SASHA’S PODCAST

00:00 [MUSIC]

00:13 [MARK]

DICE , a series of six podcasts about social inclusion, housing and the experiences of older people from socially diverse backgrounds. This is part 4, Sasha's story. A woman who identifies as lesbian and Jewish.

00:30 [SASHA]

I feel comfortable here. I feel quite safe. I feel very relaxed about residing here. It has become home, you know.

00:44 [PAUL]

Hello, meet Sasha, who lives in a one bedroom flat in a small retirement village, itself within the heart of a rural village in the home counties.

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Sasha is a 69 year old white woman who identifies as lesbian and Jewish. Brought up in Germany, she's been living in the UK since the 1980s. Her story is one of five insights into the lives of older people, as seen through the lens of their housing experiences.

01:12

They're all available as podcasts on this website. Sasha and the other contributors have taken part in DICE, a University of Bristol study which stands for diversity in care environments. My name's Dr Paul Willis, and I have led the DICE research project with a number of colleagues.

01:33

As a lecturer in social work at the University of Bristol, I study housing and care support for older people looking at things like aging, the experience of loneliness and social inclusion. I'm interested, for example, in how sexuality and aging are experienced by older people in the context of their housing and longer term care.

01:56

I was pleased to meet Sasha and to hear her story because in the 1990s, she herself was a manager of a housing scheme for older people. So what was that like for her, I wondered.

02:08 [SASHA]

Oh my god. D’you want me to go there? Um, very demanding because it was residential. You had to live on site. So it's almost like being on duty 24/7, very demanding. People seem to confuse being the manager with being a servant, especially the ones who were owner occupiers. It was a good adding to my learning curve of people's psychology.

02:46 [PAUL]

So now that the tables are turned and Sasha has been a resident at her scheme for five years, what's that like for her?

02:54 [SASHA]

Sometimes inadvertently I have my manager hat on, and I think the manager should be doing this and should be doing and if I had done this, or behaved in this way, I wouldn't have been fired on the spot, but it doesn't apply.

03:12 [PAUL]

Sasha's flat is part of a complex of self-contained one and two bedroom apartments and bungalows surrounded by beautiful, well-maintained outdoor communal gardens.

However, she has emphysema and likes to keep herself to herself. During the first 16 months of the pandemic, she didn't leave her flat once.

03:34 [SASHA]

I went out a couple of weeks ago because I desperately needed a passport picture for my settlement application, and that was the first time since the first lockdown began.

03:52

But I have to be fair, it's probably easier for me than for a lot of other people to stay in seclusion because I had certain mental health issues like agoraphobia, anxiety attacks and depression, so I'm used to being by myself.

04:18

So to me, it wasn't that much of an issue, really. The other thing is because of my emphysema, I have to stay away from people who have colds or had the flu or something like that and my friends are very considerate aswell, they weren't coming to see me even before COVID if they had the sniffles or something like that, yeah. So it had its ups and downs, but I have managed alright, yes.

04:45 [PAUL]

Sasha's clearly a thoughtful and perceptive person, and it's hard to square the quiet, withdrawn nature of her life now, as she describes it today in the home counties, compared to her out there lifestyle 30 years ago.

05:11

Sasha is a great storyteller with accounts of having lived in a commune in Holland for a while, and she lived in squats in London. Before she became a social worker, she ran a stall at Brixton Market and was deeply involved in women's rights, supporting women's centres and housing projects for women who had experienced domestic violence.

05:32 [SASHA]

I decided to stay here. People laugh when I say because of the architecture, I love Edwardian and Victorian buildings and even later ones, and it was different and reminded me of my hippie times. Even though the hot and cold water was still not connected, there used to be a centre, which I believe now doesn't exist anymore.

06:03

The London Lesbian and Gay Centre and I was bit involved in that for a while, and I was involved in women's centres and counseling, in inverted commas, people. Other women, removing women out of abusive situations, relationships. Without knowing I should have called the police instead of going there myself in my DMs, supporting fundamental human rights that were so, so missing, basic human rights. It was a lovely time, yes.

06:44 [PAUL]

So does Sasha miss her activism of 30 years ago, compared to a quieter life today?

