

Greg Charles Transcript

Sammy:

What is your full name?

Gregory Charles:

My name is Gregory Charles. But everyone calls me Greg.

Sammy:

What year were you born?

Gregory Charles:

I was born in 1971.

Sammy:

Onto the next questions. Where were you born?

Gregory Charles:

I was born in Birmingham.

Sammy:

What did your parents do for a living?

Gregory Charles:

My mother worked in a care home as a cook and my father worked in Bradbury's making chocolate.

Sammy:

[inaudible 00:00:36] Please tell us why you decided to work for the Royal Mail.

Gregory Charles:

I'd been in the army for about six years, and when I left I couldn't find a job. And a friend of mine worked in a delivery office in Birmingham and asked me to go along, help out one day. And yeah, I've been there for 27 years now.

Sammy:

Interesting.

Speaker 3:

Greg, could you sit back how you were before?

Sammy:

Sorry.

Speaker 3:

Yeah, just because you lean forward a bit so it threw the... Sorry. Go on Sammy. Nice loud voice, Sammy.

Sammy:

Tell us about any family members who worked for the Royal Mail.

Gregory Charles:

To be fair. I didn't have any members of my family working for Royal Mail, so I can't really.

Sammy:

What did your family members think about you choosing to work for the Royal Mail?

Gregory Charles:

Yeah, they were happy. They was happy that I'd got a job and yeah, more than happy for me to work with Royal Mail. And it was in the area where my family lived in Birmingham. So on some occasions I actually delivered to my mum and dad's house.

Sammy:

Tell us how you started working for the Royal Mail.

Gregory Charles:

As I said, I'd just left the army and a friend of mine, their office where they did they deliver deliveries from were struggling for people to come into work. And they asked me to come in and help them out and yeah, I did. I still work for them.

Sammy:

Okay. Describe the training you did.

Gregory Charles:

The training? It was very hands-on training. So it was turn up, see the amount of letters and parcels and packets, as we call them, to get delivered. And people who already worked there told me what to do, how to sort them out, put them into the different pieces of equipment and then showed me around particular delivery routes. Yeah. So you had a number of people in the work location that would help you understand how it all worked and train you up.

Sammy:

Okay. What was the first job you did with the Royal Mail?

Gregory Charles:

Delivery. Delivering people's letters.

Sammy:

Tell us how you felt on your first days at work.

Gregory Charles:

It's a bit like first days at school, I suppose. The different place, making different friends, but it was a very friendly place. And the good thing is that I knew where it was and I knew all the place. So yeah, it was a little bit scary,

Sammy:

Okay [Crosstalk 00:03:26].

Gregory Charles:

But yeah, as I say, a bit like the first days at school.

Speaker 3:

Hang on, do you want to come down this way? Do you need to get something out of your draw? Hold on, hold on one second, Sammy, we just got a... Can we just grab it quick as you can please?

Speaker 4:

Sir, can you look at the interview, okay?

Speaker 5:

Yeah, yeah. Sure. I'll do it.

Speaker 3:

Go on sir. Sammy take your time, remember not to talk while he's talking. Okay, good stuff so far we go.

Sammy:

Describe your work in those early days.

Gregory Charles:

The work in the early days, it was hard getting used to it. It was the summertime, so it was quite hot. Just waiting for a uniform to come through, getting to know people, getting to know how things worked, how the job operated and making friends. Yeah.

Sammy:

What was that atmosphere like at your work in, those early days?

Gregory Charles:

Very friendly. Yeah. The people helped me out a lot. Yeah. They could see that I needed, obviously, training. Needed to understand how things worked, it was a very small office as well. So it was very much like a family atmosphere. Everybody knew each other, socialized with each other. And there were families that worked in the place as well. So they were very welcoming and helped me out a lot.

Speaker 3:

Sam, try and hold the paper still in between, because it'll pick up on the mic. So try and hold it still in between the questions if you can.

Sammy:

What kinds of people were you working with?

Gregory Charles:

Oh, all sorts. Young, old, different backgrounds, different cultures, different religions. They are very much integrated all from various places in the world. Very good and very cool.

