

Agatha Phiri 21.1.25

Emma: Okay. My name is Emma Woods, and I'm recording with Agatha for George House Trust, and it's the 21st of January 2025.

So, Agatha, could you tell me about your early life? Where were you born and when?

Agatha: I was born in Malawi, and I was born 1986. And Malawi is in southern of Africa, yeah.

Emma: What was your— How did you find Malawi? What was your childhood home like?

Agatha: So— I have different memories of my childhood. One is when my parents were there, especially my mum. That's the only one I remember really well. She was the poorest in the family, and we lived in a typical village. So, in Africa, life is different. When you say you live in a village, you're the poorest. When you say you live in the city, you're— kind of mmhm. You have it. So I grew up mostly in the village, and my mum was a hospital cleaner and she passed away in 1997. So yeah, my memory more is about her, even though she was a poorest (??). But now I look at— I look at how we lived. She had so much love for us. We literally didn't think about us being poor. It's now that I'm like, oh my god how did we live that life? But it's because she gave us unconditional love. So yeah, that's mainly—

And then growing up with family members who looked after us then when my parents died. All the memories I have of them are harsh, kind of traumatic, and by raising myself up, to be honest, to be where I am. If I have to be truthful, honest. And all I can remember about my childhood is trying. Everything is to try to survive. Try— what am I going to eat? What am I going to dress up? Everything was just a survival, really. So I grew before I even grew up.

Emma: So do you have any siblings?

Agatha: Yes, I have a brother. He's— in US, he's married, he's got his family, he's working. I've got little nieces, and I've got a daughter as well myself. She's eight years old in school, yeah.

Emma: Did you go to school in Malawi?

Agatha: I did. So I went both primary school, secondary school, college, uni, both in Malawi. And I was— I lived in an orphanage afterwards— when I stayed— when my parents died, I lived with my uncle, and I got sexually abused from when I was twelve years old to when I was fifteen years old. And then I escaped because I couldn't stay anymore. And I went now in the streets. I was homeless and a couple found me. They were coming from a different city, coming to my city, so they were looking for directions, and they could only speak English. So I was the only one who had been to school in the streets, who could speak to them in English. And they liked me, and they took me. And from then, that's when they took me to the orphanage. So at the orphanage, they sent me to school. They realised I've got potential, I've got skills, and they sent me to a journalism school because I wanted to be a journalist. And I

graduated, and I became a journalist. Yeah, in a short note, that's a little bit of my story.

Emma: Do you have any like, teachers or friends you remember from school?

Agatha: Yes. So I just said this on my social media last week. [laughs]. I remember my teacher. She was called Mrs. Kiseve(??) in the north of Malawi, Mzimba. And it's now that I see she was earnest. She really loved me. But then I thought she was harsh on me. My aunt didn't want me to do anything sports. She didn't want me to do anything acting, drama, no. So Mrs. Kiseve(??) could take me like she's giving me a punishment. She'll tell me, "Tomorrow, come early, you got a punishment". And I'll go to school early thinking I've got a punishment. She'll take me behind the block. She'll be like, "Let's do P.E— let's do netball". And we'll be practicing netball the two of us. And then during a netball game, she'll put me on the bench because she doesn't want to put me in trouble at home. And half time, when the team is losing, she'll be like "Come in". And she'll give an excuse of "Our team was losing. We wanted her to save it". So, it's now that I'm grown, I'm like, she saw something in me - even in acting, she saw something in me and she found a way of— this child is not allowed, but she's got something in her, so I'll grow that up. And I looked for her on social media last week and I found her, yeah, and we spoke. It was really— it was beautiful.

Emma: That's amazing, did she remember all of this?

Agatha: She did. She did because— 2009, before I left Malawi because I came to UK to act in Edinburgh Fringe Festival. So, when— we're on that tour in— we did a tour in Malawi. So we went to one of the universities where she was, and she saw me acting on stage. Was just thinking to herself, I think I know this face. So when we finished acting, she came, she was like, "Have you been to this school before?". I was like, "Yes". And I saw, I was like "Oh, my God, I remember you!". We hugged. So probably one of the last people I saw before I came to UK. Yeah.

Emma: So, I was gonna ask if you had any hobbies, but I'm guessing acting?

Agatha: Yeah, acting, writing. I'm a good writer as well, but— I don't do anything with it at the moment. I write a lot. I express myself more in writing than in talking. And yeah, acting. What else? I like to walk in the woods. Like, literally, the only sound I like to hear is birds, water... just that moment of peace. I love peace. So I can literally stay in the bush, in the woods, because that's it. Yeah.

Emma: But you weren't allowed to play sports or act when you were in school?

Agatha: I wasn't when I was in primary school but then growing up— in secondary school, because I went to a boarding secondary school. But that dream was killed, right, in primary school because I just felt like it's not the right thing for me to do. So I never did. So I just let it. But acting I continued, because I just enjoyed acting, yeah.

Emma: And you said that's what brought you to the UK?

Agatha: Yeah.

Emma: Can you tell me more about that?

