
HE FOUGHT TWO AND A HALF YEARS FOR EQUAL CUSTODY OF HIS AUTISTIC SON.

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

single dad of colour, autism parenting, fifty-fifty custody, divorce and fatherhood, men's mental health, emotional suppression, counselling men, cultural stigma, asian fathers, the dad project

SPEAKERS

Kiran Dhilan, Naroop Jhooti

Kiran 00:00

You get to a certain time in the day and it just feels like you need the day to finish. I remember a lot of days have been like that, where it could be like two or three o'clock in the afternoon and you've just had enough. I need the day to finish. And one thing I've always said to myself for the last three years is: tomorrow is a new day. So no matter how bad today might be, get up tomorrow and start fresh. I've kind of kept that mantra. Just take it day by day. Let's just get today out of the way.

Naroop 00:33

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, on this inspiring journey.

Kiran, thanks so much for coming down today and being part of our Dad Project. It's a real pleasure to have you here. We talked a little bit on the phone and your story is really inspiring. Tell me a little bit about your journey as a single dad.

Kiran 01:19

Thanks for having me. It's a pleasure to be here. So the journey kind of started around three years ago. Me and my ex-wife separated and we decided to go our separate ways. I had to almost start again: new property, and with that we obviously had to arrange childcare arrangements. It was a really, really difficult time, just because of the separation, but then having a child in the mix of that is even more difficult.

I think from the outset, the most important thing was that we both put our son, Dylan, first. He was the priority. But yeah, the memories that really stick out to me were the conversations we had about childcare arrangements, and how that would look from the very beginning. I remember where we were sat, how the conversation went, and it was a really, really difficult conversation, because I was asking for access and time with my child, and I felt awkward doing it.

Naroop 02:37

Why did you feel awkward?

Kiran 02:39

Because it was almost like I was having to ask for something I wasn't entitled to.

Naroop 02:44

Why didn't you think you were entitled to that? I mean, you're equally entitled. You're one half.

Kiran 02:49

I think it's the perception. Going into that conversation, it's kind of what you already know. Single parents: you normally hear the children live with the mum. You hear stories, dads are not good dads, they don't want to see the children, or they only want them once every two weeks. That's almost instilled into your head because that's what you hear.

But I knew from the outset that was nowhere near what I wanted, or how I could see things moving forward. So even through the separation, the divorce, the childcare arrangements, I had one thing on my mind: fifty-fifty. I wanted everything split down the middle. That's how I settled the divorce, and that's how I intended to settle the childcare arrangements.

Naroop 03:49

That's really interesting, that you almost felt awkward asking for access because it was already ingrained in you that dads don't take care of the kids as much as mothers do. And that is exactly the whole purpose of this project.

Why do people think that? Why do people think that we want to go out and just hang out and do crazy stuff and not be with our children? It's insane. We can put it down to society, to TV, media, maybe generations above us where fathers just weren't as involved in raising children, so you think: dad takes a bit of a side step and mum is really doing a lot of the work, which is the case in some cases. That's really interesting. I felt the same way about the fifty-fifty. I want to have Lara, so that's really interesting.

Was it easy for you to get that fifty-fifty time with your son, or was it a bit of a battle?

Kiran 04:59

It's been a battle. There were times where I thought this isn't going to happen and I'm just going to have to settle with what I've got. It took two and a half years to get that full fifty-fifty split.

Naroop 05:12

Why did it take so long?

Kiran 05:14

Because my ex wasn't willing to give in to what I was asking until the very last mediation, before I was going to take it to court.

Naroop 05:22

Is that because of the perception that a man isn't able to take care of a child as well as a woman?

Kiran 05:28

I don't think so. I think it was more to do with power, almost. I looked at it from her point of view as well: it was almost like she was losing more and more, and I was gaining. Because for such a long time she was used to her routine. I was used to my routine, and I was wanting more. That's what I could see from her perspective.

So I took that into consideration every time we spoke. I tried to go about it in the best way I could, because ultimately I knew we still needed to have a relationship afterwards. I did everything I could to stop it escalating, but at the same time I wouldn't have been comfortable just walking away. I wouldn't be able to live with myself knowing I didn't fight for what I wanted.

Naroop 06:22

Why do you think you wanted your child fifty-fifty? If you were to look back at your upbringing, your influences, what you're inspired by, do you think that had a role to play in you saying: I'm going to take care of my son fifty-fifty?

Kiran 07:00

I think the number one reason was I just wanted to make sure I was able to be there for my son as much as I possibly could. I had made my work arrangements and my social arrangements all around my son. And I think the biggest thing was that my son is autistic. He was diagnosed when he was three, and that brings its own struggles. It brings a level of support that he's going to need beyond that of a typical child.

I'm his dad, I'm his role model, and I needed to make sure I was able to give him that. So I knew fifty-fifty was the maximum I was going to be able to get, and that was all I was going to be happy to walk away with.

