
HE LOST EVERYTHING HE KNEW. BECOMING A SINGLE DAD GAVE HIM THE FREEDOM TO FINALLY BECOME HIMSELF.

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

Arun Setty, Naroop Jhooti

Arun 00:00

My son is probably the only person, really, who genuinely cares about me. You know, you can have friends, and they're lovely people, but ultimately, quite understandably, they'll have their own commitments towards their own families and whatever. So there's only one person. It's the little one.

Naroop 00:34

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.

Arun, thank you so, so much for being part of this project. It really means a lot that you've given your time to come down today and talk to us about being a single dad of colour. We're going to do the photo shoot after this interview, so before that I just wanted to get to know a little bit about you, your journey as a single dad, the challenges you've faced, and how you have come to this place right now. You're doing so many incredible things with your time, so tell me a little bit about yourself and your journey of being a single dad.

Arun 01:18

Well, I became a single dad after a separation in 2019. That was after I'd lost both my mum and my dad. The actual separation happened as a consequence of my dad passing. My ex didn't want to upset my dad, so only once he had departed did she then have the courage, or the inclination,

to go ahead and file for divorce.

So the separation happened in 2019. By that time I'd lost my parents, and then my marriage was falling apart. My daughter went to go and live with my ex as well, which came as a shock to me. I was under the impression that we'd be sharing both kids 50/50, but that was another thing to deal with.

Unfortunately, at the time of separation, the entire family on my ex's side, who I was very close to, also pulled away. So I was pretty alone. Very alone. And yeah, some dark days at that time, definitely.

Naroop 02:42

So tell me a little bit about that time. The feeling of knowing that you now have these children, and your desire to be a good dad. What kind of thoughts were going through your head? What kind of challenges did you face at that time?

Arun 03:05

Well, for me, my priority was, by that time, I was able to take a step back from my career as an accountant, so I actually started to have some time in a way I'd never had when my daughter was growing up. I'd had a standard five-day-a-week commute to London, going out early, coming back late.

Naroop 03:28

Did that have a big impact on how close you were to your daughter?

Arun 03:35

It probably did. But here I had an opportunity to devote more time to my son. I took a step back from my day job and threw myself into supporting him. For example, during lockdown, we had 21 weeks together. I homeschooled him, and that was actually a very positive thing for both of us. I was able to devote time to him in a way that, to be honest, I would not have been able to do if I was still working in a day job.

The challenges for me, in those early days, were also about the first couple of years where my ex was not saying particularly nice things to him about me. But he'd come and tell me, and the important thing is he knows me directly. He doesn't know me through his mum. And I'm happy to say that that negativity seems to have subsided now. Hopefully because she realised there's no point in doing that. It's quite detrimental to the kid, and he's spent enough time with me now to make his own judgment of who I am.

Naroop 05:00

So for you, the focus was on the time you could now spend with him.

Arun 05:10

Yes. I have him Sunday lunchtimes until Wednesday evenings, typically, and my ex will then have him Wednesday evenings until Sunday lunchtimes. I'll have the odd Friday or Saturday here and

there. And over the last few years, I'm the one who's taken him on most of the holidays he's been on, actually. He's always pestering me about it, almost every school holiday. He'll say, 'Where are we going? Where are we going?'

Naroop 05:45

What kind of places do you go?

Arun 05:50

We go all sorts of places. We do a lot within the UK, but we've also gone to Dubai, we've been on a cruise, and we were in Rome just a couple of weeks ago. He was absolutely brilliant. He must have walked about 35,000 steps a day, which just allowed us to enjoy the place. He loved Dubai and keeps asking to go back.

Naroop 06:23

What I'm getting from this is that being a single dad has actually meant you've been able to spend more time with your son and do more things than you probably would have done if you were still in the marriage.

Arun 06:35

That is true. Because the marriage was not one made in heaven, there was a lot of tension. So in a way, my son is now getting the best of both of us. When he's at his mum's house, he's got his mum without me there. She can be herself. She's a very good mum, a fantastic mum, a great person. And when he's with me, he gets to be with me, and there's none of that tension in the house.

Also, because I've actually got the time to spend with him, I can spend a lot of quality time with him. I get him up in the morning, make him breakfast, walk him to school hand in hand, pick him up. If the weather's nice, we'll go out, play tennis, or go out for a bike ride.

Naroop 07:22

Tell me about the bike rides.

