

BECOMING A SINGLE DAD TAUGHT HIM THAT STRENGTH MEANS SHOWING UP, EVERY SINGLE TIME.

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

single fatherhood, fatherhood identity, men's mental health, vulnerability men, sacrifice and resilience, absent fathers, men opening up, breaking the stigma, fathers of colour, the dad project

SPEAKERS

Brenton Amedee, Naroop Jhooti

Brenton 00:00

How do you think being a single dad has changed you? It's changed me in terms of I realise that it is okay to not be okay. It's okay to share your issues with other people. So I guess it's made me more open, and more vulnerable. It was a bad, bad feeling. I went to some dark places. And I think this project is great because it's showing people, men like us, that there is help out there. You're not alone. You don't have to suffer alone or in silence. You don't have to constantly have this brave face on. And it's just an opportunity to share my experiences with others that might be going through the same situation.

Naroop 01:09

Imagine being a single father navigating life's challenges while nurturing the future. The Dad Project tells these stories of strength, sacrifice, and unbreakable bonds. In Season 1, we dive into the voices of single fathers of colour, capturing their victories and their struggles. It's time to recognise their impact, break down the stigma, and celebrate the powerful truth of fatherhood. Join me, your host, Naroop Jhooti, on this inspiring journey.

Naroop 01:09

Brenton, thanks so much for being involved. When I contacted you to be part of this, what was it about the project that made you say yes?

Brenton 01:47

I think the most important thing was your energy. Obviously you're very passionate about it. You've gone through a lot, and I've gone through a lot as well, separating from my partner and having kids. I wanted to share that experience with people. I'm generally a lively, bubbly person, and even though I was going through a hard time I didn't really show that on the outside. People might think, 'Ah, Brenton's going through that, but he's okay.' But really, I wasn't okay. Inside I was in turmoil. And I just thought it was a great opportunity for me to share my feelings with other people who may go through similar things and think they should be able to show a brave face all

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the time. I did show a brave face a lot of the time, but like I said, inside I was in turmoil. It was a bad, bad feeling. I went to some dark places, and I think this project is great because it's showing people, men like us, that there is help out there. You're not alone. You don't have to suffer alone or in silence. You don't have to constantly have this brave face on. It's just an opportunity to share my experiences with others who might be going through the same situation.

Narooop 02:39

So tell me a little bit about your journey. How did you feel when you first became a single dad? What was that like?

Brenton 02:39

It was tough. At the time my kids were nine and seven, and I had an older one who was fourteen, but he's from a previous relationship. One of the hardest decisions was actually leaving the family home and leaving the kids. Obviously it was a home that the kids had been brought up in, they'd been born there, they'd spent all their life there. Me not being there, not seeing them every day, not being part of their life every day, was really, really tough.

It was a really tough decision to make. But it had to be done, for everyone's sakes, because I wasn't happy and my partner wasn't happy. I didn't want it to impact the kids. So it was a tough decision, but I think it was the right one. I moved into a flat ten minutes' walk away so I could see the kids as much as possible, trying to keep their daily routine as much as possible, see them before school, take them to school if I could, pick them up after school, see them in the evenings. So it was tough, but it did work out. It wasn't a smooth road, but I'm glad I persevered, because I have a great relationship with my kids now, and I have an okay relationship with my ex.

Narooop 04:10

How did you get through those first few months? When you become a single dad and you realise the routine is going to totally change, your whole world's been flipped upside down. What did you find comfort in, to give you the strength to keep showing up? Because as men and as fathers we feel like we have to be strong. We're the foundation, the protectors, the providers. That's something innate and built into us. So what gave you the strength to keep the routine the same, and what kind of things did you have to do to get through that?

Brenton 04:40

I think I can draw on my own childhood experiences. Without going too much into it, my mum and dad were never together. I was brought up by my grandmother from the age of six. My mum moved to America, my dad was in London, and I was living in the UK with my grandmother. My dad was in and out of my life. He would say he was going to come and see me, I'd be all excited waiting for him, and he wouldn't show up. I'd be in tears thinking, 'What have I done wrong? Why isn't he here?'

My grandma was always a comfort to me. She'd say, 'Don't worry about him, I'm here for you.' So I didn't want my kids to go through that experience. No matter what turmoil I was in, no matter what I was doing, I would always be there when I said I was going to be there.

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With technology, the kids had phones so I could always message them and keep in contact. When I did see them, no matter how tough a week I'd had at work, when I saw them it was all about them. I could be tired, I could be drained, but I'd put all my energy into them and just make sure they were happy and that things were relatively normal for them, even though I wasn't living in the same home.