Agatha: Yeah, so there was a time I joined an acting club in Malawi. So, in Malawi, acting is not a career at all. It's a hobby. And I joined acting clubs, and I was doing stage plays, I was doing radio plays, TV plays. Then one of the local artists - a musician - had watched one of the plays we did. It was about empowering women—to escape domestic abuse. So, when he saw me acting on stage, he took my number without me knowing. And then years later, he called me saying, “There's a director from Scotland. He's coming to audition people to do [a play about] the adoption of Madonna's children, the ones she adopted in Malawi, the artist”. So I was like, “Okay”. So she [the friend] said, “If you want to— be part of it, because I've seen you on stage before and you're good”. I was like, “Ah, okay”. So I travelled, I went to do the auditions, and I was picked! There were about fourteen of us, and we started rehearsing the whole adoption, how it happened, but we made it a musical thing. It was a musical play. So all the songs were Madonna songs, but we twisted them into the story that we're doing. So— and then we travelled, we came to Scotland in 2009. And that was it. I didn't go back. Since I've been here in— 2009. I've never been back to Malawi.

Emma: Wow, that's amazing. So, did you have any like— what were your friendships like when you first moved to the UK? Did you have any relationships?

Agatha: Yeah. So, I'm a bit— I like my own space. I'm not really a friends, friends kind of person. But it's because of the experiences that I've had as a child, and I— kind of don't trust people that much. So with that experience, I tend to keep myself to myself. But I had a friend, who was already here in the UK when I was back in Africa, in Bradford. So when I came, I asked if I could stay with him, because I wanted to stay because life is different. I wanted to be a different person, because back home I have memories that I thought - let me start a new life. So the first person I contacted was the person I knew was in the UK, and they were okay to keep me. They had their own family in Bradford. So I travelled from Scotland to Bradford, and I stayed with them for a while, but I was so unwell. And... yeah, let me just end it there in case some other questions are coming forward. I don't— want to say all the gist!

Emma: That's alright, you can lead this! But— you said that you struggled with friendships because of childhood experiences and trust. Can you tell me more about that?

Agatha: Yeah, so as a child— it's now that I'm realizing that I might have ADHD. But growing up in Africa, you don't know any of these things at all. So I remember I was different, really different from anyone. And my weird behaviour made people, especially in primary school when I young, I was called weird. I was called mad. I was called— any name you can think of. And I was only good in some specific things. And things that I'm not good at, I will not even put attention to that. And even the teachers - some of the teachers were really upset with me, because, “How do you give 100% to English, this and that, but not us?”. So that— behaviour, I got a little bit bullied in school, really. And I didn't just trust anyone around me apart from myself.

And then, in secondary school, that's when I started now acknowledging that I am different. Now I started working on, what am I good at? And I started expanding that. I only had one friend in secondary school. If she's not around, because it was a boarding school, so if she's unwell, she's gone back home, I'm alone. I'm not going to try and connect with other people, no. Because she gave me that time, she gave me that trust. So, yeah. So, and then, as well, in here [the UK], as an adult being HIV positive, I have experienced a lot of stigma from people that I try to build a friendship, relationship with. Chasing me out of their houses, more like I'm a disease, I'm an infection. So to protect myself, I kinda stay away from friendships.

Emma: Could you tell me more about why you decided not to go back to Malawi after you came to Edinburgh?

Agatha: Yeah.

Emma: What was it about the UK?

Agatha: It wasn't necessarily about the UK. It was about Malawi. That's why I stayed. Because like I've said, I got sexually abused and... by my uncle, not a stranger, but someone who was supposed to protect me. And that alone was a no, because I didn't want to be there anymore. But because I was a child, no money, not even having dreams of one day I'll end up in the UK, there was no way I could have just ended up myself in here. But when an opportunity came, I came to UK. Firstly, what I attracted me was the children's services. Children are safe, are protected. If what happened to me as a young child was in this country, he could have been in jail. I could have been protected. I could have received counselling. I could have been put on _____(???) for me— in case I've got— in case he's transmitted the virus to me. I could have been protected, but all that didn't happen because I was in Malawi. So for me, it was- okay. I'm in the UK. I'm safe. I can start my life now without anyone knowing my story. I can live a different life, not who I was. So, it was an escape from myself, an escape from my experiences, my traumatic experiences as well, and just to start a new life.

Emma: So what was your first sort of job you had when you came to the UK? Or did you do any training or go to school in the UK?

Agatha: No, so my ever first job since 2009 is the one I'm doing now – Agatha's Space. And I also have another job with another company, which is— I'm not sure if I'm allowed to mention them, but I'll not mention them. But we do system change. We're looking at the systemic cause of poverty in our communities, but also how to challenge the systems if they are not benefiting people, the people who are supposed to benefit from it. So, I'm passionate about that, because change is what I dream for. That was my first job, like to properly go for an interview, and it was only last year. Because since I've been in this country, I have— I was refused to work. I was— I went to claim asylum, and they never allowed me to work. I was surviving on five pound a day for fourteen years. So it was until last year— no, 2023 that they gave me a decision to stay, and that's when I started looking for a job. But I wasn't just staying, because obviously I knew when they give me a decision to stay, I will need a job, I will need to pay bills, I need experience.

