

3rd Episode

Derek: Perspectives from the allotment

Welcome to Doorstep Revolution, a project emerging out of the heart of South Riverside in Cardiff and run by gentle/radical, an arts organisation based in the neighbourhood, and interested in connecting up culture, community, politics, spirituality, and healing justice.

Supported by a grant from the National Lottery Community Fund, this sound archive was born out of the pandemic of 2020 and 2021.

We spent time knocking on doors, hearing people's stories and finding out how our thinking about the future might have changed under COVID.

From homeschooling to weddings under lockdown, from acute isolation, to finding new forms of togetherness, these conversations with neighbours reveal questions and profound reflections on recent times and how we might wish them to be different.

.....

This episode is an extended interview with Derek, a Riverside resident living on Wells Street, who invited us to share some time with him on his allotment in Leckwith. Derek's reflections touched on work, his disillusionment with academia, moving to Wales from Malaysia, the impacts of the pandemic on family and perhaps most importantly, for Derek at least, vegetables, food growing, and his allotment.

Derek

Well, I'm Derek, my connection to Riverside is I lived there for about eight, nine years now, with the family. I came over from Malaysia, about 20 years ago, did my PhD and live in Riverside, Roath to begin with, and then moved on to Riverside recently, not recently eight years now, is it? I came here when my kids were like, seven or eight, seven and eight. And then obviously, after my PhD, there was like, five, six years later, they didn't want to go back, you see. And obviously, life will be very difficult for them. And thinking of them and also, you know, our future, I just decided to stay on. Yeah, it's been lovely. Can't complain really? Yeah.

Rabab

Can I ask you how you found it living in Riverside and in the South Riverside community over that time?

Derek

Thing is I'm not particularly social, I would say. So I don't really mix around very much. Except for my neighbours, I hardly know anyone else (laughs). Sorry about that. And of course, my friends at work, who live in Riverside, I sort of mix with them once in a while and that's about it. I don't go to pubs and things like that. I prefer to be out

here in my allotment. I enjoy this kind of, and I've always been a loner myself so perhaps that's why. Yeah, so this is quite strange having an interview because I wouldn't really possibly agree to this. But I don't know why on that day. When you approached I thought, well, why not? You know, and you seem quite desperate, I think (laughter) Because you came back quite soon. So I think you must have knocked on a few doors and nobody answered you I thought then.

Rabab

We were definitely happy when you answered the door. Not everyone does.

Derek

Yeah. So yeah, I know. And then I said, yeah, let's do this, I said, because I know you have a... I did sort of read the brochure and I know you're doing something good for the community, you know, in Riverside. So I said, yeah, why not?

Rabab

We appreciate that.

Derek

No, no worries. I say I wouldn't do it willy nilly, you know, so I know you're doing something good, so I thought yeah, let's let's do this.

Rabab

As you know, we're gonna ask you some questions about, you know, this last year in the pandemic, I just can't ignore the fact that I can hear the birds, I'm in an allotment, could you tell us a little bit, just describe where we are and what this place is to you what the connection is for you?

Derek

Well, I said before, it's like heaven on earth to be honest (laughs). It's peaceful, you know, it's like, back to nature. Birds singing... My first allotment was in Riverside, I still have that one. Initially my thought was, well, I have that plot now for 12 years and I moved to Riverside. So I was planning to give up that plot and then just keep this plot here, that plot over there. But I didn't have the heart to let it go. Because that plot over there is in, it's in a very nice area, if you can, if you think of Lakeside, right? It's all the posh houses by there. So it's surrounded by posh houses, there's only like 80 or 90 plots there. So it's a very small plot. The people are so nice, the people in the plot, I mean, and also the neighbours. It's a lot smaller than this one, I think it is about half the size. So it's something like that. Same thing, initially hard work, you put in a lot of work, digging, digging, digging it, the soil is so nice. And that's why you don't want to give up you see, because you just put anything in and they grow. You see? And then it's like, my plot overlooks the lake as well. So after I finish a bit of work, I just sit down, cup of coffee, just look around, bird singing, lake in front of you. What else can you ask for? You are up on a hill! Yeah, when you have time, maybe one day we'll go over to the Lady Mary allotments, lovely. And that was a time when nobody wanted plots. Here when I had a plot like 12 years ago, nobody wanted plots; it was all abandoned. So I took that one up. And then slowly, people got interested, you know, and they had to subdivide plots into smaller lots so that more people could have them. Like here as well. We had three hundred plots, I think half of them were empty. So when I requested it, when I moved here, I requested a plot. I got this plot within two months. The guy, the previous owner, not owner, I wouldn't say that the tenant right? He had three plots, he had 1,2,3.

