

Bard of foster care

BY YINKA SUNMONU

Solomon Ogunmefun Booker, stage name Solomon O.B., was fostered when he was seven months old with his older brother Sam and younger sister Anu by Victor Roy and Patricia Anne Booker. It was a transracial fostering arrangement (his foster parents are white) that became long term as the siblings lived with the family into adulthood. It gave them the stability that many children in the care system can only dream about.

Although raised away from his Nigerian heritage, Solomon said that his upbringing was far less a problem in the home than outside of it. "There weren't many people of colour in my area and you became quite used to being the only black face around. It made me realise how easy it is to be disconnected from your culture."

HAPPY

Ultimately, his was a happy home. He calls his foster parents nan and grandad because they grew up with their grandchildren and he talks fondly of the qualities the

Booker's have instilled in him – a work ethic, confidence and self-belief, which he appears to have in abundance.

A performance poet, rapper and musician, he started writing poetry when he was 14 and rapping at 19. He uses the spoken word and rap to express his situation and it has proved a winning combination. Discovered rapping during a set with his band Sounds of Harlowe, his role as a bard of foster care and foster children has begun.

He is starting to explore this form of childcare and how it affects all involved.

STORIES

"I don't want to come across as disingenuous and paint a picture that is not right. I want to speak to other children about their experiences of foster care and write about it. Stories need to be told. If you don't tell stories in different shapes and sizes you get one dimensional narratives and this is what is happening with foster care."

He talks about the stereotypes of most children coming from broken homes or having a parent on drugs and the thoughts people have when they hear the words 'foster care home':

AMBASSADOR

In March, Solomon became an ambassador for IACT Fostering and Adoption.

"I want to raise myself to the challenging things and look someone in the eye who might have been through some horrific stuff," he says speaking of being a mentor.

During his tenure, he wants to challenge the perceptions of what it is to be a foster carer or foster child and give children and young people a voice.

"They don't see themselves reflected in the media, in art or in popular culture. I didn't see anyone I could point to as a role model on foster care," he says.

Solomon has seen foster carers who rise to the challenge of caring.

In 2014, he "adopted" the Booker surname as a tribute and Christmas present to the couple who raised him and his siblings as well as five children of their own, nine grandchildren, four great grandchildren and several foster children.

"My life turned out potentially so much better than if I hadn't been fostered and to be in a situation that could accommodate all three of us was so important."



FOSTER CARE AMBASSADOR: Solomon O.B



Unorthodox beginnings by Solomon O.B

This excerpt from award winning performance poet Solomon O.B gets readers to think of how they view children who are fostered. It is a tribute to the poet's foster parents Victor Roy and Patricia Anne Booker and an invitation for children in foster care to create their own stories. Solomon won the 2016 Hammer & Tongue National Poetry Slam Champion with this poem.

SO YES WE ARE FOSTERED

And when I say this the lines on people's faces crumble up like discarded pages of paper Laden with mistakes
But we are not mistakes on Pages
We are simply awesome novels
With unorthodox beginnings.
We are not mistakes on Pages,
We are simply a crooked introduction
straightened out by proofreaders Pat and Vic
Whose love and guidance set the foundations for straight lines for us to write the rest of our story on
No we are not mistakes on Pages.

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Fostering solo

Myths continue about who can and cannot foster. Single people, including single parents, often rule themselves out without knowing the facts. Single mother Itiesha Chester became a foster carer six years ago at the age of 26. She lives in Bristol with her daughter, Sophia



MUM'S THE V

Becoming a foster carer at just 26 – as a single mum to an eight year old – might sound crazy, but I've never regretted it. In six years I have looked after 16 children, aged between eight and 18, and it's the most rewarding thing I have ever done.

My own childhood in Guyana was difficult, with domestic violence and instability, until my aunty Muriel brought me to the UK when I was 10. I'd always wanted a family of my own and fell pregnant at 18 but the relationship with Sophia's dad ended when I was 23.

In 2008 I signed up with TACT and began the rigorous vetting process. In early 2009, after endless checks and interviews, I was both ecstatic and petrified to finally be approved.

We live in a four-bedroom house so I can have more than one child at any time and I get paid an allowance for each one. There have been ups and downs – some kids have special needs, some are violent or swear a lot – but the rewards always outweigh the downsides.