So I decided to volunteer. So I was working in the volunteer section. I volunteered with George House Trust; I still do volunteer. And it was George House Trust that really gave me the confidence and motivation to be doing what I do now. And I also volunteered with Support and Action for Women's Network (SAWN), which is an organisation I'm working with right now for Agatha's Space. So there I gained a lot of experiences. When the system changed, I can— somehow something happened. Somebody spotted— my skills, and would ask me, "Do you want to go to school?". I said, "Yes". So there was a course available for us to do, for people like me. And she said, "This systemic action research, because you are so passionate about changing the system. Do you want to take the course?". I was like, "But— I'm an asylum seeker". And she said "Yeah, so make things happen for you". And I did a course. And so now, more to do with research, really. And we just finished last year. And so that's the only course I did.

Emma: So, you mentioned your work with Agatha's Space and the George House Trust, which are both obviously HIV support networks. So, can you remember when you first heard about HIV and how it came up?

Agatha: Like in general, when I heard the word HIV?

Emma: In general, yeah.

Agatha: It was in Africa. My mum died of AIDS, but we were not told that she died of AIDS. But it's growing up remembering everything she went through, I know it was AIDS. And because it's like a taboo in Africa, and AIDS is described as death, really. So, because there's not much information, that's the only information that's in your head. HIV is death. AIDS is death. If you touch someone with HIV, you're going to die. But then, living in the same house as my mum when she was unwell, when she was suffering, and I didn't get it that time. That kept giving me questions of - is it real? Can you get it with just touching someone, looking after someone? So that was really my first time I heard of AIDS and HIV.

Emma: How did HIV change your life? Obviously, you mentioned you lost your mum.

Agatha: Yeah, yeah, I lost my mum, but that's the negative side. But if I have to be really real, HIV changed my life in a way that— I feel more powerful. Really. If I had a wing, I feel like I could have been one of the humans to be flying around, not walking. And HIV gave me a purpose really. I choose to look at the positives that HIV has done to me than the negatives, because obviously I'm on medication. At some point, I nearly committed suicide because of the experiences, but I really focus on what did I get from this that now I can look behind and say— if I wasn't HIV positive, I wouldn't be where I am. And it has given me the confidence to do what I do now. Yeah, really. Sometimes I feel like if I wasn't HIV positive, I wouldn't be doing what I do now.

Emma: Can you tell me about when you were diagnosed with HIV and how that came about?

Agatha: Yeah, so, okay. Sexual abuse in Africa. Had to go through all my learning to be a journalist in uni and college. All that time I was unwell. I was in and out of

hospitals, even when I was coming to UK to act. The last week in Malawi, it was bad because I was so unwell. And then there were fears of, “Oh, Scotland is cold. If you come to Scotland when you're unwell, you're not going to be well”. And nearly, my trip nearly got cancelled, but I had to force myself because I wanted to leave. So I came. Now, that illness continued when I was here. So, when I was in Bradford with my friend, I was really unwell, and she said we should go to— do the normal registration with the GP, new patient. And they took my blood as a new patient. I don't know how things are done now, but back then they would do all the bloods if you've just come from a different country. And that's when they found out I was HIV positive.

Now, my uncle was HIV positive. When I was unwell in Africa, I was thinking I could be HIV positive, but because— remember the stories that I knew about HIV were all traumatic stories – death, this... So, I knew— if I find out in Africa that I'm HIV positive, I'll end up either killing myself or have low self-esteem. Every day will be a scary moment of, am I dying today? Am I dying today? So I didn't want to know all that. So I just didn't get tested in Africa. But when that happened here, the first thing I remember telling the GP was, “Can you help me?”. Then he said, “Yes, we'll help you. We'll refer you to an HIV clinic”.

So, they referred me to an HIV clinic in Bradford. Same day I went, and straight away, they started me on HIV medication. Because my CD4 count¹ was below 100, which was— I was going into AIDS. So, which means I had stayed with the virus since I was twelve years old. So they started me on HIV treatment straight away. And also, I had lumps in my neck. So, I had fevers. I was coughing a lot. All the symptoms now of AIDS were starting to come up. Now they had to do a biopsy, and they found out I had TB², but the TB was not the one that can transmit to other people. I could not infect other people, but it was because it was on my neck, not in my chest. However, they needed to protect the people I was living with. So, one, I'm on HIV medication straight away. I haven't processed all the information of, I'm HIV positive, straight away I'm on medication. I've got pills as well. I think I was taking, was it nine pills at once for TB? So, I had lots and lots of medication that I was hiding in somebody's house because I didn't want them to know. And when they found out, stigma started. [They said], “Leave our house as soon as possible”.

Now this is the only home I know. These are the only people I know from home, and there was no chance of okay, let's process this, because even myself— I didn't know much about myself. All I knew was, I'm HIV positive. Now you have to remember, have the HIV back in my country, I'm gonna die anytime from now. If I die, what's gonna happen? And I'm being told to, “Leave our house”. And that was a confirmation of, oh yeah. I am a disease. I am a virus. So she chased me out of the house, and I went on Facebook. I just said, “Can anyone keep me for a few days when I'm finding something, where to go to?”. So luckily, I had started going to a church, so one of the ladies from the church saw my post. She had just given birth, and she was desperately looking for somebody to help because she was a single mum. So she said, “Oh yeah, you can come with me”. At this point, I'm like, I'm not going to disclose what I'm going through. I'll just go as long as I've got a roof over my

¹ Indicates health of immune system

² Tuberculosis

head. That's it. But eventually they told her. "Oh, be careful. She's HIV positive. She's going to transmit it to your child". And she was like, "Oh, no. Out of my house now". But at this point, I have started building up relationships now. So I spoke to my friend in Portsmouth - that's why I was telling you before, I have done a UK tour! It wasn't just a tour; it was places I need to go and be safe. So, yeah, so no, this one now was in Oxford. That's when I ended up in Oxford, in the army, yeah.