And he was ageing and the wife wasn't feeling too well, so he had to give up to take care of the misses. So yeah, I took this plot. My Polish friend took the other plot right there. And this one was just abandoned. People come and go, come and go every two years you get somebody take over but never did anything because it was hard work to be honest. The weeds were like that, brambles all along there, all there were weeds, especially mares tail. And they are a killer mares tail, if you have, if you know allotments. So yeah, a lot of digging and digging and digging. And finally it is the outcome. Not there, give me another five years maybe

Rabab

Wow! There's a plan! And can you just say which allotments we are in Derek?

Derek

Oh, yeah, in Leckwith Drove Allotments. Yeah. Because I was a businessman myself and I got interested in motivation and things like that. And when I was actively being a manager, and also being my own boss, you can bring in, say, two people, similar qualifications and all that and yet the results you produce can be completely different, you see, and that always intrigued me and I wanted to find out more. And so I did my masters and I quickly got in to do this PhD. I quit everything and sold everything. Sold my business and all that came over to the UK now. So I thought I'd do something good, you know about motivation and all that, that was hard work, to be honest. Academia is a completely different, different feel. That the thought behind how they think and they are completely different. Yeah. So yeah, no way. It was nice. But yeah, it took me about six years because off and on, carry on working, save some more money, pay off your tuition fees and carried on. So it was six years, I think it took me to get my PhD done (laughs). When I had my Viva four years later, I got my Viva, to be honest, it didn't go very well. Yeah. So the examiner gave me one year. He said, yeah, give me a list of things. He said you got to put all these things into your PhD to make it really substantial and worthwhile. So yeah, I spent... so I went into a depression in a way. I told myself, you know, this is ridiculous, you know? But yeah, got it done anyway. I got it done. Yeah, got a PhD over with and then I decided uh... just got fed up with it. Not the kind of life I want. You know, I don't really like to be like my examiner, you know, criticising people but that's his job to be honest (laughs).

Rabab

I feel like this whole interview we want to do with you, can we come back about motivations? Sounds very interesting. We can come back to that.

Derek

Psychological empowerment. Empowerment, that was the topic I did. Yeah. And at that time, there was a US researcher who was researching this, I can't remember her name. But yeah, I used her work, expanding on her work basically. Yeah, because in doing a PhD, like at this age you're not sort of on your own. Basically the wall is already there. And there might be gaps in the wall. So you just basically, you're just basically probably just fitting in a little brick into that spot there. Maybe just add another brick on top here just to get a complete wall, the wall is never finished though... and that's research for you really.

Rabab

What a great way of explaining research.

Derek

That was what my supervisor told me then. Yeah, I had a very good supervisor here. Lovely guy. Yeah, the thing with him though, whatever I put in, he just said, "Yeah, brilliant work Derek. Yeah, you'll do really well" (laughs). But I went for my Viva, oh, my God, it was a completely different thing. You had to be the, you know, the question you... oh, my God, I say I'm dead, I'm dead, I'm truly dead (laughter). Yeah, he gave me like a list of a two page maybe.... point-to-point... Things I need to add into my PhD to bulk it up, make it a really solid piece of work. I'll forever remember, Mr. Baruch? (Laughter)

Rabab

Imprinted on your memory.

Derek

He's a good man though.

Rabab

I thought we could ask you. There's so much to ask you, in a way. I thought we could just ask you a little bit about the last year and...

Derek

Oh, yeah, sorry, we don't want to... pandemic, not knowing about my past...

Rabab

It's actually really nice to hear all of this. And it gives us a sense of, let's just get to know you a little bit, which is really...

Derek

I guess it's because of your past life, right? And the kind of hustle bustle the life that I let you know, doing running my own business and all that. At a time, I was only in my 40s. But not like 40 sorry, I was in my late 30s. I decided to give up all that. I was really doing quite well, pretty pretty well, with my life in business and all that, but you asked yourself, is that all you want, you know? It's a rat race, you got to get out. And that's, that's where all this plan came in.

Rabab

And do you mind me asking what kind of line of work you were in?

Derek

Well, I was in the medical healthcare business. Yeah, so I worked for a company before, a British firm actually, based in Malaysia. And for many, many, many, many years. And then after that, you know, once you have built your contacts, you start off, you know, follow through with building your own business, importing stuff from Japan, all over the world and then trying to sell them to the healthcare community.

