

Sara Fowles 0:00

Hello, welcome to Yarning, Tales from Birmingham a short podcast series by me Sara Fowles about black women knitters in Birmingham. This podcast series is also part of Yarning Projects by Trevor Pitt. This is episode two, where I interview Selina Cheshire.

Selina Cheshire 0:21

My name is Selina Cheshire. And I am 57 years old. I'm a grandmother of two, a mother of two. So I knit, I sew and I garden. You know, my mother was a teacher. And she loved sewing. I grew up in rural Zimbabwe. And we used to teach each other knitting with the grass and some bicycle spokes. That's how I learned with my friends. And then I went to primary school where we were taught to sew and to knit as well. But at my secondary school, I fell in love with sewing. So I took up that class fashion and fabrics, which I enjoyed. Except that I didn't like the teacher. Then you know what happens when you don't like the teacher, you fail. So I didn't do very well in fashion and fabrics.

I got married without a profession. And I think it was two years, three years into marriage, I thought, OK, I need to do something. So I went to do cutting and designing. I just love sewing OK, that's the best thing I can do. So I did that, getting a diploma in cutting and designing.

It was I think 1997 I opened the shop and started sewing for people. It was good. But you know, people being people they loved taking, but they don't want to pay. So in the end, it's OK. I can't just leave, or do nothing. That was after my nasty divorce anyway, so I thought, I'm gonna do this. And then it didn't work.

So I thought of going into teaching. And the best, you know, subjects I wanted to teach was Fashion and Fabrics. So I went to train.

Sometimes in life, things happen, you don't plan. I never thought I would end up in the UK anyway, or anywhere outside Zimbabwe. But because of politics, which started happening in my life after I became a teacher. And I thought, OK, I don't have anything to live here for, teaching wasn't paying that much. And I wanted a better life for my children. And so because there was a freelance, if you may see, I'm the one who makes decisions. So what am I going to do? Am I going to live this life or I'm going to change. So I thought, OK, I'll go. And my friends who thought I was crazy, because waking up in the morning and say, Oh, I'm going outside the country. So I mean, I actually like begged my ex husband to help me buy the ticket to come to the UK. And it was two weeks before the Zimbabwe was armed with the visa. We would come without your visa.

So when I came I went to Manchester, but actually Bolton because my niece was in Bolton. I think after a few months, I was moved to Birmingham. So it was not by choice because when I wasn't looking for refugee status they moved me to Birmingham, and I didn't know anybody in Birmingham then I mean, funnily enough, I feel more at home in Birmingham than I ever felt Manchester. I mean, I worked in Manchester, after that. I worked in Manchester for 11 years. But I never felt I wanted to be in Manchester. I always felt like "Birmingham, I love it".

I'm sure, somebody with a mouth, you can always find a way. You know, the friend of mine was still back in Zimbabwe. I asked her if she knew somebody who knew somebody who was in Birmingham. So even when I was with the people, we were living in the house where I was given, I ended up knowing a few people started coming into my circle. They showed me what to do.

I started you know, developing my circle. I joined the church, which was brilliant. That was 2004, 2005, I trained as a social worker, social care worker. And I loved working with people but I wasn't doing my sewing I guess I was just doing what was there.

Now after some time, when I got my status here, somebody offered me a sewing machine. My partner then was, we were not married, he got me an overlocker so I started sewing. And, OK knitting, I went back to it full time was 2014. I had cancer, and that was Hodgkins lymphoma stage four. And when I

was going through those, I couldn't do anything, just sitting, so I thought "OK, what can I do?". In order for me to be doing something I thought "OK, I can knit" so I started looking for balls of wool and I started knitting, I would finish a scarf in just watching TV, I ended up knitting about almost 100 scarves. Then I started sewing as well. Going to the market, just buying some pieces of fleece and started sewing some scarves. So that's how I came back and I just love it because it's so therapeutic.

I can't just be sitting down, otherwise my mind will just really go outside thinking about the negativity of me dying, of leaving my children on their own. And so I thought, "OK, at least you know, it's like knitting, you make something up". You see, and you enjoy, you can give it to somebody, and they can feel, you know, like warmth. So I thought that, "OK, why can't I do that? Even if I can't do much at least I'm doing something". I mean, imagine it was stage four, one point in time, I couldn't sit up, I couldn't help myself, I couldn't feed myself. I needed somebody to feed me.

When I started feeding helping myself a bit I thought, "OK, I need to be busy". This is bringing me back to who I was or who I am. Because it was when I was young. That's when I learned to knit. And so it's like, OK, I'm still there. I can start from where I started.