Sammy:

How diverse was your work place when you started?

Gregory Charles:

Oh yeah. As I just said, yeah. To the last question, very diverse people from multi-faith backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, different jobs that they'd had before, different ages. Yeah. Very much a wide spectrum of people.

Sammy:

What sort of equipment did you use in your work?

Gregory Charles:

Not a lot of the equipment. It was pretty much a frame where you put the letters into, and then you had to sort them to number order. And then you'd put it all into a big bag or a trolley, what we call them. So yeah, just two or three pieces of equipment that we'd use.

Sammy:

Describe your uniform.

Gregory Charles:

The uniform was red shirts or blue shirts. So a mix, you'd have different ones for the summer, different ones for the winter. Waterproofs, coat, a thick coat, a thin coat for different sort of whether it was raining or whether it was cold. So yeah, gray trousers and some trainers and shoes that weren't the coolest didn't look too good. Certainly didn't look like we'd want to, but it was a uniform and it was all there to protect us.

Sammy:

Tell us about the skills you needed for your job.

Gregory Charles:

To be able to read, write, know numbers, orders and things like that. Be able to communicate with customers. I mean, as you would do now, when we knock on your doors and to give you parcels and be able to be respectful of people, so good communication skills and be able to read and write.

Sammy:

Describe a typical day at your work.

Gregory Charles:

A typical day? A typical day we start very early. When I first started, would probably get up about four o'clock in the morning, get a couple of buses into work, get into work and start work at five o'clock. And then there'd be a lot of letters and parcels to sort, and we'd sort them all onto the frames and into the segments that then goes on to the individual range that we would do.

And yeah, just making sure that we came, did all the work and got it all prepared, and in order, ready for us to go out on to delivery.

Speaker 3:

Sam, can I just show you something? When you've asked the question just put it on the list [inaudible 00:08:18].

Sammy:

[inaudible 00:08:18] Things about your work?

Gregory Charles:

Working with people. I like to work with people. I like to talk to people. I like to be in people's company. So one of the best things was working with people, and working with the people that are was, and then being outdoors, you can't beat being outdoors.

Especially in this weather.

Sammy:

What were the difficult things about your work?

Gregory Charles:

Getting up early, in the cold, in the rain, in the wet, and then getting into work and getting more cold and wet when we're out on delivery. That's worst thing, getting cold and wet.

Sammy:

Can you tell us any discoloration you experienced or witnessed?

Gregory Charles:

Discrimination? I've been very fortunate. I've never been discriminated against. Witnessed discrimination? I've not witnessed discrimination, but I've had to deal with aspects of discrimination for people in a role that I do now, where people have said some hurtful things to people that have had to be dealt with and dealt with by the management in there. But myself? I haven't come across it myself. I've never been somebody that's been discriminated against. But yeah, it does happen unfortunately, and it has to be dealt with.

Sammy:

Tell us a story that stands out from your working life.

Gregory Charles:

A story that stands out. One of my biggest things is Christmas. Christmas, where it's such an exciting time, whether you're young or old. The amount of work that we have to do, and my first Christmas ever... Through December, we get lots and lots of letters and cards and parcels, more parcels than you can ever imagine that especially in our days. And that all has to get delivered, obviously. So we can be in early in the morning and work all the way through.

The first Christmas I had, I remember it was two weeks, pretty much snow everywhere. I'm working through the cold and the snow with all the letters and the parcels that we had to deliver. And this was in 1994. That there, that has stuck with me ever since, and whilst it's such an exciting time for everybody that's experiencing it, for the postie, it's hard work, very hard work. And you're glad when Christmas Eve comes and you've delivered everything and then you can go home and enjoy Christmas with the family. But yeah, Christmas is one of those. I always remember the first Christmas I ever had.

Sammy:

What were some of the naughty things people did at work?

