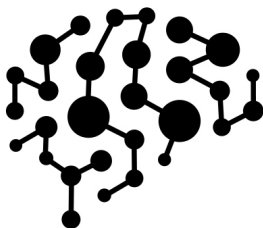


ONE GOLDEN NUGGET



**HOW TO
SURVIVE
AND
THRIVE
VOLUME III**

**JOE FOSTER, FOUNDER OF REEBOK,
RETURNS WITH POWERFUL NEW STORIES OF
RESILIENCE AND INNOVATION, CHANGING THE
WORLD ONE PAGE AT A TIME.**

Joe Foster



FATIMA WHITBREAD, MBE

Double Olympic Medallist, Javelin World Champion,
and Founder of Fatima's UK Campaign

If anyone truly embodies the spirit of *Survive and Thrive*, it's Fatima Whitbread. From the moment she was born, she was fighting to survive. Her story is raw and powerful, one that could have easily broken her faith in humanity. But rather than dwell in the darkness, Fatima chose to find light in the pain, to focus on the good, and to rise above it all. Her journey is nothing short of extraordinary and a powerful testament to the resilience of the human spirit.

As a baby, Fatima was left to die in an abandoned flat in Hackney, London. By the time a concerned neighbour alerted the police and they broke down the door, her condition was so critical that it took doctors seven months to treat the effects of malnutrition and severe nappy rash. Nevertheless, Fatima fought to live. At just seven months old, she was made a ward of court, beginning a fourteen-year journey through the UK care system. Her first placement was a residential care home in Hertfordshire, housing twenty-five children — a place she describes as “more like an institution” than a home.

Now a passionate advocate for care-experienced children, Fatima speaks openly about the lasting impact of such an upbringing. “When children grow up in the care system,” she explains, “they carry deep trauma. Many believe it was their fault they were abandoned, and that belief can have a profound effect on their mental health.”

When she reflects on her own experience, Fatima paints a heartbreaking picture of children “wailing for their mummies,” and remembers how, every time a visitor came to the care home, she would ask if it was her mother coming to take her home. It wasn't until she was five years old that she was told the painful truth.



This was during the 1960s, well before experts began to consider the emotional needs of children in care. One morning, a houseparent told five-year-old Fatima that her mother would be coming to collect her and that she would be joining her half-brother and sister in another care home. She had never met or heard from any relatives before, and the other children had become like siblings to her. The prospect of being suddenly uprooted to live with strangers in an unfamiliar place was not only bewildering, it was deeply distressing.

Describing a particularly heartbreaking detail, Fatima recalls having no belongings. Everything was communal, even the clothes. At five years old, when most children's bedrooms are filled with toys, she had just one item to call her own. "Corrie, my sixteen-year-old helper's mum, made me a little dress," she shares. "So when I had to leave, I took my dress in a little brown paper bag."

As she approached the office, Fatima vividly remembers "a strong waft of perfume, and in came a large lady with black, curly hair and a gold tooth." She was driven down to Ockendon in floods of tears. "Not a word was spoken to me by my biological mother," she explains.

When they arrived at the new care home, Fatima was introduced to her half-sister and brother. The two girls began playing on a climbing frame, but just as Fatima placed her foot on the first rung, she felt a sudden thud against her chest. Her biological mother had yanked her back and, drawing a finger across her throat, warned, "Look after your sister, or I'll cut your throat." It was the first thing her mother ever said to her.

Her sense of isolation only deepened when Fatima's half-siblings rushed to their mother, speaking to her in their shared mother tongue of Turkish/Cypriot. "I realised then, that my siblings knew my mother, and I didn't," she shares.

Although this home housed fewer children, just fourteen, Fatima is still haunted by what she describes as a "sea of emotion: nightmares, crying, waking and calling out for mummy, and wetting the beds."