Emma: So, what happened next? After you—

Agatha: So, I went to Oxford looking after the kid. She had a boy, and the dad was a dentist, and the woman was in the army. So, we were really fine, until she found my medication again. Going through my bags, and she found my medication. I think in our culture, we have this thing of, this is too good to be true. And I think this is why my medication ended up being caught all the time. Because everyone wanted to try, like, she's too good. What is she hiding? So they go through my bags. Now, okay, what is it really about her? What fault does she have? And they find my medication, and that's it. All the good things I've done, thrown in the window.

Now in Oxford was a long story. I went to a party. It was in a weekend, on a Saturday, so my friend took me to a party. And the woman came, the woman I was living with, she came to the party. This is a party full of boys, full of soldiers, full of _____ (??), in the campus. And she said to the DJ, "Stop the music". And the DJ stop the music. She got on the table, and she took my medication. She said, "Look what I found in my house. This woman, she's looking after my child, and she's hiding HIV medication in my house. How bad can it be? She wants to kill all of us". She opened my medication, throw them on the floor, took another bottle, throw on the floor. She just dropped the bottle. Off she goes. I didn't know how to react. I just went quiet, like my head was blank. So, a friend who brought me there she said, "Let's go to my house". She just took me, went to her house. I didn't have my medication on me. And to process all that— I couldn't. I was just crying. The shame, the embarrassment, the everything.

So later on, I went and picked up my things from her house. Stayed with this lady, but she was living in a room in a landlord house, so she wasn't allowed to bring anyone. So she was on the phone, speaking to her friends, because she had stayed in this country for a long time. And then one of her friends said, "You know what, I've got a cousin in Portsmouth, she wants a babysitter so you can send your friend there". But she didn't disclose my status – that's a good thing. So I went to Portsmouth babysitting. Same story happened. Found my— no this time it was the little boy. He went in my bags and was like, "Auntie! Medicine!". And then they dropped. That's it. But this one gave me a chance to stay for, until when I found somewhere else to stay. Now, I went back on social media. "Anyone want a childminder? I'm available". Within seconds, somebody was like, "Oh my God. I was just speaking to my colleague in work. She said she wants a child minder".

This was London, and this was a Zimbabwean family. They've got no information about Malawians. So, I was like, yes, my information is safe. They were doctors. So I was like, yes, now this is safe for me. So I went to London. I stayed with them for two years. Finally, again, they found my medication. And this time I thought, they're doctors, I was honest with them. I was like okay, they will understand why I didn't

disclose my status, and they will also understand why this is so sensitive for me. No, it was a different story. "Leave our house". So, at this point, I've stayed long in the UK now. I've connected with the Malawian community everywhere. Now I had a friend, and I started building good friendships. I had a friend in Manchester, so she said, "Oh, you can come over". This time, in London, they didn't tell me to leave the house, but it was just awkward. Everything was awkward. So I was like, "No, I'm going".

So I came now to Manchester, and I kept myself to myself. I hide my medication. I bought— vitamins in Holland and Hemp [Holland and Barrett]. I removed the vitamins. I put my medication in there, so they looked like I am taking vitamins. Nobody suspected anything. Then I went online, look for a clinic - HIV clinic - because obviously my medication is going to finish. I ended up in Hathersage in Manchester, and okay, I started now opening up about my life. Professionals were the only people I could trust. I didn't trust anyone anymore. I built a cage around me that I didn't want anything personal about myself to be shared with anyone. But that— kept me lonely, even when I had people around, when I go to meet friends, I was lonely. Because I was— living in my own body, without anyone involved. And then the hospital referred me to George House Trust.

And I came here. I remember every Thursdays we used to, back in the day, we used to have— I think it was African day. So there would be loads of African people here on a Thursday. So that kind of made me connect to people of my colour. But also, I saw Malawian people in here looking so gorgeous. Makeup, what? I was like, so I can look like that. I can be that person. So that gave me an inspiration, and also motivated me to start looking after myself, because I literally just neglected myself like— because I was a disease, I was an infection, that's what everyone thought I was. So I started accepting that. And coming here more and more now, I opened up to the team that was here at that time, and they sent me for counselling. We were doing next door there, counselling. I went through therapy. I just went through everything that I needed to, to be empowered. And then, yeah.

Emma: So, you mentioned a lot of relationship loss and friendship loss because of your medication. But you also said you connected to the Malawian community when you were in the UK. Can you tell me about that? Like, how did that happen if you were— when you were moving around?

