know - my GP was from an asian, south-asian heritage background, Indian, and he told my parents that "look, I understand the cultural and religious difficulties, but there's nothing that I can prescribe your son. You have to either learn to deal with this or accept it in some way or another". And... there was a period when I had a lot of family pressure and community pressure, and I agreed to an arranged marriage with my first cousin in Pakistan. And I fell into a deep depression because my university grades just started falling behind, and my tutor one day just pulled me in - I went to Queen Mary University of London by the way, in East London - and he just said, "what's wrong with you, what's happening? You're a bright kid, and you're handing in work that is really below your usual standard". And this was in my third year, and I burst into tears and I told my lecturer what was happening.

And, you know, it was a god-send because he deferred my year, I had the whole year off, and he put me in touch with charities in Central London. And ... I met other queer Muslims for the first time in my life. And ... [pauses] I'm so sorry guys, it's very difficult for me to talk about this. Up until that point I felt that I was the only queer Muslim living in the UK. And when I met other gay men who were muslim, who were south-asian heritage, and other lesbians and bisexual people, and transgender people, I realised that I wasn't the only one. And it gave me a lot of strength because I met people that were in marriages of convenience - so asian gay boys would marry lesbian south-asian women to still keep that pretence of being in a heterosexual marriage. And then you had those queer Muslims that were out to their parents and living their lives. And I realised that I wanted to be an out person. And so I went back to my mum and dad and I said "look, I'm not going ahead with this marriage, this engagement. I'm gay. This is who I am". And I began living an out, proud life.

Fast forward to years later, where I began performing in drag, the LGBT community and in particular drag idol, which is a national drag competition, gave me the title of "Britain's first out Muslim drag queen". I went on to do debates about being queer and Muslim and asian on BBC shows, and also did Channel 4 documentaries about being a Muslim drag queen. And, for the past five years I have been living in Croydon. And it was in Croydon that I realised that I was transgender, and I began my transition three years ago, in 2017. And it is in Croydon that I feel that I can live with all my identities hanging out, be it south-asian, be it British, be it Muslim, be it Pakistani, be it queer,

be it transgender, being disabled. I am so happy to be a Croydonite with all these identities, and it's led to me hosting Croydon Pride for the past few years in Wandle park. As a Croydon resident, and as Britain's first out Muslim drag queen. And it gives me such pleasure to know that I can do that to the borough where my home is, but also the borough that has the most youngest people and a thriving LGBT community. I can go to 'Trans Pals' social group in Croydon every month, I can go and have a pint for example at the Oval Tavern, which is super LGBT friendly. And every year, and year round we can have LGBT events, for example at the Fairfield Hall, or the Stanley Halls and celebrate Pride at Croydon Pride. So I'm very proud to be a queer person living in Croydon today — it's home.