Narooop 05:50

That's interesting. So what kind of things did you have to sacrifice? One of the key words that comes up a lot speaking to dads is sacrifice. And it's not like they sacrificed things and resent it, they did it because they knew they had to. There was no other choice. Tell me a bit about some of the ways your life had to change in order for you to still give your children what you felt they needed from you.

Brenton 06:21

I guess it changed in terms of my living arrangements. I'd gone from a family home to living in a small two-bedroom flat, and mentally that was quite tough. I was thinking, I've worked hard to build this family home and I'm the one moving out into a small flat. But it was a sacrifice because I wanted the kids to maintain their normality, have their own rooms, have their own space, know where they were going every night.

On the flip side, the kids kept me going. They were like, 'Oh Daddy, can we come and see you? Where's our room? Where are we going to sleep?' They basically had two homes. When I saw their reaction to that, it made me feel a lot more relaxed and comforted. Finances were tough, too, paying for one house and supporting myself. But again, it just comes back to the kids. What is best for the kids?

And seeing their reactions, one of the things I didn't want was them saying, 'Oh, we don't want to go to Dad's because it's a small place.' But they never said that, which is a testament to them, and to their mum as well, just keeping them grounded.

Brenton 07:38

One point where it did get a little bit tense was when I had to move to the other side of London when I met my current partner. We had a two-bedroom flat there, and at the same time my eldest son had finished university and came to live with us. So on a weekend we had five people plus a dog in a small two-bedroom flat. My eldest son had the spare room, and the kids were on the sofa bed in the lounge. That broke my heart.

They were getting older and they needed their own space, but I just didn't have it. I was thinking, 'I'm failing as a father here.' I wanted them to come and see me, but when they did they were sleeping on the sofa bed. It took so long to resolve because I was going through a divorce and I couldn't buy anywhere until it was finalised. The divorce went on for a lot longer than it should have, mainly due to Covid and other issues. I'd say I had about four years of that living situation, and it was tough.

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Naroop 08:32

You said something which really resonated with me, which was 'I don't want them to not want to come to Daddy's house.' As a father, especially a father of a daughter, I always feel like I have to make sure she has just as good a time with me. You've got a daughter too, right? A daughter and two sons.

It's different with sons and with daughters. There are things that mothers can do with a daughter that are different. But you also want to make sure they have just as good a time with you and that you can provide for them. What have you had to do specifically with your daughter to make sure she can spend time with you and enjoy it, and how have you had to adapt to her needs?

Brenton 09:35

Good question. So I don't like shopping. I never have done. But my daughter loves shopping. So a sacrifice I've made is going out shopping with her, carrying her bags, telling her we can go to whatever shop she wants. I joke about it being a sacrifice, but I love it because her face just lights up. I'll say, 'You can have whatever you want,' and she goes, 'Oh no, it's too expensive.' I'm like, 'It's yours, baby, if you want it, get it.'

Then there are things like she loves making bracelets, so I'll sit with her and make little bracelets and necklaces. As she's got older, what she wants is basically to sit on TikTok, so I'm trying to drag her out of the house. 'Come on, let's go for a walk, let's go to the park, let's play on the swings.' I do make more of an effort to make sure she's alright. She's very sensitive, like I am. She'll call me up or message me just out of the blue, and at first I think she wants something, but then she'll just say, 'I'm just checking in, seeing how you're doing.'

That makes me feel really emotional. It shows that the effort I've made is reciprocated, that she understands I may not be living with her but I'm very much in her life. The kind of love a child gives you can't be replaced anywhere. I feel truly blessed having a daughter. That has changed me as a man.

Brenton 11:29

I was talking to Amit about this earlier, that if I had a son I'd probably treat him differently than a daughter. I know what a little boy would need. I was a little boy. I know what I wanted to do when I was young. I can still remember going to the park, wanting to play football, playing with trucks. But with a daughter it's different.

Naroop 11:57

How do you think being a single dad has changed you? Because obviously you've been through a lot of tough times, but you've come out and you're sitting here smiling. When you walked in, your energy was vibrant. You look like you're thriving. How has it changed you?

Brenton 12:22

I think it's made me a lot more positive. Like I said, I've been through some dark times, and when I was going through those dark times I kept things to myself. I didn't want people to worry about

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me, and I didn't want unsolicited advice like 'It's going to be okay.' Inside I knew it would be okay at some point, but at that point in time I just couldn't see light at the end of the tunnel. So I kept things to myself and just smiled and thought everything was fine. But it's changed me in terms of I've realised it's okay to not be okay. It's okay to share your issues with other people. Another thing was, if I wanted to talk to someone, I wanted to talk to someone who had gone through or was going through the same things.