Arun 07:25

One of our favourite things is going for a bike ride on a sunny Sunday morning. You put the backpack on, you have to have some biscuits, some crisps, some other snacks and drinks, then we go out for four or five hours. And you've got to stop for a mini picnic every half an hour. That's very important. It's one of the best things I do with my son. I love it.

Naroop 07:52

This is really beautiful to hear. I see smiles, happiness, and beautiful memories being created. And what it tells me is that it's all positive. Because I feel a lot of the time, and I'm a victim of this myself when I first became a single dad, I thought: how am I going to give my daughter all the things I wanted to give her?

But I've actually realised I've probably given her more than I would have before, because inevitably, when you're working as a team, you always push some responsibilities onto the other partner. But now it's your responsibility to do all of it, and you throw yourself into everything.

Arun 08:50

And I think that applies for single mums too. You become not just a single dad, but a single parent, which means there are certain things a mother might typically do that, as a father, you have to learn, and vice versa. I don't think that's a bad thing. I think it's great that we can understand different sides of our child's needs, because it actually helps us to grow.

Naroop 09:22

Exactly. And those things that you learn, you wouldn't always have thought of before. But I think it's great that you learn to think of them, and to share every step of that child's daily routine with them.

So, these are all positive things that come as a result of being a single father. What I want to tap into now is some of the mechanisms, some of the actions, and some of the things that you may have done in those early stages, when you first became a single dad, that helped you find your way. Because we both know it's not like you separated, became a single dad, and all of a sudden you became the man you are now.

There must have been a rough road. Certain things that you were adjusting to, certain things you had to learn about yourself. Can you tell me about some of those coping mechanisms?

Arun 10:59

Well, I suppose it all fell on me now, while he's with me. And as I explained, there was a real sense of isolation. Mum and Dad were gone. I do have a brother, but he's rather distant. So I'm very much on my own. I'm lucky I've got some good friends. But my main coping mechanism was basically just throwing myself into the relationship with my son.

I've also been doing charity work and voluntary work, which I get a lot of satisfaction from. It's a good feeling if you can help someone. But otherwise, the coping mechanism was just to throw myself in. Because there were times when I really was struggling to keep my head above water, psychologically. Definitely.

Naroop 11:45

Tell me about that. I really want to understand what thoughts and feelings were going through your head at that time.

Arun 11:50

Well, I'm the sort of person who believes that when you get married, you get married once, you get married for life. Although the marriage was not a particularly pleasant one for either party, I was willing to just keep going. That's just how I am. It was going to be a marriage for life, and that's it, regardless of whether I was happy or not.

So a big part of the coping challenge for me was simply the idea of being lonely. That was a big thing. I'm not designed to be lonely. I'm much happier when I've got people around me. And in a way, having my son there was actually mutually beneficial, because it allowed me to focus on him perhaps more than I otherwise would have done.

Naroop 13:15

Because you're going into this whole new world of being single, being alone. In your case, you'd lost your partner but also the extended family. Now all that you'd known is gone, but you've still got this one constant, which is your child.

Arun 13:35

Yeah, and it's the only person on this planet, really. Unfortunately, my daughter is a bit more distant, but hopefully there's a bit more closeness developing now. But yes, there's this acknowledgement that my son is probably the only person who genuinely cares about me. You can have friends, and they're lovely people, but they'll have their own commitments and their own families. So there's only one person. It's the little one. He's everything.

Naroop 14:20

That's something I can totally relate to and understand. What I think is really important about that feeling is: what do you need, and what do you need to keep going? How much can your own company, your self-worth, and your self-love carry you? Because one thing I find about being a single parent is you can't give up on yourself, because you've got your children looking to you for support. You're raising them. So then you've got to find a way to stay strong.

That takes a lot of courage. That's why I find that going through these challenges in life really rebuilds you and teaches you something you never knew about yourself. I've come out of my situation much stronger. I've learned to love myself, appreciate myself, and be more confident than I was before, because I know I don't have a choice. I'm not going to achieve what I want for my life if I don't.

Arun 15:34

And that idea of loneliness can be really daunting for men. Men struggle. And I think this is one of the things about this project which is so powerful. We're just as emotional, but a lot of men don't know how to express it.

Naroop 16:06

Correct. And one thing I would like this project to show is that talking, like right now, you're sat in front of me. I've just met you. I'm asking you very personal questions. I want you to be vulnerable. Because I'm telling you things about me that are very vulnerable and honest.