I mean, I think it's part of me now. I go into a shop. Sometimes if it's a wool shop I always come out with a ball, even if I go out walk around the streets. And so you know, those stores they sell fabric, I buy. And now I can make something that's like, OK, if you make a mistake, you can tell that I've made a mistake. It makes you think, then you think OK, this is so healing, one stitch at a time, one stitch at a time. OK, whatever. You look back at the tension. Is it alright? I'm happy to that. How long did I take? I'm making this, how many stitches, how many lines, how many rows am I going to do? It just brings your mind. But there's some, like this one, where you can really see if somebody drops a stitch, or maybe you make a mistake, instead of make two stitches instead of knit one purl one, you can tell that. So I try to rectify, as long as I can see it, before I do 10 rows,

SARA : We have a rule or I have a rule that if someone is rude enough to point out the mistakes in your making, that they're not a very nice person, and that they're being quite rude. Someone's taken the time and the effort and has tried to make something. And yes, it might not be perfect but most of the time that's not the reason why they made it. It wasn't to make a perfect copy, it was to make something. It seems quite cruel to ...

SELINA : ... To dampen the spirit ...

SARA : Yeah, it's very, it's like you say that the thing of making is it's not always about what you make at the end, it's about the process and how that can make you feel and you can feel satisfaction just in each individual stitch. If you start kind of giving people a hard time, you're going to take away that joy. And I just think that, for me anyway, that's where a lot of that joy is, is that kind of sitting. I think it's almost kind of like a meditation. It is like so how it's very good for me. I can't quite describe why but it's very good. I know. It's very good for me.

SELINA : It grounds you, you really feel you're there. Yeah, because it's something which we're doing that, like if you miss the stitch, if you make a mistake, because I'm going back, I'm in the present moment, because you can't do it when you're thinking just to think about what you're making. Right. So I love it.

SARA : Yeah, that's a really good point that it makes you focus on now, that you can't kind of think too far ahead or too far back. Now you've got to be present in the moment.

SELINA : So I mean, when you're sick, you know, meditating, meditation is all: you need to be in the present moment, you are there, you need to be grounded. I think that was more of a healing thing for me than ever.

Imagine you can't ... You're thinking of killing yourself. Because you think "I'm not going to be worth anything". So if I take something which can just take my life, then all of a sudden think, "OK, I could be doing something". I could rather than thinking about that, what can I do to replace that thinking?

And I thought, "OK, I can use my hands." Then I couldn't use my machine. Because I've got three machines. I'm crazy about sewing machines as well. So I've got you know, like boxes and boxes of fabrics now. But I thought I couldn't sit on the machine, so went into crazy about getting wool. I went into West Brom some other time, into this shop and I found this kind of "Oh my goodness" and it was first these "Oh, different colors. I'm going to buy." I started buying, I think I spent about 50 pounds, just buying and buying.

So when I sat down so, you can imagine, with all that wool, you need to go over it. And when I was looking forward to something, yes. I was expecting that in that moment, I'm not going to think about wanting to kill myself and get ... or whatever, or about my pain about, "OK, how are my kids going to be" because my kids were in their 20s then. I was just imagining things. "Oh, who is going to look after my son? What's going to happen to my daughter?" Fortunately, my daughter had just finished her uni. So I thought "OK, at least she can look after my son" by then it's like, OK. I didn't think about you know. So when I went back to my knitting, it just pushed all that nonsense away.

And I thought, OK, I can produce something, maybe I can sell? I can start making money. I think these buttons, I bought them when I went to Peterborough, you know helping somebody there. Different types of buttons, picked a few. So it's like wherever I go ...

SARA : You're always thinking about where the next make is coming from.

SELINA : What can I use that? Or, what can I put?

SARA : So we talked a little bit about your knitting and some of your sewing as well. Tell me about your three machines?

SELINA : No, I mean two plain sewing machines. No, not plain as such both zigzag but the other one is an overlocker. You know, I used to, say make like, if I'm going out for an evening, I would make a dress in the morning and wear it in the evening. That's, you know, how passionate I was about, you know, sewing and still if I look at a fabric ... like the other day. I just came from South Africa, I took a fabric with me in my case (laughs). And I was almost taking it back coming back with it and then I thought that "This is crazy. I'll just leave it here." And so like I'll come back next time, maybe I'll make something or somebody to make, you know, but it was just the sense of "I know, my fabric is there." I just feel like "OK, it's located, I feel like I'm wearing it" and I went for a party wearing that, it was just a cloth, put it around myself. You know, then cut a few, and put it like a lining. And then I had a dress and people were amazed, "Oh, it looks nice", but it wasn't it was just a fabric. It's like I can make some fabric into anything. I can wear whatever I want and it makes me feel happy. I mean, it's like "you are creative" that is all about cutting and designing you know it's like "OK, I can design whatever I want" and I can wear whatever and now it will be just be my pattern not anybody can have it. I mean I'm not saying you can't because we all stem from one mind. So what I think maybe somebody 1000 miles away is thinking about it but I always think "OK, anywhere I am, it's just me".