A lot of my friends hadn't separated. Those who had separated from their kids sometimes had no involvement with their kids at all. But I wanted to share my experience with someone and ask, 'How did you get through it?' I guess it's made me more open, more vulnerable, and that's not just in terms of the kids but in life in general. I'm playing cricket at the moment, I've just come back to it after years away. I had a tough first match on Saturday, and I thought, 'Why am I doing this at my age, coming out of retirement?'

But I've shared my thoughts and feelings with other people, and they've said, 'Just take your time, don't beat yourself up about it.' Whereas years ago I'd have just kept that inside. So yes, it's made me more vulnerable and open to being vulnerable, and more willing to share experiences.

Naroop 13:59

I know I'm old school, but the old British Telecom ad is right, it really is good to talk. I can totally relate to that. I had two sessions of therapy after I separated from my partner, and the therapist wasn't telling me anything I didn't already know. But I spoke openly to everyone I met, especially my four best friends, who I would literally pour my heart out to. Amit would be one of them. I'd be on the way to a shoot and I'd be telling him stuff, and bless him, he would listen.

Sometimes all he needed to do was listen and not even say anything back. I've always said to any man going through it: be open, don't be afraid to show your vulnerabilities. Because it's the only way you're going to heal. A lot of these emotions that we carry are like baggage, like dragging a weight with you. How are you going to move forward and fly and flourish if you're being weighed down by your past? Men find it very difficult to do that.

But I think what you've realised is that your vulnerability is actually your strength. As soon as people realise that, life changes. What advice would you give to somebody who's just separated from their partner, loves their kids, wants to be the best dad, but it's so fresh? How would you tell them to get through it?

Brenton 15:36

I guess going back to the communication point: find someone to talk to. If they want to talk to me, open up to me, that's fine. Share your thoughts, feelings, and fears. I would offer myself not as a role model, but as someone who has gone from the bottom and got through it. I would tell them that you'll always be the father of your kids no matter what happens, even if their mum remarries or finds another partner. You'll always be their dad.

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You may not be living with them and seeing them every day, but they will always love you. For me, one of the things when I split up was the fear that I'm not going to be there, that someone else is going to take my place, that they're going to call that person 'Dad' and forget about me. I'd reiterate that you are their dad.

They love you, you love them, and you can still have a great relationship with them even if you don't see them every day. With the technology we have, your daughter sends you pictures and messages all the time, and it makes you feel great, especially when she's not asking for money. It's just 'Hey Dad, look what I did today. How was your day?' That type of thing makes you feel like all the pain you went through has been worth it. So I'd just tell them to persevere.

Brenton 17:14

One thing I probably didn't do enough was look after myself. You're so busy thinking about your kids being okay that you neglect yourself. I know I sometimes struggled to get out of bed. I didn't want to see anyone or do anything. Sport has always been my go-to since I was a kid. Whenever I was stressed, I'd go and play football, play cricket, go to the gym, go for a run.

There was a period when I didn't do any of that. I just couldn't face the world. So one piece of advice would be: if there's something you love doing, even if you have to force yourself, do it. I would force myself to get out of bed and go to the gym or go for a run, and you feel so much better afterwards.

I was fortunate that my current partner recognised I wasn't going to the gym anymore, and she'd push me to go. Initially I'd be like, 'I don't want to,' but after the session I'd think, 'Thank you, that's done me the world of good.' So if you're not self-disciplined enough to force yourself, find someone who will make you go. I'll text my friends every day and bug them until they get back into the habit and start feeling better about themselves.

Narooop 18:24

What you said is amazing, and I say to a lot of men I meet who are going through something: put yourself first. Not in a selfish way. It doesn't mean as a single dad you go off to Las Vegas and spend a fortune. It means take care of yourself first, because if you're a mess, you're going to be a mess for your child.

You have to get to a state where you can look at yourself in the mirror and be proud of that man looking back at you. I thoroughly believe that if you wake up in the morning and your reflection disappoints you, the rest of your day is going to be disappointing. Taking care of yourself, going to the gym, eating healthy, reading. I've got this gratitude jar where anything good that happens in the day I make a little note and pop it in the jar, then at the start of the new year I read them all out. It could be something small, but it just makes you feel good.