Naroop 07:44

Tell me about the challenges of raising an autistic son as a single dad. When we spoke on the phone and you told me, I could hear your passion and dedication to giving your child everything. I can't relate to raising an autistic child, I don't actually know what the struggles are. But you were telling me some of them and I really felt for you, because I know being a single dad is challenging enough as it is.

Having to deal with the challenges your son faces does put more pressure on you, doesn't it? Can you talk to me about some of those challenges, the difficulties you face, and how you've learned to deal with them?

Kiran 08:18

Absolutely. Like you, I had no knowledge of the disability until he was diagnosed. From that point, we went on a journey of self-education to really understand it. That was one thing we both took really seriously and passionately. We went on numerous courses, and I was always at the forefront, making sure I attended everything on my days off.

It was a really interesting journey, just seeing how differently our son is wired compared to other children. Some of the struggles along the way have been his development being one or two years behind other children his age, and his sensory sensitivities. Things he's not able to cope with that are just part of everyday life: hoovering, lawnmowers, hand dryers.

Public toilets stand out to me, because I've got so many memories of different public toilets where he's just had a complete meltdown. But we learned to deal with it as a family, and the wider family soon got on board as well. Everyone wanted to learn how to support him.

At the time of the separation, he was a very happy child. He was coping with everything, and the people around him knew how to deal with him. Our biggest worry was: how is he going to deal with this? How is this going to affect him? And I think the most surprising thing is that his autism has actually helped him through the separation and the fifty-fifty parental split, because the way he looks at things is that he's got two of everything.

Two bedrooms, two cars. He's like the luckiest boy in the world. Abundance, rather than having less. Which I think is a really beautiful way for a child to see it.

Naroop 11:24

That's beautiful. I want to touch on the struggles you had and where you found the strength to deal with them. Because you want to be strong for him, but someone's got to take care of you. You don't want to be defeated inside and just putting on a brave face. Where did you find that inner strength to keep pushing through? What were your coping mechanisms?

Kiran 14:35

It's really interesting, because these are some of my strongest memories from the journey. I was in the transition of moving into my new house, staying with my dad, and going through a really difficult time. Work was really demanding. I was trying to make as much time as I could to see my son, and also dealing with selling a property to buy a new one, all while the separation was still very fresh, within weeks of it happening.

I didn't realise, but it was taking a massive toll on me. Things got really difficult at work. I remember having a director's visit and almost breaking down halfway through. I had to be taken

aside. It was soon after that, on my drive to work, I just pulled the car over and called the doctors. I just needed to talk. And I just let out whatever was on my mind. I felt a sense of relief. The doctor mentioned coping mechanisms: depression tablets, or counselling. I thought, that's not me, I don't need any of that. But I thought about it and ended up going for counselling, and it really, really helped me. I had a lot inside that I needed to let out and talk about.

So I think step one, the biggest coping mechanism was talking. For some people that might sound simple, but for me it wasn't. I realised that for the last ten or fifteen years I'd just held everything in, never talked about my feelings. And the outcome of that was that it was just bringing me down.

Through the therapy, we looked at things in my life that I'd closed the door on, things that were actually really positive for me: sports and activities, playing golf, visiting family I hadn't spoken to in a long time. Health and fitness and well-being. I realised I need to be the best version of myself before I can help my son. I need to be happy. I need to take care of myself. And from that morning, I completely refocused my energy onto myself.

My work started going better, and they were also supporting me because I was talking to them about what I was going through. I had support from my work and from my family, because they could see I was doing the right things. Things were going in the right direction.

Narooop 19:17

One thing I thought was really interesting is how you became more open, and how you had fifteen years of emotions that you hadn't let out. Every dad I've spoken to has said they've become more open about their emotions and feelings as a consequence of what they've gone through. And every inspiring single dad I meet talks about things so freely and openly.

I think when life shatters and that wound opens you up, nothing else in life could open you that way, because you've got no choice but to heal, and you can't heal if it's all still inside.

Every man who's gone through that journey of recovery, healing, finding themselves, and becoming positive has had to let it all out. I never even realised that until I started speaking to these dads.

I'm sure you can say you're a different man now than you were before, probably in a lot of positive ways, stronger in ways you never thought you could be. I consider myself an example of that. How would you say you have changed, from Kiran pre-separation to Kiran as a single dad now?

Kiran 20:23

I think the biggest and most noticeable thing is that I just don't take things as seriously anymore. At the end of the day, what's going to happen is going to happen, and what I've learned is I can deal with a lot more than I give myself credit for. I just try to enjoy the moments in life, however

small or big they are. If there's something I'd like to do, or something I'd like me and Dylan to do, we'll really make the most of it and put the energy into it.