Agatha: Yeah, so the Malawian community, I connected - I think the first one, the friend that I called a friend then, it was because of social media. So, I used to talk a lot about politics, because back home, when I was a journalist, I was a political journalist. So I was so much into politics, so I would go online, criticising, spilling the beans, all sorts. So then someone was also passionate about that in Manchester. So we connected, we kind of shared the same views. So she's the one now when I said, "Oh, I'm looking for somewhere to stay", she's the one I stayed with. And when I came here now, to George House Trust, the Malawian communities I met, they were now already people that I'm seeing in the community, but I never thought they could be HIV positive. So when we came here and I was like, oh okay. But even though I viewed those kind of friendships that were coming here, still I had trust issues. I was thinking, okay, they are positive as well, but what can stop them to tell someone, "Oh, she's HIV positive"? . So even though they are positive as well, literally, it was

just trust. I didn't have trust in anyone. And I think that's what, that's what made me—to really grow so much into protecting people's information, because I don't want anyone to experience what I did experience. So yeah.

Emma: So, the friend that you made in Manchester. Are you still friends with that person?

Agatha: No, no, no. So we were friends for a while. She was like my little sister, because she was younger than me. And I gave birth early to my daughter. She was born twenty-three weeks. So she was in the incubators for a long time. George House Trust is what supported me so much. And so when— I came off social media completely everywhere, because I just needed to concentrate on my child. And I had said, any friends that are coming, “No pictures”, because she was so vulnerable. So I don't want pictures of my child to be shared anywhere else. But when I came out of the hospital now, before I even spoke to anyone - because she was the only friend that was coming to see me, she only came once. But that only one time, she managed to take pictures of my child when I wasn't in the room in the hospital and she shared it around to people. That— I went back to trust issues. I was like, ah, every time I try and trust someone, this happens. So, we didn't have any verbal conversation of, “Oh, the friendship is not there anymore”. Emotionally, I just started— distancing myself, because that's what I'm good at. I just emotionally distance myself from trouble, because if you're my friend, you cannot protect my story, a sort of like little child who was vulnerable in the incubators. You couldn't even keep that away from the public. How can I trust you to tell you I'm HIV positive? How far you're going to go with that information? So yeah.

Emma: So you mentioned giving birth to your little girl. Can I ask how that came about?

Agatha: Yeah. So— I'm a little bit of an introvert really, and I don't do social life at all. I don't have any. So one day, this friend I'm talking about, she has a friend as well—who does catering. So it was around Christmas time in— 2015. She was delivering food, serving in parties. So she asked my friend to go with her, to go and serve somewhere to a party. But my friend was busy, so my friend invited me. “Oh, can you go and help my friend?”. I knew this friend, so I was like, “Oh, cool. I'm just lying down in bed, I can go and help”. So it's to this party now that— I met a guy. And we exchanged numbers, and that was the only opportunity I could go out, because I just stay in bed - weekend, in bed, every time in bed. So I was like, oh, okay, at least I've got— I'm seen now. So we're sharing numbers. We started chatting. It was just a short period of time and we started dating. And straight away, he wanted a child. So I was like, “No, I'm not ready”. I was still fighting for my immigration status. I don't have a home of my own. I'm still living with people. And my friend— was moving to another house because she was gonna get married. So it was— a matter of me now finding another house somewhere. How am I going to pay the house? I'm also trying to sort my life out. I was like, “No, I'm not going to have a child”.

Now— he was abusive now. He hit me really hard when I started taking my morning after pills because I was really scared of having a child. So when he found out that I was taking morning after pills, he beat me. He broke my teeth, like half of my front teeth is gone. So he now— I think naively, because I've never had really an

experience in men, I thought maybe he really loves me. Maybe he really wanted to start something with me. So I gave it in, and I stopped taking my morning after pills. I started— I opened up to him that I was HIV positive, and he was happy with that. He said he had had a friend as well, a relationship with someone who had a friend who was HIV positive. So he was okay with that information, and he was okay with me having a child with him while I was positive. So I gave it in, and he bought loads of pregnancy tests. Lots. So every single day we're testing. Now this is me still being convinced, ooh, he loves me. The day that I found out— I was pregnant, he was over the moon. He screamed. He was excited. That's the last time I saw him.

He said he was going to ASDA to buy champagne. "We should pop it". The champagne— eight years later, he is never back. So that was me now, waiting, oh, where is he? I'm pregnant. Day one, his phone is off. I rang his friend. I went to his house. He's not there. What happened? He was living with a friend, the friend was like, "Oh, he's just waking up in the morning. Go to work. Come in the middle of the night". What? What changed? He changed the number like, literally, there was nothing, no connection. I was stressed, and now all the reality is coming to me. What am I going to do with this child now? Every single day, she's growing up. I didn't know it was a boy or girl then. This child is growing every single day. And then eventually he communicated. He said, "Whatever you want to do with this child, whether you want to go for an abortion, just go and have an abortion. But I've got nothing to do with that child". Okay, why did you do it? Why did you have to go through all that and end up going, "I've changed my mind". Just like that. Yeah. "I don't want anything to do with you. That's it."