Those little things really compound. When you start feeling good about yourself, everything else around you falls into place, because we radiate energy. Kids are so intuitive. My daughter picks up on my energy immediately. If I'm in a bad mood, she'll know it and she'll be in a bad mood.

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The truth is, as a single dad, any time we have with the kids is so valuable. We've got to be present, enjoy it, and be grateful for it.

Naroop 20:26

What are your thoughts on the motivation behind this project, that single fathers of colour aren't given the respect they deserve? I found that when I became a single dad and told people I'd separated, a lot of the time people assumed it was my fault, that I'd done something wrong, or that as a single dad of colour you may not be as present for your child as the other parent might be. What are your thoughts on that?

Brenton 21:05

Yeah, I agree with you. One of the reasons it was so difficult for me to leave was that I didn't want that stigma. I didn't want people thinking, 'Oh, another Black man who's got a kid and isn't going to be around.' I'm not that, and I didn't want to be that. There is that stigma attached, and I think it might be a small percentage of guys who are actually like that. But all the single dads I know, whether Black or white, are present for their kids.

They want to be there. For me it broke my heart when I didn't see my kids. The fact that some people can go weeks or months with no contact with their kids, I can't fathom it. I made a special effort to be present, but it wasn't even like a sacrifice really. It wasn't like, 'Oh, I could be playing football but I'll see my kids instead.'

My kids are my priority, full stop. I was fortunate that I could have a social life, go to the gym, and see my kids without one suffering at the expense of the other. It was hard work, getting up at five in the morning to go to the gym before work, or before seeing the kids at the weekend. It's just about making sacrifices.

I actually think I might have had more quality time with my kids after separating than when we were all living together, because I was working ridiculous hours. I'd sometimes go to work before they woke up and get home just as they were going to bed. Whereas now I'll take a day off and see them, and weekends are all about them. The thing for me was maintaining that consistent relationship and communication with the kids.

Naroop 22:58

That's really interesting, because I did a talk the other day about time with your child as a single dad, and how you probably spend more quality time with your kids being a single dad than you would if you were in the relationship. A lot of the time we can pass responsibility off to the other partner.

I'd go to a shoot, come back, and it would be just before my daughter was about to go to bed. Or I'd go to the gym at six in the morning and get back just in time for her to leave for school. Now I get her ready for school three or four mornings of the week. I won't work on certain days because I've got my daughter and I know she's finishing school at half three.

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So we actually end up spending more time together, which in itself is a beautiful thing. I also say to dads, look, it's going to be difficult, but think about all the ways it's going to be better for you as well. In some ways it is better. You're clearly thriving now. I'd love to hear about your life now, your work, your relationship with your kids, and how having gone through all those challenges you've come out to be the man sitting in front of me.

Brenton 24:24

Okay, so it's been a long road, but I am thriving at the moment. I have two jobs. My main job is working in an investment bank. My other job, which is my real passion, is running an outdoor laser tag business, like paintball but without the bruises, the pain, and the mess. I set that up about fifteen years ago as a sideline, and it is going really, really well. I am working all the hours I'm awake, but it's worth it because I get to provide for my family and live a good life.

I still have a great relationship with my kids. My middle son, who is sixteen, actually works for me at the laser tag site on weekends. He's doing his A Levels, but when he's off school he works with me. It's giving him responsibility, building his confidence, and developing his people skills and communication skills. In terms of my daughter, she's fourteen, she's grown out of playing with dolls but she's into TikTok.

I keep trying to get her to do a TikTok video together and she says, 'No, Dad, you'll embarrass me.' I'm going to keep bugging her with that. My eldest son lives with us and works in finance as well. I have a great relationship with all three of them. No matter what I was going through, I tried to shield them from it. My daughter is more sensitive than the boys. The boys are like, 'Dad's alright.' But she'll check in and ask, 'Dad, are you okay?' She's had my back.

Naroop 26:13

Amazing, man. Well, thank you so much for coming down today. I'm super passionate about this project, as is Amit. I think it's going to help inspire a lot of men who are going through a challenging time, comfort them, and let them know they're going to be okay. Hopefully it'll give them some advice they can put into action, no matter what stage they're at.

Because one thing I've realised about being a single dad is that time isn't always a healer. It's not time, it's a shift in mindset, a shift in the way of thinking, that really heals you. I've known people who have been separated and single dads for ten years and it still feels as raw as the day it happened, because they haven't been able to take the steps to heal and recover.

I'm hoping these interviews and this project as a whole will help men watch, take inspiration, and live thriving lives as a single dad. So thank you so much, man.

Brenton 26:50

Real pleasure. Thank you, man. Cheers.