Rabab

But you decided to take a different route?

Derek

True. Yeah. Yeah.

Rabab

Do you feel happy that you did that?

Derek

It was the best thing I have ever did, to be honest. And it just progressed on isn't it? You came here, you do your PhD and all that. And then you thought you might want to go into academia, that didn't work out because academia is complete, it's this hard work, to be honest. You got to continuously produce papers, got to publish, they say publish or perish, you see. And I'm not the type because it's not easy work, to be honest, you know, and you got to collaborate with your peers. And then you got to give talks, and all of that. I'm never good at giving talks, talking to people, sort of a group of people, I get a fear, you know (laughs). I get tongue tied.

Rabab

Listening to you because so many people, I think, probably carry on doing something in their career, including in academia, you know, because, I don't know, maybe they don't ever ask themselves: am I really being nourished by this? Is it really right for me? And I think it's quite a rare thing to ask yourself: is this right? Is this my path? And then yeah, deciding, no, I mean, most people don't do that.

Derek

I think that comes from being a loner, isn't it? And you sort of ask a lot of things, you know, you question yourself, but if you have friends and all that, these kinds of questions don't normally crop up, isn't it? Because you try to keep up with your friends, sort of, be with them and sort of want to be part of the group and the family, and that becomes your family, whereas me, I've always been an outsider I will say. I have always been. I came here and I feel myself an outsider, except when I'm here. (Laughs)

Rabab

Yeah. Well, I want to come back to that. I was gonna just first ask you a question about the pandemic, and I was going to take you back. We wanted to take you back to this time, roughly, last year...

Derek

Yeah, around March last year, yeah.

Rabab

And ask you what was your initial response to what was going on? And what do you remember, what were you feeling? What were your feelings in response to at the time?

Derek

It was quite strange... So when this happened was around December in Asia, and then you can hear the stories over there building up and building and building up. And then we knew it was going to come here. Eventually, because no one stopped flights from coming in and all that, you know, people will feel free to enter countries and all that. And you hear about deaths and all that in China in Japan and it was a ship that... went afloat and it was like a floating petri dish, is that what they call it? People getting infected dying on cruises. So you can feel a dark cloud, coming over, you know, slowly but surely, I couldn't do anything about it. And then in the end, we got

locked down, didn't we? And then businesses stop. Luckily enough, in Britain, I think we were lucky because we had a furlough. So for March, April, May it was June I think, four months. We were furloughed. So does that sort of tide us over?

Rabab

Can I ask how? What was happening in your life at that time? Was it changing significantly? Were you having to respond? Or react to what was going on around? Yeah...

Derek

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah! I think initially it was the fear that was there and then you get news about people stockpiling toilet rolls and all that, we started to do the same thing, more or less (laughs). Yeah, and then you... just a lot of fear now that you're going to be like, the whole country is going to grind to a complete halt, you know, that, of course, didn't happen, but they didn't help everyone panicking. And then, you know, like, if you go over to shops, you can only buy like, one item per person or whatever. If you want eggs, you can't buy two dozen, you can only get half a dozen, something like that. Yeah, quite strange. And to be honest, and I think the fear as well, initially, because of my age, I felt oh, should I go out? Shall I not? So I stayed home most of the time. To be honest, I even abandoned this plot for a good six weeks. So March around this time, end of March was the last time I ever come here. And then when we got locked down, I just stayed home. And of course, first thing in the morning, six o'clock, off to Tesco's, grab your stuff, back home. That kind of fear, you know, I only go there once a week anyway, grab whatever you have, what you need back home, and then lock yourself up. Quite strange for a few months. And then you do realise that life has to go on isn't it? I started coming back. It was all full of weeds and all that over here. Yeah, strange, strange, strange situation. But there's something positive about this whole thing? Actually, I would say because it lets you think about, well, what life is all about, isn't it? And of course, we'd be working all your life, you know, this incident, right? This pandemic, basically, opens your eyes. And as you ask yourself serious questions again, about how you want to lead your life from then on, you know?

Rabab

Can you say a little bit more about that? It's particularly this idea of the pandemic opening up, your eyes...

Derek

Do you want to carry on working till... 65, 67, 68? And is this what life is all about? Like, I think about it as if it must be something else. There's something more to this kind of artificial kind of life that you're leading. I think, I don't know, yeah. I'm still thinking about it, probably never stop wondering what you probably want to do. But the rest... I think that furlough period, that three months and also this time around. It gives you an opportunity to ask yourself how you want to lead your life, in retirement as well. I haven't got the answers yet but you should ask yourself things like that. And then you discuss with the family you know, things like that you know? Obviously different people will have different ideas.