One time I did sew my finger through, you know the needle came down. I was sitting there enjoying this, early in the morning, I think around five, I don't know how I did it, all of a sudden, and I thought "Goodness me! You have to remove this." Nobody was around. My son was sleeping, he was very young then. So I ... easily like, then no ... ow! ... So I had to ease the needle up, OK it came out. Put it in warm water, salt water and that was it.

SARA : It was OK?

SELINA : Yeah, it was fine.

SARA : I did the same thing, you can still see the scars. I did it on an industrial machine.

SELINA : OH yeah That's why

SARA : And the scream. I was at work

SELINA : I can imagine it was really painful.

SARA: Don't take your eye off the machine whilst your foot is still

SELINA : Talking, talking women (imitates talking)

SARA : Yes, exactly. Absolutely. Concentrate. You'll only do it once, I tell you. You'll never do it again. The worst thing was because I was at work. I bled on to the costumes.

SELINA : The garment you were making?

SARA : yes the costumes. Just put it into soak and it was fine. It's absolutely fine. But yeah, could have got into trouble for bleeding on costumes.

SELINA : But then it wouldn't have been your fault.

SARA : No, well it was, because I wasn't paying attention. Too busy, like you say, chatting away.

SELINA : When I would teach my students to see the way they improved, you know, making things then was when they started enjoying, it's because I was enjoying. I went to school, where the teacher used to tell them to write notes and write the page in their notebooks. So it's like when I went there the children were not interested. So that, "OK, what can I do? How can I make them enjoy?" So I would sit down with them and said, "OK, we're making something, which should represent you." If you're going to make crooked stitches, which means there's something wrong. So it's like, OK, in the end, the subject was passed the first time, A. When I took over they gave me a GCSE class. So it's like, even the headmaster gave me some money for because he had two of his daughters in the class.

I loved seeing, you know, people that are now ... they love, you know, like showing off what they've done. That was really something I would love to ... even you know, like, I know, some women, we are adults, who would have loved to do that when we were growing up and we didn't have the chance. I wouldn't have mind sitting down and talking and teaching other people to do it.

SARA : So is that something that you, you don't do now that you are in the UK?

SELINA : At the moment I don't, because I haven't joined any, you know, like groups or created any groups to say, "OK, I want to teach or come here who wants to learn". I mean, when I came in, then I became ... I was a single mother and my focus was on my children, working hard to feed them to, you know, until ... I had to pay for my daughter's masters. So it's like I had to work day in day out.

Afterwards, I thought I was resting. When 2014, that's when I had cancer and it pushed me down. And I was beginning to start thinking "OK, now I can do what I want". But then yeah, you can never say I've learnt enough. I remember I did macrame some time back. I didn't take it serious. I think I was still at school or at college somewhere. But it's something I'd love to learn and go back to it. I do crocheting but not much. Yeah, I would love to learn that.

I was a divorcee, I could have just gone down and say "OK, nobody wants me". I had challenges of cancer. And I could have said "OK, nobody ..." like a thought which almost came to me said that "Nobody ever survived cancer because I hadn't seen anybody". But I know they were there. So there's

nothing or nobody can say you can't do anything. You can do anything you want. After my chemotherapy, my cancer, I became a health coach. It was 2020 I'd always wanted to be a coach, because people used to ask me how I survived cancer. I know what I did. But it's like I wanted really to get into the details. So what really is some ... what is a coaching? How can one help other people realizing that life is not just about, you know, like, a few things.

In my coaching, we've got about 12 different aspects of life. Which makes you say, I'm really healthy. Each and every one of them they're different. It can be your finances, your children, the family aspect of it. It can be you know, the environment. How do you look after your home? Outside? Are you in relationship with nature? Do you love walking outside? Do you understand why it's crucial for you to go outside? Do you understand like meditation, self love? Because who can love you for you? You have to remember that. OK. I mean, like I was divorced, I thought maybe I can't be loved. But no, love starts from me. If I don't love me, who can love me? Even if I came into your house and I would say, you would see that I was so low. I wouldn't have been vibrant the way you were, you were going to measure up to, you know, my vibrations. So it's like, OK, we need that, when I came to understand that. I was so grateful. And I thought "This is it. Life is just not for Selina and her children and her family. Life is a community". So it's like in a community. How can you serve? How can we serve each other? That's why I love coaching. And it's just about, yeah, that. It's like "Make life the way you want it!". I can tell you, I can help work with you, but if you haven't said "I'm going to do it", you will never do it. What do we want to do in this world? Most people say "I want to love, I want to change the world". But if you change the world around you to say "This is the life I love, I want to give, I want to share, I want to do this". Life is about sharing and loving. Let's be there for each other. You can never be alone. There's so many of us around. So, yes, reach out. I'm Selina Cheshire, and I'm there to support, even if for a talk. If you want to talk.

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