Gregory Charles:

Naughty things that they did? I know of a story where they picked up the managers' Mini and put it inside a delivery office, and the managers then come back and couldn't find his car, and the car is actually inside the delivery office in the working environment. And he can't get it back out because everybody's gone home. There's times, we used to have bags where all the parcels are coming and we'd hook them on to things that take the bags in the building. I've seen people that have been hooked onto them and then go along the conveyor belt. Yeah? And the part of it triggers the conveyor belt and triggers the bag. And then people come sliding down the ramp into where the vans are kept and everything like that. So yeah, people do some naughty things. Probably wouldn't get away with it these days under health and safety.

But yeah, I've see some strange and naughty things.

Sammy:

Can I ask briefly for your different jobs you did while working for the Royal Mail?

Gregory Charles:

Different jobs? Well, I've done two real jobs and that was delivering all the works. Walking delivery, postal worker. And then the one that I've done for the main bulk of time now is I work for the union, that looks after the postal workers. So looked after the men and the women in the job. If they get themselves into trouble, or if they have to go off sick and they need to be looked after, I do that role now, do that job now. But it's very rewarding. So two aspects. One is actually doing the work and delivering. The other role that I've done is looking after people.

Sammy:

Tell us your favorite job.

Gregory Charles:

My favorite job. My favorite job is the one that I do now. And that's looking after people for the trade union. I love being a postal worker. I love working for Royal Mail and very proud of working for Royal

Mail, but I'm very proud of looking after people in the workplace, making sure that they're looked after and making sure that they're okay. And they're all right.

Sammy:

How did you progress in the Royal Mail?

Gregory Charles:

For me, I progressed from being a delivery person, somebody that delivered the letters, and then someone asking me one day to attend some meetings to do with the union and looking after people. And then yeah. Progressed through the trade union, the communication workers union through to being what we call now, a branch secretary. So I look after a lot of people across South West London. All postal workers, that's so I look after.

Speaker 3:

Can I just ask, because I've got the notes here. Could you talk to Sammy, because I know you started in Birmingham, but just how you came to move to London and work in which office you worked in?

Gregory Charles:

Yeah.

Speaker 3:

Talk to him a bit about that please.

Gregory Charles:

Yeah. As I say, I first started in a place called Selly Oak, which is where I was born and where I come from. That was the first delivery office I worked in. I worked there for about 12 months, but my then lived in London and we were going to have a baby. So I needed to move from Birmingham to London. I came down to a place called Wandsworth. South West 18, in Southwest. I London had an interview and they liked what I was saying, liked me. And they said, "Yeah, come and work in that delivery office." So I worked in Birmingham for probably about 12 months, and then I got a move to Southwest London and that's my workplace ever since.

Sammy:

Tell us about your recent relationships with your colleagues.

Gregory Charles:

I have a good relationship. We have a lot of fun. Yeah. As I said previously, one of the main things in Royal Mail and working in delivery offices and working with people, is that we have a lot of fun. We have a good camaraderie, a lot of, a word that people use now, a lot of banter. And yeah, it's good fun. As I said, one of the best things is working with people that you get on with and having a good old laugh.

Sammy:

Tell us about your experiences of joining clubs at work.

Gregory Charles:

Joining clubs?

What we used to do was have a lot of football clubs, cricket clubs, and social clubs, a lot of entertaining at Christmas time where families would come together. So yeah, we still try to do that. Unfortunately, because of the way the work's gone, there's a lot of work around in it's a lot more intense. It's a lot harder to actually enjoy those times, but yeah, we still try and meet up and play football and cricket.

Certainly at Christmas, again, we do a lot of socializing. We do a lot of work for charities as well. So we're always looking to make sure that we're looking after people with charity work.

Sammy:

Tell us about any other opportunities to socialize.

Gregory Charles:

Any opportunities to socialize?

Speaker 3:

Through work.

Gregory Charles:

Through work? Let me say, we'll take every opportunity to socialize. So any opportunity that arises, whether it's birthdays, Christmas, or any other celebrations, we'll always socialize. Whether that's together in the office, we mark a lot of religious celebrations in our offices. So whether it be Christian or Eid, we would celebrate and people bring in food and drinks and stuff like that. We try to celebrate every occasion. Any occasion.

Sammy:

What made you join the union?