So I had to make a decision to keep the child. And with all the stress I was going through, when I was twenty three weeks— my water broke. I was rushed to the hospital, St Mary's Hospital, and I gave birth early. I stayed in hospital for 105 days, but it was a rollercoaster. It was up and down. Some days they'll tell me she can't make it. "She's only got one hour left". And I'll be there, struggling. Who am I going to talk to? Now, when I called him, telling him, "There's a child and the child is dying". he said, "So what am I going to do with that?". So that was for me— done. Don't waste your time talking to this man anymore. Let him be. So I let it. So I just toughen up like, okay, you're in this alone now, like you've always been by yourself. Fight it. Pray for your child. She'll be fine. Yeah, she's fine. Now she's eight years old. She's in school causing trouble.

Emma: So now you live in Oldham. Can you talk about how you came to live in the area?

Agatha: Yeah. So I was living in— all this drama that was happening, I was in Gorton. And then— the Home Office now, in my asylum process, moved me to Oldham, because with the Home Office you don't have a choice of where you live. They will take you anywhere and you just have to go. So they moved me to Oldham. Mainly it was because also they couldn't move me out of Manchester because my daughter was still undergoing treatment with hospitals in Manchester, so we had to stay. So they put me in Oldham.

Emma: And that's where you became involved in HIV activism?

Agatha: Ah, no— I could not necessarily say Oldham. I got involved here, in Manchester - George House Trust. So there was a period of time where I didn't come to George House Trust anymore. Obviously, for trust issues, my own insecurities. It had nothing to do with George House Trust, but me. The thought of, somebody will see me going in there, blah, blah, blah. I was like, no, I'm not going back. So I became lonely again. And I was just coming on and off, on and off. So when my child now was, I think it's 2021 that I was now I think looking for my path. I was really looking for what really can I do in the community that will make an impact? And the first one was to help people that have been sexually abused, but you will never see these places anywhere. And it was hard for me, with my immigration status, to start looking for those places. Because what I was looking for, I think, was healing. I wanted to heal from that experience, because I've never forgotten. And I thought, okay, since I can't find this place. Then something just kicked, like. You want somewhere where you can heal, but your HIV experience, you've never healed. So, ah, I'll go and volunteer at George House Trust.

So I called and— there was Josh, and Josh was like, “Okay, we need to book a meeting”. I came and spoke to him, and he was really listening. And I wanted mainly to support people that are newly diagnosed, because I wanted to understand their experience, what they feel, so I can relate to my own. Like I should start understanding my own now, telling myself, “It's okay, it's normal, that's fine”. So when I started that, I found it— it's different from what really, really I wanted. Because really what affected me the most was the stigma. And me supporting newly diagnosed, it's not helping me to understand the stigma, and it's not helping me to change the way people see HIV. So I said to Josh, “I want something different. I want awareness. I want to be going outside and teach people about HIV, because that's what will bring change to HIV narrative. I need to change all that, and I also needed to change myself from that HIV ____ (??) back in my country”. So Josh said, “Okay, you're going to meet Paul”. Paul is one of the founders of George House Trust. And Paul trained me to be a positive speaker. Since then, I have loved everything about myself.

So the first event I ever went to was World AIDS Day. I hosted World AIDS Day in 2021, and I had never told anyone outside the hospitals or outside George House Trust that I was HIV positive. But this was my first time to stand in front of hundreds of people on stage, hosting World AIDS Day, and disclosing my status to people. To me, that was power. It gave me the power— it was like I challenged myself. Something that I thought I would never, never do. I just openly said it. And it was like a chain that was tangled, broken now. I was free, and I grew wings. I remember sending an email to one of the organisers of that event. I think if I had to print it out, it could be eight pages, eight A4 pages, because it was long. I just poured everything out. And Paul— Paul is amazing. Paul took me in as his child. He took me everywhere I was going. He trained me. And I've been everywhere. We go in schools, we go in community groups, we go everywhere.

Now, the challenge was all these places that I go with Paul to teach people— these are people, I'll never meet them again maybe. I might meet them by accident one day. But my challenge was helping my community in Oldham, where I go to every single day, because I had joined an organization called SAWN (Support and Action for Women's Network). This is a place where women, you just go and be who you

want to be. There's a lot of empowerment. Not from the people working in SAWN but women who have been through everything that you are going through, being immigration, asylum seeking, every problem, domestic abuse, everyone is there. So it's their stories now that empowers you. So I was like, okay, all these women getting all this support. Why can't I open up about myself? If I'm able to open up out there? But the challenge was, I'll see these people again every single day. My fear was me not to see them again. My fear was them walking away from me, walking away from all the support they're getting from SAWN. So I went and spoke to the owner of SAWN, Rosie. And I said, "Rosie, I want to come and do an HIV awareness session here. I'm not scared. I'm okay now, that part is gone. My fear is I don't want them to leave this place. I still want them to come". So she said, "Agatha, you cannot control how people are going to react. If they leave, it's okay, because here at SAWN, we don't discriminate. So if they want to go, let them go, but come and teach, because some people learn from you".

So I spoke to Paul. Said, "Paul, the challenge has come, and then now to go to speak to the community that I know, a community that I'll meet again". Paul said, "How do you feel about it?". I said, "I'm fine". He said, "Okay, let's go". So Paul, Yvonne and Anna, all HIV activists for George House Trust, they came to support me. We called the event a disclosure party because what happened, we didn't see that coming at all. This is a woman who's coming from experiences of every time somebody knows about my status, I become a monster. I get chased out of the house. For the first time, they secretly baked a cake, put my name there. They cooked food so— which the room was full, really full. I was like, okay, what's going on? Now my fears were really more because the more the room was full, the more I'm like, okay, I'm gonna tell to hundreds of people now. But it turned out to be the most beautiful disclosure party we've ever been to. One woman, surprise, surprise stood up in the crowd. She said, "Agatha, you're not alone. I'm HIV positive, too".