And just trying to be happy a lot more. A lot of days in the last three years, you get to a certain point in the afternoon and you've just had enough. I need the day to finish. One thing I've always said to myself is: tomorrow is a new day. No matter how bad today might be, get up tomorrow and start fresh. Just take it day by day. And that's kind of helped me through.

Narooop 22:16

Tell me some of the sacrifices you've made in your personal life, work life, and every aspect of who you are in order to become the kind of dad you want to be.

Kiran 22:30

From the start of the separation, we had some investment properties. With the separation, and knowing what I wanted, I needed my own property. I needed a space for me and Dylan to grow. I could have just moved back in with my parents, but I needed that space. So straight away I said: let's sell, and let me just buy my place. We did that first.

Then there was work. Finding a stable work-home life balance. I was working around forty-five hours a week as a senior manager, and also having quality time at home, running a household, and spending time with Dylan. I had to step back a little from work. I had ambitions I wasn't able to pursue right then. I wanted to do further qualifications, develop in the business, but I knew that wasn't the right time. I needed to get that work-life balance right first.

And the great thing is, I actually had my career conversation with my boss just yesterday, and it turns out I'm now in a really good place. I am ready to develop, and we've signed me up for further qualifications. Something I wanted to do two years ago. And I'm so glad I didn't do it then, because I wouldn't be where I am now.

As for other sacrifices, I wouldn't call them sacrifices because I love doing it. I love the school drop-offs and pickups, coming home, bathing Dylan, making him dinner, sitting down together, then an early night. I don't miss late nights or going to the pub to watch football, because I'm doing what I want to do. Everything I want to do, I find a way to do it.

One thing that does resonate, talking about this now, is that in the last year or so I've learned I have to do things for myself as well. The first year and a half, it was all about what does Dylan want to do. I think I couldn't do this because Dylan's with me. But the last year and a half, I've acknowledged that I need to also have time to do things I enjoy when he's not there. That's helped me become a better person, which means I'll be a better person for him when I have him.

Naroop 25:50

This whole project is about single dads of colour, and this perception that if you're a single dad of colour, you're probably not as involved in your child's life. Maybe the relationship failed because of you, and now you only see your child once every couple of weeks.

We want to break that stigma, because I know that's not the case. Tell me about your experiences. Can you relate to people thinking that single dads of colour are largely absent, and have palmed off all responsibility onto the mum?

Kiran 26:21

I can, yeah. I think looking back, when I've had conversations with people about my situation, more so in the last year as people have been finding out and wanting to know more, I think it's really telling to see their faces when I tell them my arrangement. They're like: oh really, you have him fifty percent of the time? You can tell straight away they're thinking: oh, is it every other weekend then? That's the first thing everyone says. And I'm like: no, I have him every week. But what about school? Yeah, I take him to school.

On the back of that, the recognition and appreciation they show for what I'm doing is really heartwarming. They're more surprised than I am. For me, it's just what I do. It's what you've got to do. There's no other option. And that's when that stigma really sits in and you think: okay, but it's nice to be able to reflect on it and think, you're not part of that stigma.

Naroop 27:59

If you were to meet a single dad now and he said: Kiran, look, I've just separated, I'm going to be a single dad, I'm finding it really difficult, what would you say to him? What advice would you give to a dad who's really early on in this journey, to let him know he can get through this?

Kiran 28:30

I think the first thing I would say is: figure out what you want. What arrangements do you want? And try not to listen to all the feedback you hear. In these situations, everyone's got something to say. Everyone's got their opinion, especially in the Asian community: the wider family, cousins who've had divorces, everyone wants to give you advice. It's okay to listen, but it has to come back down to you as a person. What do you want? Because we're all different.

Once you know what you want, go and get as much professional advice as you can. Use all the avenues available to you. I remember being on hold to child mediation services for two or three hours on my days off, regularly, with a list of questions I wanted answers to. Self-educate yourself so that when you're having the conversations and the mediations, you're fully informed about what you've got to say, what you want, and you're more confident that you can get it, because you know you're entitled to it.

Try to stay positive. Try to be the best version of yourself. Recognise where you are right now and where you want to be, and just have positive things going for yourself in your life. Everyone's got

different things: some people like martial arts, some people like football, some people like watching films. Find those things and do them, because that's going to make you a better person. And give it time. It does take time. It's a long journey. Keep fighting.

Naroop 30:32

Thanks, Kiran. Having you here today has been really inspiring. I can see you've really put your life together in a way that allows you to make time for your son and make time for yourself. You've given some really positive, practical advice, which is nice, because I tend to speak all about heart and feeling.

Practical advice is something we all need. So we're going to get your shoot done now. First time having a professional shoot done?

Kiran 31:03

It is, yeah.

Naroop 31:05

Get it done. Thanks so much for coming down, bro. It's been a real pleasure to meet you and great to see how confident and how well you're doing in your life.

Kiran 31:10

Thank you. Amazing. Cheers. Thank you so much.