Gregory Charles:

The union? Well, I was always interested in trade unions. I think it's more the fact that I like to be involved. I like to know what's going on. I like to have my say and it, that was the position and the avenue to enable me to do that. And people asked me if I wanted to get involved as well. I think they thought I've got a lot to say, and they thought they could use me as almost their mouthpiece for them, which in some regards that is true. But yeah, it was a good opportunity to know what's going on and to have an influence in the workplace.

Sammy:

Why is the union important for postal workers?

Gregory Charles:

Why is it important for postal workers? Very much what I've just said, having an influence, you can't believe how much of an importance to be involved in your own workplace. Being involved in terms of the responsibility of making decisions and having an influence with making those decisions and making

sure that people have their say and they have a right to say something and they have the right to know what's going on. So yeah. It's so important. A trade union, a union role within the workplace.

Sammy:

What part did union play in your life?

Gregory Charles:

I think my wife would probably say that the trade unions become my life. As the major play in my life. But it sort of takes a life of itself and it takes over what you're thinking and what you say and what you do, but for a good reason, for a very good reason. But as I say, I think, sometimes it might be a bit too much. Certainly for my wife, anyway.

Sammy:

Tell us about any strikes or despite you're involved with.

Speaker 3:

Disputes.

Sammy:

Disputes you were involved with.

Gregory Charles:

Oh, strikes and disputes? I think we have strikes and disputes pretty much every week, in Royal Mail. Some of the big ones would have been national ones, probably dating back to 2003, 2007, 2009, where we would organize our workplaces to vote yes in national industrial action ballots.

So if there was a dispute, if there was a problem within the workplace, we would organize the workers around those reasons and why it's important to fight on those terms and vote yes, for industrial action.

Some of the localized ones will be over particular issues. If they believe somebody is being treated unfairly, the people working in that office would come together to look after that individual. And I would hopefully help to organize and influence that and then look to resolve the issues. So there's been many, many strikes and disputes in Royal Mail.

Sammy:

What was the most memorable moment at the post office?

Gregory Charles:

Most memorable? That's a big question. Most memorable moment for me would probably be my first union meeting, and going to the meeting and listening to people that have been doing that job for a long time and understanding what it was all about and realizing that's what I wanted to do. So in May, 1997, my first union meeting, that was probably the most memorable time to say, "Yeah, that's what I want to do."

Sammy:

What was your most challenging moment at the post office?

Gregory Charles:

1994 Christmas, as I said before, that first Christmas, that I just didn't know what to expect. Cold weather, snow on the floor, working 10, 12 hours a day. Delivering all your Christmas cards and your Christmas presents, that's challenging. Every Christmas is challenging, probably superseded, now. We've, COVID what we've just been through.

The last year, the last 18 months, you can't plan for it. You couldn't foresee it. And it was scary for some people because we were still working all the way through, and then looking after people, some people took it in their stride and didn't mind, and it was fine, but some people were very nervous, especially people that had vulnerable people at home, but that were having to come into work every single day. So in terms of challenging, personally, those two elements, the one that really sort of started back in Christmas, 1994, and then the last 18 months, hopefully that we're now seen that we're coming out of the back of. But yeah, 18 months worth of very challenging times.

Sammy:

Over your working life, what were the main challenges at work?

Speaker 3:

Changes.

Sammy:

Changes at work?

Gregory Charles:

Main changes? How we work. We've changed a few times. When I first started, we would do two deliveries. So we'd go out first thing in the morning, and then later in the morning, so we'd deliver letters and parcels twice a day. We changed that in 2003, to only once. So we get all our work and take it out all at the same time. So that was a big, massive change for us. And the change that we're now going through, the change from the fact that we don't get as many letters anymore, but we get lots and lots of parcels.

And over the last sort of 12 months, because of online shopping and you guys always shopping online and your mums and dads always shopping online, that were getting loads and loads of parcels. So we're having to change the way we do things now. We're going from mainly delivering letters to now mainly delivering parcels. So that's a big, massive change that we're going through. And a big challenge for us going through now.

Sammy:

In what way do you think the job has improved?