But it's only through our vulnerabilities that we can start to know ourselves a little bit more, and lighten our load a little bit. Trying not to show that vulnerability is a heavy task. We can't carry everything alone. As humans, we're not designed to isolate. We're a tribal species. We sit around fires, share, and tell stories.

And what people don't realise is that expression is offloading, not weight, but emotional baggage. Sharing it, and having someone listen, I know who my people are that I offload to. One of them is Amit, my business partner, and my other best friends.

They know everything about my life, and I will openly sit there and just talk and ramble, and they'll listen, and I come off feeling lighter. Sometimes, in the early stages, a good cry just takes a lot out of you, but in a good way. Being open and vulnerable is really important.

Arun 17:45

Absolutely. The people I did have around me were some close friends from university days. And also, to be honest, I made some good friends more recently through dating. I met a couple of ladies who I dated, but we didn't see each other that way, but we became very good friends. They've become quite significant confidants. I came here today with one of them. She's in a coffee shop nearby. People like that have become really quite significant, much more than I would have expected.

Narooop 18:23

I've read this quote in the early stages where someone said: don't think about all the things that can go wrong. Think about all the things that could go right. Do we even give ourselves a chance to think about all the things that could be amazing? Meeting new people is one of those things that's fantastic.

You also started to volunteer. I'd love to hear about that, because it inspires me, and it seems like a way you channelled your experiences into something really positive.

Arun 18:55

Yes, sure. After my father passed away, I became a client of a national charity called Cruse, I think they're the only national charity operating in the bereavement space in the UK. And the person who helped me was brilliant. I thought to myself: when I get the time and the space, it would be lovely if I could do the same for other people.

So soon after leaving work, I trained and became one of their bereavement volunteers. I did that for a couple of years. I even got nominated for best volunteer in Hertfordshire in the first year, which was nice. I was probably the only bloke doing it, actually.

But over time I found it increasingly difficult, because I live on my own apart from when my son is with me, and I found myself absorbing everything like a sponge. I'm not a trained counsellor or psychotherapist, but I've been told I'm a good listener and that I show genuine empathy, which is exactly what people who are grieving need.

They need someone who can listen and make them feel that the person they're speaking to is truly with them in that moment. Only then do they open up, and only then can you help them on their journey through grief.

Naroop 20:35

And then you moved on to volunteering with the NHS?

Arun 20:38

Yes, I took a step back from the bereavement work, and then I started volunteering for the NHS. I'm a response volunteer at the local general hospital in Stevenage. I've been doing that for about eight months now. It involves all sorts of things. I could be talking to patients, doing lunch rounds, tea and coffee rounds. I've done stroke unit patient questionnaires, some admin work, meet and greet, directing patients around the hospital. I love it.

The other voluntary work I've been doing for about two and a half years is working with older people at the local church, where they run a coffee morning. For most of the people there, it's probably their only social outlet during the week. And I just help to run it. But helping them also helps me, because seeing them happy, knowing that I'm just facilitating that, that's my payment. That'll do.

Naroop 22:18

You're feeding your heart in a way, I suppose.

So prior to being a single dad, you had a very successful job. I'd love to know about the sacrifice you had to make from that career to where you are now. How did that make you feel, knowing there was a life you'd lived that paid you well, and then you had to make a change for your children?

Arun 22:52

For me, the choice was that I simply could not see how I could carry on in the same way. Ideally, I would have loved a part-time job that still allowed me to spend time with my son and still work, but in my line of work, getting a part-time role is almost impossible. So the choice was either to go full-time, which I didn't want to do because I wanted that time with my son, or to take a step back.

Fortunately, I'm in a position where I can, because I run a small business on the side. And I'm one of those people who, as long as I've got enough to sustain my lifestyle, that's enough. I don't feel the need to accumulate more and more. So for me, I'm content with where I am. And I'm really glad I made that choice, because you only get this time once. Once they're grown up, that's it.

The school walk, holding my son's hand on the way to school and picking him up, doing all the things we do together. That's priceless.

Naroop 24:00

I sense it's the little things in life that give you the greatest pleasure.

Arun 24:05

Exactly. And I totally share that thought that you only get this moment once. One thing that really helped me move forward, and I know you're known for this too, is to replace old memories with new memories. The sense that you're never going to get this moment back. Do you want to be four or five years down the line thinking, 'I wish I had that mindset then'? Or do you want to try to leapfrog that gap and be in that place now?

Because time isn't a healer, as they say. Some people are stuck living the same day over and over again. They don't move forward. They just go through the same cycle. Until we make that adjustment in our mindset, we will never really move forward.