06:51 [SASHA]

Oh yes, I even miss my working days because I have so much more to give. But because of my conditions, it's very hard to do what I would want to do. I could do telephone services, supporting somebody with certain knowledge I have, but from afar, you know, not being by their side because I don't drive, not thinking about Covid, just in a regular situation.

07:28

I would love to do that because I have so much more to give. But I can't, so I just have to do what I have to do because of my condition. I have to live day by day and make the best of every day and thankfully, I'm thankful for the internet, all the things I can study up and educate myself.

07:57 [PAUL]

I wanted to know whether Sasha still feels that she's part of the LGBT community in spite of a quieter, more withdrawn lifestyle today.

08:07 [SASHA]

Well, by being a lesbian, yes, I am, but I can't be there physically. You know, so yes and I would love to be more involved, but I have my limits and also my mental health situation, you know, and I've been doing OK.

08:27

Other people are much worse off than me. This is the reverse psychology I always use, see, and it works.

08:36 [PAUL]

So what’s Sasha's sense of difference and diversity at her housing scheme?

08:40 [SASHA]

I think we have one woman here who is of multi-ethnic parentage, but I probably shouldn't say this, and I don't know the right words to, but she's very English.

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You know, it doesn't seem to me she has many connections with her different ethnicity. See, I'm Jewish, but I'm not a practising Jew. But to me, being Jewish is more than a religion. It's ethnicity as well, and history and so many things.

00:09:19

I'm very multifaceted and I like that. But no, we don't have no black people here or Asian. No, we don't.

09:29 [PAUL]

So who, I was interested to learn, would Sasha speak to if, for example, she felt discriminated against at her scheme as a lesbian and indeed as a Jewish lesbian.

09:42 [SASHA]

Myself, there's nobody I could speak to about, my friends and then I might resolve to go into practical mode, depending if it’s a legal situation or if it's something else, I would try to resolve it myself, I'm used to that.

10:04

I've done so for a lot of people, so I'm one of the lucky ones. I have never felt being discriminated against because of being a lesbian. Being Jewish is a bit different than being a lesbian. No. Does that answer your question satisfactorily?

10:25 [PAUL]

Yes, it does. Thank you. But if you couldn't resolve it yourself, who could you turn to?

10:31 [SASHA]

The people who send me the lovely information and the LGBT involvement people from the housing association, even though I've never spoken to any of them I think on the phone even, but yeah, they might have some ideas.

10:50 [PAUL]

And if I was a lesbian or Jewish, would you recommend me to come and live in your scheme?

10:54 [SASHA]

Yeah. Yes. Yes. Despite being very English and rural, it's very laid back, life is about certain segments where you had the ability to make it your own, you make it your own.

11:13

Other things in life you have to adjust to or tolerate to a certain extent, but that's life. But yes, I feel very safe here and very comfortable and relaxed.

11:28

And if I wanted to go on the balcony tomorrow and shout out I'm a lesbian and I don't give a hoot about anybody knowing about it and not being comfortable about it, I'm quite sure I would be able to do that, I'm still a little rebel inside, see.

11:59 [PAUL]

Sasha's comments have lingered with me. There's so much in her observations on life to reflect on that goes to the heart of DICE, the research project, into how diversity is experienced in the context of older people in their housing, and how residents’ identities and different characteristics intersect.

12:19

What strikes me most is a difference between how she lives now, away from the London she loves and where she lived so vitally when she was younger, and the quietness and apparent isolation of her life now at her housing scheme in the home counties.

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Yet, in spite of her health conditions, Sasha confirms that she's still very much in life, connected through her computer to a wider online community. Her apartment gives her a sense of safety from which she can continue her engagement with the world.

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Certainly, her health and COVID have limited her face to face social interactions. Since March 2020 nonetheless, her life online supports her independence. Connectivity through the internet, especially for those of minority identities who may be isolated from support networks where they are living, is such an important thing for schemes to provide.

13:25

Alongside this podcast, you can listen to the experience of four other people and the context of their housing and a sixth one about how and why we've conducted the DICE research project.

Thanks for listening.

13:41 [END]

14:01 [MUSIC END]