Gregory Charles:

Has improved? The pay, for a start. The pay over the last probably 10 years or so, it would have been improved considerably, quite a lot. The general terms and conditions that the union has fought for over that period of time as well, for protections of us, people in work. And we've tried to build on the

protections that were built for generations to come as well. So postal workers, like yourself might turn around and say, "You know what? I've spoken to all those ex postal workers and current postal workers. I might want a job in Royal Mail and deliver letters."

So the changes that we're trying to do now, are making sure that you guys are the future and you've got jobs to go to.

Speaker 3:

[inaudible 00:25:49]

Sammy:

In what ways has it got worse?

Gregory Charles:

It's hard. It's hard work the intensity of the work and where we change from the government owning Royal Mail, so people owning Royal Mail, what we call publicly owned company. It was owned by the population. It changed over to what we call a private ownership. So there're certain groups of people that now own it. Yeah?

And what they want is to earn a lot of money from it. So the way they earn a lot of money is by putting pressure onto us that are doing the job, that's probably the hardest and the worst bit that's happened for us. That it has changed being something that is owned by everybody, for the benefit of everybody to be an owned by a certain amount of people, for the benefit of them. And we've had to change how we do things and change the way we work to try and suit them and earn them money when it should be being earned for the good of the service and the good of the people.

Sammy:

What would you think if your child wants to work for Royal Mail?

Gregory Charles:

I'd be happy. I'd be happy for them. Yeah, very much so. I would definitely say it's a good job. That's what we want to maintain and make sure that there is a good job for the next younger generations coming through. It's a big employer. There's a lot of people that are employed by Royal Mail. and that's the way we want it to remain and grow as well.

Sammy:

If you were the boss of Royal Mail, what changes would you make?

Gregory Charles:

If I was the boss? Wow. If I was the boss, I'd probably pay myself a little bit more money, but no, I would make sure that people are protected, give them good terms and conditions, give them the right equipment, so they're safe in work. Probably look to give them some more time off so they can get more holidays with their families and enjoy their families more. So they're the big ones. Just looking after the people, making them proud to work for Royal Mail.

Sammy:

The last question, looking back over your working life, what has meant to you?

Gregory Charles:

It's meant pretty much everything. It's what enables me to pay the bills, keep a roof over my head. Yeah. It's proud to work for the Royal Mail, work for something that had such history behind it. We've got over 500 years worth of history that people understand.

People like it, people care about their posties walking down the street and you like your Christmas presents and your cards and birthday cards, and everything. Especially on those special occasions. So yeah, it means a great deal. And I would expect most people working in Royal Mail would say the same. It means a lot.

Sammy:

Thank you very much for answering my questions. Is there anything you would like to talk about that we've not covered in our questions?

Gregory Charles:

No. I think you've covered it all adequately. Very, very good.

Speaker 3:

I think we can go to the crew for questions. Can I just ask a quick one? I've told you all my notes I've taking because I'd spoken to Greg already. You gave me a really lovely description of when you were working as a postie to in London about delivering on Henry Dickens estate, people like their posties, dog attacks, training for the marathon. Just tell us all the pros and cons of being a postie take us through that.

Gregory Charles:

There was a place in Wandsworth called the Henry Prince estate, and there's probably in the region of 1500 steps. There's all the blocks have got no lifts. So when you go into the blocks, you've got to go up literally every single step. I do a lot of running, so I do a lot of marathons. So I particularly chose this route to help me train for the marathons. And no one else really wants you to do it because it's an estate that is quite notorious for dogs roaming free.

You would literally open doors and start shouting down corridors to make sure that people have closed their doors and the dogs aren't running and roaming free. There's been a few occasions, and not only myself, but other people where we've been chased out of blocks by dogs. It's a common occurrence. But yeah, Henry Prince, estate it's actually where the Mayor Sadiq Kahn comes from. That is where he was brought up in Wandsworth.

Speaker 3:

And then you also talked a bit about just what you enjoyed about working outdoors, being your own boss, the people, your commute, your relationship also with people you deliver to. Speak a bit about that.

Gregory Charles:

Yeah. Yeah.