Me and Paul just looked at each other. What just happened? Because it doesn't happen. We've been everywhere, that doesn't happen. So we embraced the moment and we had fun. We ate, we danced. It was a proper party - we still talk about it years later. So yeah, that's how I ended up to be doing— Oh, now in there, Rosie stood up, the founder of SAWN. She said, "Agatha, if you want to start an HIV service here at SAWN, supporting African women living with HIV, you're more than welcome to do it". So I said, "Okay". So we— in SAWN we have a furniture shop, a second hand one. So she said, "Don't worry about the money, how you're going to start"— because we wanted to be giving people transport money back. Because most of these people are asylum seekers, living on five pound a day. So if they use their five pound a day to come to Agatha's Space, we need to give them back. So they were coming, a few people. And then eventually we started growing, and now Agatha's Space is a thing. Yeah. So that's how I started.

Emma: So what sort of stuff does Agatha's space do?

Agatha: So I— the design of it was really everything that I needed when I was struggling. When I was going through all the stressful moments that I've explained, what I needed was a sister in all this, a sister who is like me, a sister who cannot judge me, a sister who can open up about anything and everything, but also they'll

help me to build my confidence. They help me to build my vision, what I wanted at that particular time. So I wanted to be that sister in Agatha's Space, and I wanted to plant in all that in every woman, because we are in this alone. So we have to be each other sisters. We have to protect each other, one. We have to keep each other's stories, two. We have to help each other to grow visually(??). We have to help each other to build ourselves financially. We have to build our dreams as well. We have to build our confidence. So when we first started it was just, okay, let's relax. This thing is just starting now, we don't even know. I really didn't know how that was going to work out. I had all these fears. Is it going to come true? Is it going to happen? Obviously, I'm dealing with women as well, because women will talk a lot as well [laughs].

So the first few meetings were just for us to relax. And the actual vision now kicked in after attending, because every week there was now new people coming in, and then these women, we also meet in SAWN. We got to SAWN, but we also meet at Agatha's Space, because Agatha's Space was now separate. Because I said, "I'm not letting anyone know who is coming to Agatha's Space". So we would be in SAWN together, Agatha's Space women. And none of us is going to mention Agatha's Space, as "Oh, I got Agatha's Space". No. And you're not— going to talk about someone who comes to Agatha's Space as well. So it was like two places we meet.

So one woman from Agatha's Space one day, she comes here as well to George House Trust, she just stood up. She was really distressed. So I've got this thing of protecting my women as well. Even when we are somewhere, they're starting a story that they shared in Agatha's space, and I know - they're sharing out of excitement. They will regret it later on. I'm very sensitive with that. I give them a sign, stop it. And they stop. So this woman stood up. She— doesn't speak English that much, and she started saying about Agatha's Space. I'm thinking, what are you doing? So she's just said, "No, it's fine, Agatha, I'm okay to talk". And she was crying, and she said, "When I came to this country, that's when they found out I was HIV positive. That was around COVID period. And I wanted to kill myself. I live alone in a Serco³ Home Office accommodation. Every single time I take a knife, I'm just feeling like, should I just stab myself? Every single time I'm taking my medication, I'm thinking, should I just overdose myself? But when I came to SAWN, the first time I came, Agatha was sharing about her being HIV positive. She was confident. She wasn't even talking like she's got HIV. I look at her, I'm like, how is she even HIV positive? And everything she's done for us has been amazing. And that just looking at her, I said to myself, why do I need to kill myself when I can actually be like Agatha, why do I need to kill myself? She's got so much joy. She laughs with everyone. I want to be like her. So that's when I changed my mind in wanting to kill myself".

I was just looking at her like, did I just hear that? And I was like, okay. Now the question of what do I want to do with Agatha's Space was answered. I'll use my story to help other people to find themselves, to change their ways. If they were ever stressing about, "Oh, I want to die. I want to do this". If I can change her from killing herself, I want to change thousands and many more. So that's where now all these ideas started coming in.

³ Serco is a British multinational health, defence, space, justice and migration company

Now I use my story to change the narrative. I use my story to change other people's perspectives. I use my story to empower women. I use my story to motivate. And at Agatha's Space as well, one other thing is most of the women are not from here. English is not their first language. They struggle in hospitals as well to get medication, to understand what the doctors are telling them. So sometimes I go with them so I can help them to understand, if they are confident for me to come with them. One challenge I found out was women were taking medication wrongly, HIV medication. And my first question was, "How do you take?". [They said], "The doctors told me I can take any time". [I said], "No, you can't take any time". "Yeah", they said, "Anytime. I should choose time". I said, "Yes, the doctor told you to choose the time of your choice. So you have to choose if it's early in the morning, it means every single day, look at the time - six o'clock, you take that time". So I said, "Okay, we're going to come back to day one. Everyone who is taking medication wrongly give me your names". So I started ringing them. We said we're going to start again taking eight o'clock in the evening, because that time they've eaten, they've had their supper, they're going to bed. So I called each one of them for about two weeks. "Take your medication it's eight o'clock, take your medication it's eight o'clock". So I said they should come back to me after two or three weeks to tell me how they feel, because they were so tired, exhausted every day. [They said] "I feel better. I feel more light". And I said, "Yeah, because you were taking medication wrongly. Now your medication has understood your system. Now you're taking that exact same time". I supported them to do all that.

