

# My policing career

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Q&A: Temporary Deputy Assistant Commissioner Dr Alison Heydari, from the Metropolitan Police Service, talks to Detective Sergeant Jaspreet Athwal about her career – including as a mounted officer and in leadership

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## Family and career beginnings

DS Japsreet Athwal: Tell me about your family background and how that has influenced you.

Temp DAC Dr Alison Heydari: My parents came over from Guyana towards the end of the Windrush era and met in London. I am the eldest of four children. When I reflect on my upbringing, I am convinced that the values set in my childhood led me to a career in policing. I grew up in a very diverse environment. My parents were very community orientated and people from different backgrounds were coming and going all the time.

JA: What led you to a career in policing?

AH: When I was living in Hampshire, I noticed a very small advert (so small you could have blinked and missed it) in the paper for police officer recruitment. Firstly, as a bit of a joke, I mentioned it to my husband, and he supported me to find out more. I started to observe the police in the community and think about me making a difference to the diversity in policing. I went to the local station and asked to go on a ride-along. Once I'd done a ride-along I wanted to go on another! After that I was sure policing was what I wanted to do.

## Unique experiences

JA: Can you tell me something unusual about your policing career?

AH: I am the most senior officer who can ride as a mounted officer in the Met. I have about 20 years of horse-riding experience. When I joined the Met, I was told there was a spot for a senior officer to go on a mounted policing course. I put my hand up for that one and they accepted me

after an initial test. I had the privilege of riding on Coronation day and have also done the Changing of the Guard. There is something special about police officers on horses. Members of the public are drawn to the horse and it's a great engagement opportunity.

## Lessons learnt

JA: What are the three most important lessons you have learnt about career development and leadership?

AH: Humility is important – there's not enough of it in policing. We need the humility to listen to communities who are seldom heard. If we aren't humble, we won't listen and that has all sorts of consequences for public trust, confidence and legitimacy. Procedural justice is essential – the value of being fair to people, respecting our colleagues and the people we serve in our communities. In leadership there is also more room for empathy and kindness. I don't think we are kind enough to each other. Sometimes we need to acknowledge intergenerational trauma and do more to empathise with communities. In policing we need a supportive and kind environment in our workplace to build respect and increase our resilience.

## Police Race Action Plan (PRAP)

JA: Now that you are leading the PRAP, what do you want to bring to this?

AH: In short, enthusiasm and a strong belief that we can make a difference. I want to recognise the good work already under way in policing, working with black communities. I am passionate about developing and delivering the Plan. I want to support police forces and identify gaps where our central PRAP team can help. Ultimately, I'd like us to go out to black communities, raise awareness of what we have achieved and ask them to be heavily involved in shaping the next version of the Plan.

## Support from loved ones

JA: Policing can be challenging with lots of different demands. What's the one thing that has kept you going in your policing career?

AH: It's got to be my husband. He's not from a policing background and he has his own very busy career. He's been an incredible support for me and is the person who has encouraged me to achieve my potential. I also have an incredible small group of trusted friends who support me.

## Advice

JA: What's the best piece of advice anybody has ever given you?

AH: My mum and dad told me to work hard to achieve your goals. I watched them both work incredibly hard with the belief in justice and community and that instilled the importance of a worth ethic in me.

JA: What is the best advice you can give us?

AH: Face your fears and go big! We have our own barriers which can stop us reaching our potential. Thinking big and facing your fears can help with putting yourself forward for things like promotion, lateral development, secondments and lots of other opportunities. I saw an opportunity to teach at John Jay University in New York but I didn't have one of the skills required. I contacted the organiser and explained the other experience I would bring to the role. They encouraged me to apply and I passed the assessment process. Although I experienced imposter feelings, I didn't allow it to stop me from trying. The fear of rejection created by 'the imposter' can be used in a positive way to help you build resilience. Take ownership of your career and leadership journey in policing by focusing on the things you can control. Finally, policing involves responding to a lot of strange things that happen, as well as a lot of sad things too. Every day it's important to chuckle a bit and find some humour with someone.

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