

SARA FOWLER:

Hello, welcome to Yarning, Tales from Birmingham, a 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 four, where I speak to Sarah Sammy.

SARAH SAMMY:

Hello, my name is Sarah Sammy. I am from Trinidad and Tobago, and I've been living in the UK now for about five years. I moved to the West Midlands, around 2017 also, and I'm a crafter. I knit and I crochet, and I do cross stitch and crafting has kind of been in my life longer than, you know, I can really think to grasp pool of time

It's all kind of intermingled with my mental health journey. Basically, during that time, I was experiencing my first kind of, I guess, proper management of my depression on stuff. I'd come home from university and started to see a counselor and that kind of stuff, that my mental health was being cared for in a constructive way for the first time.

And I actually dropped out from the classes because I felt because the classes soon morphed into me staying on beyond the class to the point where all the ladies would meet. So I ended up staying longer and longer. But at that time I had this, I was in a pretty depressed period. And there was this gloom around me that I felt that I was like, this dark presence that was just souring the mood for these ladies. of course, it's all in my head. So I stopped going. And I would go to my psychologist, and every time at the end of the session, she would ask me, "What are you going to do for the rest of your day?" And I would never have an answer for her. And she knew I had started this knitting thing. So she would try to encourage me to go and I didn't.

And then I can't remember exactly how it was. But one of the ladies from the group was the wife of a Spanish guy who worked in oil and gas in Trinidad. And we had seen each other in the waiting room at the psychologists office at one point. And we never really ... we acknowledged each other but never really, like acknowledged or said to each other "Ah, we both seeing a therapist". We were within that boundary between it being a very taboo and personal kind of thing to be more of a conversation like "We need to focus on the mental health of us as people". And she and I started to pass messages through our therapist to each other. It took a few of those sessions where Dr. Hadid she's like, "You need to go back to knitting. So after I want you to go back". And Natalie and I (Natalie's the Spanish lady), we never spoke of this at all, there was never any verbal acknowledgement of what had happened. But it brought me back to knitting.

Natalie was a crocheter and she would ... her crochet, she would do all kinds of stuff. But again, in this group of ladies, she found a safe space, a space of nurturing kind women and we were all different all different walks of life, all different backgrounds. And it was just nice, you know, and that's when I started to go regularly. And that's when I started to craft beyond that first piece.

When I came back is when I started crocheting, and I think crocheting I very quickly got into because with knitting there was always this anxiety for me around me around ripping around fixing anything that I make an error in so I started to crochet. So I would crochet, I crocheted a scarf. I crochet bags, I slowly evolved my crocheting and over the next five, six years that I was staying in Trinidad for that was what I did, it was a lot of scarves. It was a lot of flat work that my dad then sewed into pieces. Yeah, so my dad would help me line pieces. I did a purse once that we put the plastic canvas in to make it stiffer. So that you know that eventually became an element of it. I would make things for my mom. Again, on request, you know it was ... so it slowly became a way that my parents and I related again to something I was doing and I think for me, this journey in knitting and crocheting was a very, I think, nurturing and transformative tool in my life.

Like my maternal grandmother was a seamstress, was a sewer, to the point where she used to call me her model. So she would make, everyday she would make a new outfit for me, and I would model it. This is ... I don't have this memory. This is a story memory. And even my clothing. I mean, I remember

the point at which I started to feel embarrassed about it. But even my clothing would grow with me because she would add in pieces at the side. And she did that to everything you know, but they came from that war era where it was like “make use of everything”, you know.

So she sewed, we call them Patchwork, but I guess they were version of quilts. Right now I have a sleeping or we call it a sleeping bag. But it was just a tube. I have a sleeping bag that she made for me that she made for all of the cousins, there were 13 of us on my father's side. I think I said maternal grandmother I mean, paternal grandma.

So on the other side on my on my mother's side, my maternal grandmother, they were these ... the government had these community programs for crafting, you know, to occupy the lonely woman folk when, you know, which, anyway, whatever. But she did everything. So she made these dolls that you made these rings with cloth, and then you scrunched it together, and then you created a doll that had like floppy hands and stuff out of these things.