When you're on a route, on a particular round for a long time, you get to know all of your customers. And again, it's a little story I'm reminded of a little old lady that always delivering. It would have been in the late '90s, and it was Christmas and all I heard was, "Postie, can you come back, please." And I thought, "Oh no, what have I done? Have I delivered the wrong parcel or wrong letter," or something like that.

And I've gone back to the door and she's given me what we call the Christmas tip. So people tip us at Christmas and say, thank you for all the work that we've done over the year. And the tip was a plate. And I thought it might be a bit of money, a card, you know, a bottle of wine or something, but it was a dining plate in a plastic carrier bag. And I looked at it and I was, "Thank you very much." I didn't really know what I was going to do with this plate, but it just showed even people that hadn't got a lot of money appreciate what the postal workers do. And that's mutual. When you get to know your customers, there's a rapport and a respect that you build up. So that was good fun.

Speaker 3:

Okay. We've got a couple more minutes before because Greg's going to need to get back to work, but any questions? So we're going to ask you questions, but if you can answer towards Sammy, please?

Gregory Charles:

Yeah.

Speaker 3:

Just for consistency and yeah, obviously take a drink. So Eva?

Eva:

Okay.

My question is when you were younger, did you expect you to be a postal worker at all?

Gregory Charles:

No. When I was younger and at school, as you guys are, I wasn't really thinking about what I was going to do until obviously the, the last couple of years of the schooling. But it wasn't something I'd originally thought about doing.

But what I would say is, I'm so glad that once I'd got out of the army, one of my friends was doing it and they asked me to do it. And as I say, it's one of those jobs. And a lot of people will say that they think, "Oh, I'll do it for three, six months as a little bit of a stop gap." And then you end up being there for 27, 30, 40 years. And it just becomes a way of life for you.

Speaker 3:

Just to date it, could you tell Sammy when privatization happened? Just cause you talked about, but didn't put a date.

Gregory Charles:

Well, let me think privatization. Well, they tried to privatize this all the way back from about 1996 and then the actual privatization came about 2013.

Yeah. Around about 2013. So it changed from what I said that it was owned by everybody. Ran by the government, but owned by everybody. And then it changed that people could buy what we call shares and big conglomerates of people. A lot people that are rich, people that have got a lot of money, buy lots and lots of shares. And then what they expect is that what we earn, what we make in money, they get a return on owning part of Royal Mail.

Speaker 3:

Dina, have you got a question?

Dina:

Have you ever dealt with something with a famous person? Have you delivered anything to a famous person.

Gregory Charles:

A half, but I don't think you'd know them. So they're probably famous to us. A guy called Simon West, who is a very famous actor. We delivered to him in Wandsworth. Ainsley Harriet, no? Ainsley Harriott is a very famous chef, he's actually on television at the moment as well. I'll tell you who you might have heard of Frank Bruno.

Dina:

No.

Gregory Charles:

No? Okay. Well, I'm not impressing anyone here am I?

Speaker 3:

You're impressing me.

Gregory Charles:

Yeah. But yeah, there's quite a few famous people that of a certain generation would know. But I'm trying to think of anybody that you guys would know. Oh no, not off the top of...

Speaker 3:

If you'd delivered to Justin Bieber?

Gregory Charles:

Justin Bieber no, no, I've never delivered in Canada. So I think he's from Canada, but now probably not famous in terms of you guys, but yeah. I'll tell you who lives in Wandsworth?

Gordon Ramsey. Yeah. So Gordon Ramsey. And I'll tell you a little story about Gordon Ramsey.

Speaker 3:

It's 20 past.

Gregory Charles:

I tell you this story, and then I've got to shoot off. He's obviously very good friends with David Beckham. So the guy who delivers to Gordon Ramsey is a Man United fan. Gordon Ramsey got hold of a shirt from David Beckham and signed it from David Becker and Gordon Ramsey, and gave it to one of my friends who works in Wandsworth.

So if you're impressed with Gordon Ramsey and David Beckham, then yeah. I was impressed with that and I forgot that one, but yeah, because that wasn't me, I was quite jealous it wasn't me.