Rabab

Yeah, really important questions I was gonna ask... In a way lockdowns, people being furloughed, but also people losing jobs...

Derek

True, I think that was the worst. The worst thing because I might be losing my job because you don't know if the high street can open again... I'm going back on Monday, but whether the shops will remain open or not, we don't know. Because there's rumours. So I don't know.

Rabab

Can I ask you a question, almost more philosophically about... do you think the pandemic, or what do you think it's opened up for people in terms of how they might want to work differently in the future? Do you think it's inviting us to think differently?

Derek

But my two sons, they are working from home and they are still producing. They're still what you call productive... that's a very productive... they are still doing lots of work at home despite not having to go through the office. I think I know, they have the zoom meetings and all that. And because of that, I got my two boys working at home. I tried to get out more often as well. Give them you know, the space that they need. Yeah, I think it's a good thing. Probably there'll be more people working from home now. People wanting to do work in a different way.

Rabab

I was gonna ask you, though, what do you feel you have missed most in the last year?

Derek

Probably, I have gained more than I lose I think. Because if I'm not doing this, I'll be in work.

Rabab

So tell us more about this sense of having gained as opposed to...

Derek

You gain a freedom, isn't it? To do... look at this plot, for example, it was just an abandoned plot full of weeds. So it's like a blank canvas, you decide what you're gonna do with it. We don't own this earth. We are just custodians, you know, like the previous owner... I always say owner, the previous tenant. Every time somebody passes by here, who's been here, like 20, 30 years, right, they tell me "oh, you know, the previous owner or a previous tenant that was here, he was immaculate." I'm not going to be that, you know? But what I'm doing as well is I'm carrying his legacy, isn't it? That shed was built by him. I just carried on with it. Just improvise a little bit and reuse it. All the older materials there on the ground are probably his because he had the plot for more than 40 years before he gave up, but I just reuse his things. So basically, I'm just like, I say, a custodian. Is that a word to use? Yeah, I wish he will come over and I'll show him this is what I've done, you know? And perhaps he'll be proud of me. Or he'll just tell me off "I say, what have you done?" (laughs) "What have you done to my plot?" (laughs) "Why do you do this?" (laughs)

Rabab

I'd love to see that conversation between the two of you...

Derek

I'm not sure whether they are still alive to be honest. Because I have this plot now for eight years. No, I never ever met him. But from conversations with these people who come over here, his onions were like that (shows size with his hands), cabbages like that. (again shows size with his hands), yeah. So I never been that successful. I've tried to grow garlic and onions over there, I do a decent, decent amount, but not like what these people say.

Rabab

I just wanted to ask you a question about, really, it's a question about how radical can we be about what we're imagining for the future? And, you know you talked about a legacy and that he, this former plot owner of the allotment, left a kind of legacy. I was wondering if you could imagine like, with the pandemic and COVID and everything that's happening, there's been enormous trauma and loss for so many people and if there was a positive legacy to come out of it, impact, if we could imagine it impacting and changing how community works, what would you like to see as a legacy from this in a positive sense? Particularly in light of the community like Riverside? What would you like to see changing or being different as a result?

Derek

People need to get together more often and so being in touch more, I think that's what's lacking in our daily lives. Like I said before, apart from my neighbours, I hardly know anyone else and how well do I know my neighbours really? Apart from saying hello and when he parks his car and gets into his house "How are you today?" "Yeah, I'm fine" and that's it, but how far do you want to go? Because people want to be personal as well as they are, not personal, you know, they want to be reserved. What is the word?

Rabab

Maybe reserved or private?

Derek

Yeah, private, private and people, I mean, want their privacy...

Rabab

Do you think you would like to know people...

Derek

I don't know?

Rabab

Because you said you're a loner and I am curious how that works... .

Derek

But I don't have my own... I wouldn't say I'm a loner, like, somebody like a hermit, you know? I do have my own circle of friends. And that's a problem with us as humans. Let's say you go into school, you make a couple of friends, and they become your friends for life, maybe three or four of them. And that's it, you know, and then when you start working, again, you have another circle of friends, maybe two or three, maximum four... So let's say, like, where I work there's about 300 people, do you make friends with all 300 people? You don't call them friends do you? They're just acquaintances, you don't really know them that well, and they don't want to know you too well, either. Because they have their own interests and all that. So you go on in life having two or three

really good people, you know, and that's it, you just carry on. I don't know whether that's a bad thing or not. But what more can I add?