Naroop 25:08

I've read this quote where it says sometimes people don't let time pass. They just live the same year over and over again. They're not moving through life. And one thing I'd love this project to be able to do is give other single dads little tips, little bits of encouragement and motivation that might help them move on.

So if someone was to speak to you and say, 'Arun, I've just become a single dad, I'm really struggling. What advice could you give me to find a way through? What would give me hope?' What would you say to that person?

Arun 25:45

Cherish the time with your children. Definitely. If you have the opportunity, if you have the facility, just maximise the time you spend with them. Because once they grow up, the dynamics will change, and you could miss that opportunity entirely.

Naroop 26:20

And what about the time when you're not with your child? Because I know that's something that's difficult. It's easier and nicer when you have your child there. But when they're not with you and you're home alone, I remember when I used to come back from shoots I felt it the most. I'd put my bags down, and it would just be me. That was really difficult. How did you cope with that?

Arun 26:55

I had to develop certain coping mechanisms. One of them was starting to go to the gym in the evenings. I used to always go in the mornings at six o'clock, but now I went in the evenings, because at least I had that routine. I'd come back from the gym, eat, read for an hour or watch TV to let the food digest, and then go to sleep. And I'd pass that time as quickly as possible until I'd see my son again.

But I soon came to realise that wasn't healthy. Because that time is when you actually rebuild your new life. A friend told me that very early on, and I didn't realise it at first. She said, 'You will come to value the time you have to yourself, because that's when you create your new life.' So I started to cherish that time and not just let it rush by, but use it wisely. That's one piece of advice I'd give to men when they're alone: you need that time to rebuild.

Naroop 27:52

What do you tend to do in the time you have to yourself?

Arun 28:00

Well, over the last few years, I've managed to create a good circle of friends. So my free time is a mixture of my voluntary work and getting out and socialising. I've been on a few short holidays with friends over the last year or so. I'm going to Costa del Sol next week with a group of five people.

Little things like that just give you something to look forward to. So it's not just about being a single dad with your son. There are things to look forward to in your own life as well. I think that gives you the strength to then be the proper dad you want to be. If you're unhappy with your own free time, I don't think your child will see the best of you either.

Naroop 28:58

Do you feel there's any stigma around single dads of colour? Because I know when I became a single dad, people can make their own assumptions. Sometimes people think that if you're a single dad of colour, you may not be taking responsibility, or you may not be devoted to your child. Have you experienced that? What are your thoughts on it?

Arun 29:35

I live out in a village in Hertfordshire, so I don't really live in an Asian community, and I personally haven't had a great deal of experience of that. My neighbours will just see me with Kyus, coming and going and doing whatever we do.

Naroop 30:12

What about being an Indian single dad specifically? Because in my parents' generation, I knew very few parents who got divorced. In my daughter's class at school, there are quite a few parents who are divorced now. So what do you think about Indian culture and the perception of divorce and single parenthood? Do you think there's still a sense of shame around it, or have times moved on?

Arun 30:50

I think times have moved on. From the circles I'm mixing in now over the last couple of years, I've managed to get a good mix of friends, mostly divorced or single, and just listening to their stories and how they talk about things, I think it's now just part of common life.

I don't think the stigma is there to the same extent. In our parents' generation, it would have been quite a peculiar thing. But now, with the divorce rate at around four in ten, whether it's Asian culture, British culture, or Caribbean culture, we're all probably at similar percentages. I think so.

Naroop 32:00

Well, Arun, it's been great speaking to you. From our conversation, I've picked up a few things. I love how you've used your experiences to help others through your work with the bereavement charity and then with the NHS. I think that's probably very therapeutic for your soul. I think

subconsciously we all do things, whether we realise it or not, that give to others what we probably want for ourselves. Company. Acts of service.

And I love hearing about the social circle you've created. When you become single, you make all these new friends. Eventually people meet someone else, which is fantastic, but in that interim period, meeting new people just opens your mind and your experiences to the world.

I also loved hearing about the time you spend with your son and all the things you do together. I'm sure many of those things would never have happened if you were still living that busy life. So many positives. And I can see that you're glowing and beaming, and you seem extremely happy. So I just want to say thank you for coming down and sharing your experiences and your thoughts on being a single dad. We're going to go and take some photos now.

Arun 33:10

Great. Thank you so much. It's been an absolute pleasure. Thank you for inviting me.