But also, I helped them to go to English courses. They need to know how to speak English. One of them, I helped to do IT, computer. Send them to do IT. Now she's working with the NHS. I built their confidence to be able to talk about their status with their families. I don't encourage them to disclose their status, because what happened to me, I don't want them to experience that. But if they look at me and they feel like, you know what, I can disclose my status to my family, they can. A few women have disclosed their status to their families. Now I take them everywhere I'm going, because I want them to know what I do. I want them to learn. So when time comes, I'm like, "Manage Agatha's Space, I'm going to do other things". So— they can do it on their own. So that's the woman I want to build. A woman who is confident enough to look after herself and her family, provide for herself and her family. I don't believe in a woman just depending on, "Oh, can you give me twenty pounds? Ten pounds? This pounds?". No, that time - it has to come to a time when we're really struggling. But if you can get up and find resources for yourself, tell me. "I want an English course so I'm able to communicate at work", I'll send you there, because I know I am building your future and your goals as well.

Emma: So you mentioned, when the time comes, you can leave the women to manage Agatha's space on their own, and you go on to other things. What sort of things do you envision in your in your future? What would you like to do?

Agatha: I have always wanted to be a politician, but I've always— I find it hard. Because you have to give up some of your sanity, some of your morals, which is— me going into politics is to change the whole system. I don't believe in choosing leaders, voting for people, as changing. I believe in changing the whole system, because a new leader will come, will operate under the same broken system. But if

we change the system, how the system operates, then we've got it. Because the system is working, yes, but it's working for certain people. We want a system that works for everyone. So my idea of joining politics is to change the whole system, which— it cannot happen on my own.

So because I cannot do politics, because I know I can't change that system, my other dream is what I'm doing now. Working for organisations or having my own projects that deals with system change. So I'm really passionate about system change, because we need an equal system. If money is benefiting A, it has to benefit B. If there's no racial equality, if these days— if no one can stand up in parliament and say, "I'm a woman living with HIV and I need this law to change", I want to be that person. Because up to now, yes, we're talking about people throwing stigma at us, but we also have systems that— discriminate and throw stigma at us. And we need to challenge those systems. There are countries I cannot go to in 2025 because they don't allow people living with HIV. And we're living in a— generation where U equals U— undetectable is equal to untransmissible. I am untransmissible. I am undetectable. Why — can I not go to Australia? I am untransmissible. Why can I not insure my home if I buy a house? The systems are still made out of old fashioned system of, "Oh if she buys a house today because she's living with HIV, she will die. And— we're gonna—", you know. Insurance companies are so scared. We don't have to. So— but we need someone. We need someone to go and change all these systems, but who is the person? And I don't believe in just talking and complaining about things. I believe in, okay, if I want the system to change, let me be the one changing that system. Because everyone is busy with their life. Some people are not even worried about the system being like that. So, I can't wait for anyone. I'm the one looking at the system being a problem. So, I want to be the one going to change these systems. So hopefully this will be my next journey in life [laughs].

Emma: Thank you so much for sharing your story. It's been absolutely incredible. If there's anything else you'd like to say before I stop recording?

Agatha: Yeah, I think I'll just appreciate the work George House Trust and other HIV service providers are doing in Greater Manchester, but mainly is the HIV activists who are out there. Because I feel like, once we're in here, we are dressed, we are covered, but when we are out there talking about HIV, I feel like we are naked. We are literally exposing ourselves. Here I am. I'm a person living with HIV, but I'm not just saying because I'm a person living with HIV. I am saying because I want change. I am saying because I want you to understand what HIV is. I want you to understand that I cannot transmit it. That is a big challenge. And we're not just talking about talking about talking to people - even challenging medical professionals. Because we believe medical professionals knows everything about HIV but that's not true. I have personally been stigmatised by a doctor, double gloved. It's not even ages ago. It's— 2024. A doctor wore gloves, disinfected the whole room just because I told him— I'm HIV positive. When we say we're HIV positive, we're not telling doctors because, "Oh, hi, look at me. I'm HIV positive". No. What I'm saying indirectly is, "Whatever medicine you're going to give me, check with my HIV treatment, if it does not interact". That's the only reason we disclose that. But they don't understand that. Think we're showing off. But us HIV activists going out there trying to change the HIV narrative, trying to— challenge stigma, discrimination, systems like the ones I've mentioned before that doesn't really favour us. We're exposing ourselves and we're

okay with that. We're taking that challenge because we want change. So it's just me to— just appreciate every HIV activist who's making an impact in the community. Let's not stop. Let's go ahead. Let's continue. Sometimes it can be frustrating when you don't see the change, especially for myself, but it's okay. We are one step forward, one step forward. That's what I believe in. So yeah, that's all I can say.