Rabab

I was gonna ask you something...

Derek

I was gonna say about this pandemic, right? And how you kept indoors, and then not being able to be out there. There should be a place where we can sort of get hauled off to raise, you know, issues and things like that, which I think that that one is probably lacking. That one's probably lacking. I, we didn't really have much of a problem because we had the internet and you can get most of the... whatever you need to know, on the internet. But it's good to be able to ring someone or like a contact point where you can say, "oh, seriously, this is a problem, how do I get in touch..?" Or when you need a dentist and I haven't been to my dentist for a year now. And the last time I went to the dentist they said "Oh, only emergencies, you need to call up." So there is again a problem. So I got a bad tooth. It needs repair, it needs to be repaired. So I don't know when I can get going. The little worries like that, you know? I don't think anything else.

Rabab

I suppose I wanted to ask a question about South Riverside. And this is more of a question, not so much about the pandemic, but really about the future. And you touched a little bit on it about people meeting more and you wanting a sense of more connection. How would you... what would ideally you like to see happening in a community like South Riverside? Is it that people get together and meet more and do more cultural activities together?

Derek

Yeah, do a fair or something like that because when I was in Roath, when I lived there for about 10 years, where the street... I don't remember what street was there, but every year, right, there's an organisation there called Made in...

Rabab

Made in Roath

Derek

Made in Roath, they have like a little street party there. And everybody will try and join in and cook some stuff, you know, so you've got people from all walks of life, setting up tables, cookery and things like that and everybody just joining... that would be lovely. So that kind of thing might be quite good, I think. Because in the past Britain used to have this kind of thing, isn't it? Sort of things for people to take part in as well? Because, again, the community has changed so much. People move on and then new people move in, just like me, you know, I'm considered a new neighbour, even though I've been there eight, nine years. And the thing is whether these new residents will want to take part... It would be nice, I think, personally, something to bring the community closer?

Rabab

Couple of last things, Derek, what do you feel has comforted you the most in the last year? Either... it can be either a person or something? You know what? Yeah. What do you think? Yeah, been the most comfort to you, in this time?

Derek

Probably this plot here. The family, I think the family support is important. Having a family there, you know, that supports your ideals as well. And I think personally, my family, we do talk quite a lot even before the pandemic and we always quite sort of close knit. You know, I think we have to isn't it? Being a foreign person... family coming over, you need that otherwise, you just break up. So, yeah, family is important.

Rabab

And can I ask, have the kind of conversations you've been having with your family changed in the last year?

Derek

It's not really, I wouldn't say that much. Yeah, maybe the things you discuss about, you know about a pandemic and all that. And the current issues about Bitcoin? Because my kids are really into that kind of stuff. Of course, you know, it's good for them to try. You tell them, yeah. When you're younger, that is when you need to give it a go. Of course, not all your life savings into Bitcoin, but whatever money that you are not really needing to use. So putting the savings which don't earn you any interest anyway, give it a go and see what happens in it. Yeah, for me, obviously, it'd be too late. But our little savings that you have will be used for next 10-20 years of your life, maybe you don't put it into Bitcoin or whatever. And I see the whole thing crashes, and then that's it (laughs).

Rabab

I have another question about the virus. My question was, what if, if the virus was trying to send us a message? Send humanity a message? What do you feel? What's your interpretation of what the virus might be trying to tell us?

Derek

The message? I can't think that the virus is really sending us a message....

Rabab

It's not sending a message literally, what perhaps... what I mean is how do you think the virus is inviting us to think differently? What do you think for you stands out the most about the last year in terms of...

Derek

Yeah, I guess it's the way you look at life isn't it? Going forward, and how you want to lead your life going forward? Maybe, maybe that's what the virus has done. Because we were locked down for nearly a year. So this pandemic, still not going away, is still there. You know? You ask yourself very serious questions. I think we should have mentioned that before on just what you want to do with life after. And like I said, do you just want to carry on working and working until you're 67, 68 before you retire? Or maybe you should start to enjoy more.

.....

We hope you enjoyed hearing from some of the voices in our community. Doorstep Revolution is an ongoing project. So if you're a Riverside resident and want to get involved do get in touch with us at gentleradical.org. In the coming months and years, we'll be continuing to build a resource of stories, perspectives and dialogues, exploring the realities, as well as the dreams of people living on our doorstep.