So she and her eldest daughter would go to those things. And apparently my aunt was a crafter. She crocheted and when I started to crochet, my grandmother gave me a set of hooks, which I still use now, which she, my grandmother had accumulated over time. So you have the both sides, both matriarchs, both crafters in different ways, always dabbling in something crafty. And the first thing I learned with fiber and fabric was embroidery. Actually, no, the first thing I learned was how to make a bag. And I would make these little bags, I would make clothes for my Barbie dolls, you know, and I was always up under my grandmother. This is my paternal grandmother. I was always up under her. I was always like, at the sewing machine making these awful things. But I thought I was the best you know, and she would she had all these scraps everywhere that ... she saved every little scrap. So instead of bugging her she would say “Go make something with that”, you know.

And then from that we moved on to embroidery. And I did these two tea towels: one with love and one with hearts on it. And that, like ... up to now I have that at home. And I always imagine in my house, I'd have it framed. Her name was Myrtle, Myrtle Sammy. She really I think, I don't know, encouraged that kind ... And I was a little bit of a loner of a child. So being under my grandparents just absorbing all of that love and creativity. Yeah.

So I did not plan to leave Trinidad for any length of time. I came to do my master's degree. And during that time, I do not think I did any crafting. But when I decided to stay in the UK, I got a job offer. I couldn't refuse it. I knew because of my journey with mental health that I needed to build support around me if I was going to succeed in this adventure. So the first thing I did was I looked up knitting groups. That's what I did. Because I was like, “Where do I find a safe space with nice people? Knitting groups.” I went to these knitting groups that were no longer in existence. Because I had searched online, there was no presence online anywhere there, or whatever those search terms were coming up, didn't bring up anything. So I kept going to these pubs or these things, at the time that was listed on different websites and not finding anybody.

And then one Monday, no, it was a Wednesday, I went to the library because I heard that there was a library knitting group. When I went there was no knitting group. There was this guy, I can't remember his name, I think his name was Paul, but he heard me asking another library attendant about it and then he said, “Yes, I know those ladies, they still come here.” I was like, What did I hit gold?

And then he told me about these ladies. And he actually sent them an email saying that I had ... I was looking for them. And I then the next Monday, I came, the lady who ran the group wasn't running it anymore. And it was these two older ladies who were just hanging out with each other on a Monday. It wasn't an official group at all. And that's when I met my first knitters and one of the ladies, Iris, 92 years old or something like that, incredible knitter. Like, it was just incredible to see her create from, from creating figurines to creating stuffed animals to creating garments. She was always doing something and she was fast. So I was like, “Ah, I have someone who could fix my mistakes. Maybe I could do

knitting again.” Right. So this was when I switched back to knitting, because I found somebody that could fix any mistakes I made.

And that group was the first kind of home and support system I found in the UK. Like there's a genuine place in my heart and in my soul for them. And it's sort of a group of five of us. It's a lady named Helen, a young, a young mummy because she's a mommy now named Claire, there is Sue. There is Iris, we had a few women who have come in and out. And a lot of them have been ... there was one lady who was on a boat. And she just happened to hear about this, she lives on the on the canals. And she popped in there was a lady from Australia.

Then we had a pandemic and I could not go to my groups. I decided I had a mission in my head. I was like, “OK, we're in the pandemic now. I am not spending time commuting. I'm going to do things now.” What's driven a lot of my entry into new items has been my parents. So like I first learned to crochet a hat because of my dad and his cold ball head. You know, I first learned to crochet bag because I wanted to make one for mom and that kind of thing.

So we're in the pandemic, and I'm like ... several things happened. I decided I was going to make a blanket, the first time I'm making like a big blanket for my mom. So I did Attic23. Attic23 is a crochet designer, I can't I can't remember if that's her exact name. But she designs these fantastic blankets, right. And all through this time I have a cousin as well who is into knitting and crocheting. And she did a blanket from this designer that was based on the Moorland and the colouring of that thing you could just imagine you're looking out on Moorland. So again, that was a big project. It was like, “OK, I'm going to try it. I'm going to see what I could do.” And it was crochet so again, my comfort zone. So I did that. Then I decided I was going to knit a pair of socks for my dad. Because again with his cold bald head, there's his cold feet. I was like, okay, a pair of socks is too complicated for me. In that year before I had started to knit again. And I had knit a straight, like just a straight scarf, straight garter stitch. I said, “OK, I need to learn all of these things.” But we're in a pandemic. There is no way to learn it really. So then I found that people had pivoted their classes to online. So I said, “OK, first thing is I'm going to learn how to knit in the round.” right? Because when I'm looking up socks, and at that time, I'm still very timid with knitting, you know. So Ginger Twist Studios, had online courses, and I did knitting in the round. And we did a pattern from Tin Can Knits. So this is me now knitting and following a pattern.

