

'I was in a supportive, loving and disciplined environment'

Singer-songwriter Ashley John-Baptiste's moving documentary about being fostered reveals how it helped him build strong relationships and develop a positive outlook, says **Kelly Mattison**

"I don't know what drives me but I certainly want to help. Perhaps my sense of compassion comes from my own struggle and the strong belief that hardship can be overcome. I find that in helping other people, I simultaneously help myself," says Ashley John-Baptiste. Between the ages of two and three the singer-songwriter and former member of X Factor boy band The Risk was taken from his mum and placed into various foster placements and has never spoken about the experience until now, 20 years later.

Baptiste revealed his experiences in a moving BBC documentary, *Care Home Kids - Looking for Love*, in which he spoke to young people leaving care and revisited his first foster carer and other people in the care system who have inspired him. "Unexpectedly, the documentary had a massive effect on me personally. Causing me to go so deep into my past and confront my childhood in such an engaged way meant that I was able to confront some unknown buried feelings. Filming the documentary was my own unique form of self-psychoanalysis."

At 15 years old, Baptiste says, he was fortunate to move in with a great family. "I had a foster mum and dad, and siblings. I was in a supportive, loving and disciplined environment and it was a place where I could flourish." In July last year Baptiste graduated from Cambridge University with a history degree and went on to appear in *X Factor* after initially sending in a YouTube clip to the producers.

He feels that what he has achieved has a lot to do with his way of thinking rather than his external

circumstances but that he has had to work hard to achieve a positive outlook. "Undoubtedly, the worst thing about being moved around when you're younger is the feeling of rejection. After building a bond and connection, to be instantly moved from a family can obviously make you feel unwanted and unloved. This feeling of rejection and abandonment can become a part of your mentality and outlook. You do have to confront and fight these debilitating mentalities."

Being in foster care enhanced his ability to relate to people and in moving about so much he developed an ability to relate to a wide range of people at a quick rate. "You are not constricted to a particular culture or set of people, but can move between social groups. This was certainly the case for me."

Having moved schools and families so much, he was exposed to different cultures and ways of life from a young age so that when he studied at Cambridge he didn't feel massively homesick.

"I was able to enter this new world with relative ease and embrace the new experiences with a level of confidence. I am not saying it was easy, mind you."

Living with a level of rejection, he often found it much easier to detach himself from close people than to become even closer. "You subconsciously carry a fear that friends or family will one day just disconnect from you. Trusting people and their motives certainly became an issue for me."

It took Baptiste three months to agree to present the documentary. He wanted it to be a film that



After being fostered John-Baptiste graduated from Cambridge and won X-Factor fame. Photo: Adrian Lourie/Special Edition Films

The documentary even compelled some to become foster parents themselves

would portray the reality and toughness of the care world, to be informative yet emotionally affecting but also to inspire people. He says that many care kids are achieving remarkable things and are demonstrating incredibly precocious and commendable attitudes. "I wanted to dispel ignorance by raising awareness."

He says the response to the film has been "incredible", and that the number of people who have contacted him on Twitter and Facebook who have spoken of the way the film has affected them has been "very humbling". Many people in care told him of the inspiration and hope it gave them; it even compelled some to forgive their biological parents, go back to school and become foster parents themselves.

"The message I wanted to get across in the film is that there is life after care. You can achieve, you can be happy and you can build good life long relationships. There is hope." ■