One girl had repeatedly run away from every other foster home, but stayed with me for a whole year. Then there was a 16-year-old boy who was so nervous, he wouldn't even walk to the bus stop alone. Two years later, he was brimming with self-confidence.

At the moment, we've got a boy of 11 who has been with us for three years. He has complex emotional needs and, in the beginning, was very destructive, lashing out and breaking things. It was hard for Sophia to

witness but he's so much calmer now. She considers him a brother and we couldn't imagine life without him.

It can't have been easy for Sophia to share her mum and her home, but she's never complained and has grown into a compassionate young woman. I couldn't have done it without her.

Helping a child blossom is a wonderful thing, and I consider myself blessed to play a part in it.

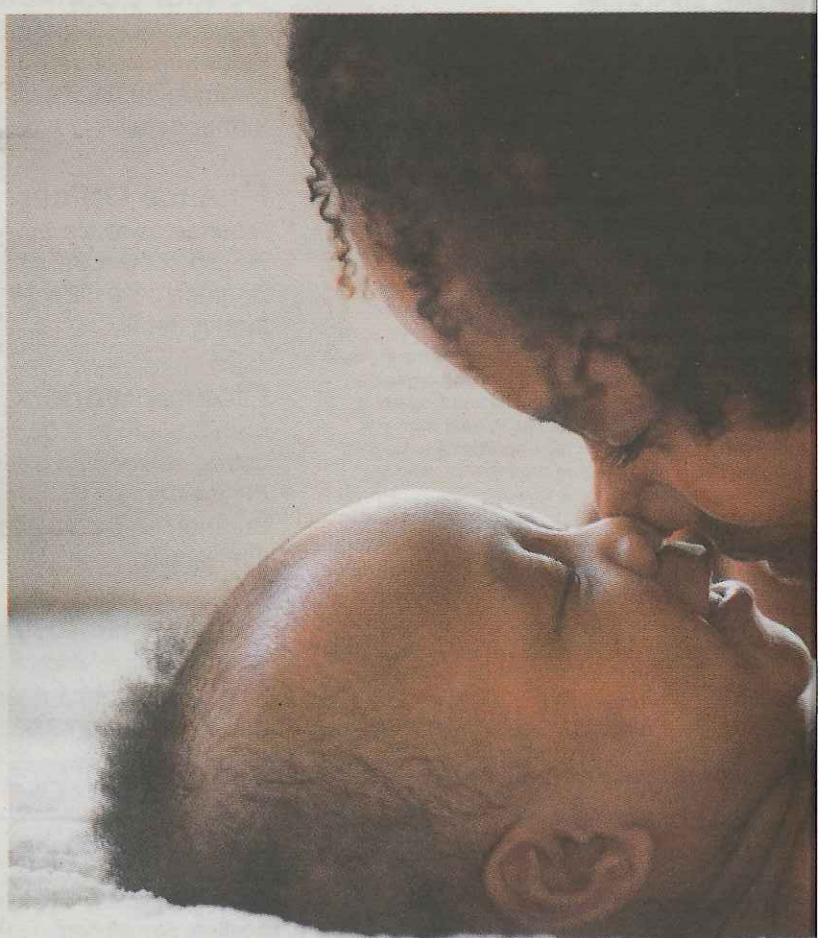
TACT Fostering and Adoption have a strong tradition in recruiting African Caribbean foster carers.

FIND OUT MORE:
www.tactcare.org.uk

Myth busting via The Fostering Network

- The legal minimum age to become a foster carer is 18, but most fostering services will accept applicants aged 21.
- There is also no official upper age limit on being a foster carer.
- You can have a job outside of the home and still foster.
- Single people can foster as well as married or cohabiting couples.
- There are many gay and lesbian foster carers.
- You do not need to own your own home.
- You don't have to be a parent to foster.

A child enters the care system every 20 minutes. Discover how you can make a difference. The Fostering Network. www.fosteringnet



DO YOU NEED DONOR EGGS

Barbados Fertility Centre offers an EXCELLENT donor Caribbean couples. There is no waiting list for treatment rates of 72% for donor cycles, so many UK couples island of Barbados for successful IVF treatment.