And you could see through that year things slowly building and building. And then I did another course later in that year, because during the making of the cowl, I realized I learned to rip because I had ripped. I've made mistakes. And actually I had made a mistake on the cowl. And the lady running the course was able to show me how to un-knit. And I was like “Oh my gosh”, it just clicked in my head. But again over time, I think it's the building of that ... and I think it's the point where it's like there's no other option. You have no option but to start over or figure out how to ...

Then I learned how to do the magic eight, magic loop, again through a Ginger Twist Course. But then doing that I was like, but I can do this. And I think during that course, I realize I don't necessarily need a course, to take me to the next step, because again, everything in my mind was building to making this pair of socks for my dad.

So I did my cowl, I did a magic loop so I can learn to make a small circle. And then the next step was, initially I was going to learn to make a pair of socks via a Ginger Twist course. But then I decided to try it on my own. Right. And I bought a kit from this group of ladies in Bournville, who own a shop called Christine's wool shop. And they have this kit, a sock making kit, where they gave you a Winwick Mum pattern, they gave you a ball of yarn, and they gave you tools. But then they gave me a little, little, neat little needle. And I was like, “I didn't know that six inch needles existed!” So maybe I can do ... because I'm more comfortable with knitting in the round, maybe I could do the sock using these tools. And that's when I started to do the socks, right.

And this is where things get a little upsetting or difficult. After I started doing that, and of course it was a rainbow colored yarn, the plan in my head was I was going to do a test sock. And then I would buy yarn

for my dad. And I would make a pair of socks for him. And he passed away. I can't remember if I had started making the sock yet. But it was just kind of blow that I spent his whole year building up skills to make a pair socks. And he goes and he, that is ... it sounds very harsh ... but that's how we are in my family. You know, it's not like it's ... but yeah, so he passed away. And that was that was difficult to deal with not only being stranded in the UK, not being able to communally grieve with my family. But now this dedication of my love and my care. And me, my way of thinking, I guess, when I look back, I could say, you know, it was me thinking of my family during this time. And I was making these things for my parents. And it's like it felt like all of that just got flushed down the drain.

So I stopped crafting again for a few months. And it was my cousin who is a knitter, that family lives in Manchester and they provided a massive amount of, again, support nurturing cushioning around me. And I can't remember if it's my aunt or who it was, who encouraged me to start by making the sock. And I did. And I finished it. That process I think helped with in some ways in dealing with that grief and working through that grief. But like when I finished that sock, when I did Kitchener stitch ... when I did a gusset and I did a short row heel. I did so many elements in that sock that took my mind out of its own worries and into "I have to figure out how to do this." And I think all of that kind of really pushed me into a different headspace not only in terms of my grief and that kind of stuff, but also in terms of my crafting. I don't think I ever envisioned where it will take me ... I mean, even in my academic and professional life, I'm open. That's my mindset with everything. And I feel with knitting, it's the same.

So I don't really see it as like a plan for my art, or for my fiber arts or anything like that, it's more like what this has opened up for me that I can do anything that I put my mind to. I wouldn't say I'm fearless with knitting now. But my second pair of socks was a lot better than that first pair. And our second pair I actually sent to mommy last September. I mailed it to her. I didn't tell I was doing it. But that also felt like a full circle moment where I could, you know, give this piece. I think it's hard for me to say where I see my craft in the future. But crafting has been such an integral part of my life and I think this discussion has caused me to see how much it's woven through every element of my life you know. And yeah, I think it's just continuing to have this open mindset to any maker, any making process and seeing what could happen. I think there's this fearlessness that has kind of crept in, and an openness that I've always had, but I feel like it's been amplified.