**"Family is not simply important,
it's everything."**



It was these early, harrowing experiences that inspired Fatima to found her charity, Fatima's UK Campaign, which is dedicated to improving life outcomes for children in the care system. "I've been in the system since the sixties, and not much has really changed in terms of policy," she says. One of the key issues her charity highlights is the arbitrary cut-off at age eighteen, when young people are expected to leave their care homes, often without the support or stability they need to build a new life for themselves.



Fatima argues that a more integrated approach to the care system is urgently needed. "Nobody talks to one another," she says. "They work in silos, and it doesn't serve the purpose it should." She points to the alarming instability faced by many young people in care, some of whom are moved between homes thirty or forty times before leaving the system. This constant upheaval severely disrupts their education, with only around a third going on to pursue further study. "They're set up to struggle from the outset," she explains. With no stability in any area of their lives, it is sad but unsurprising that 33% of adults who leave the care system eventually become homeless.



Fatima advocates for early intervention, not just within the care system, but far beyond it. This means fostering collaboration, building partnerships, sharing best practices, and rolling it out nationwide. "The most important thing we can do for our young people is help shape who and what they

become. In turn, that shapes the future of our society,” she explains. For that to happen, she stresses, early intervention is absolutely crucial.

Fatima remembers finally starting to feel settled in her new care home with her half-siblings when staff informed them that their biological mother wanted to see if the children might be able to live with her. All three were sent to her house for a trial stay.

After a week, Fatima was brought back to the care home alone. She recalls her mother telling her that she didn’t want her and didn’t love her. Even more striking, she notes, was the reaction of the helpers in the care home. No one acknowledged the emotional turmoil she must have been going through.

One person who helped shape Fatima’s future was Auntie Rae, a helper in her care home. When Fatima asked if she would be her “mummy,” Auntie Rae’s gentle, reassuring response helped Fatima shift from merely surviving to eventually truly thriving.

Auntie Rae encouraged Fatima to look after the younger children in the home when she wasn’t around, and Fatima took the role to heart. “I was ten years old, and would call out any injustice. If anyone woke up crying, I’d get up and comfort them. I’d read them bedtime stories and take care of their emotional needs,” she explains. In turn, she found that her warmth was reciprocated. “It taught me a lot about giving and receiving,” she shares.



**“The question isn’t who’s going to let you;
it’s who’s going to stop you.”**

In caring for others, Fatima had found a sense of purpose, and her narrative began to shift. “I no longer felt like a victim of my circumstances,” she explains. But of course, as a ten-year-old who had been rejected by her mother not once, but twice, the trauma must still have been overwhelming.

Thankfully, as she grew up, Fatima found a powerful outlet in sport. It gave her a sense of freedom and self-confidence and helped her envision a brighter future. As she began to thrive, her confidence blossomed, and she became well-liked among her peers. “Sport taught me so many wonderful things,” Fatima says. “I was team captain most of the time, and that helped me develop essential life skills like organisation, time management, communication, and leadership.”

Sport opened doors for Fatima, both financially, and in far more meaningful ways. While she had always relied on the unwavering love of Auntie Rae, it was her javelin coach, Margaret Whitbread, who gave her something even more valuable than money: a true sense of family and belonging.

At fourteen, Fatima went to live with the Whitbread family, Margaret and John, along with their sons, Gregg and Kirk. Though she remained close to Auntie Rae, Fatima had finally found the stable, loving environment she had always longed for.

She recalls a particularly formative



moment: being eleven years old when she was handed a pair of sports shoes and a javelin by the woman who, just three years later, she would proudly call “Mum.” Apart from the little handmade dress she’d once been given as a child, it was the first real gift she had ever received, the first thing that truly belonged to her. The symbolism wasn’t lost on her then, and it still isn’t now. Even after all these years, with the Whitbread family still by her side, Fatima treasures those items. They weren’t just sports gear, they were a promise of possibility, and the beginning of a new life.

With the nurturing support of her new mother, Margaret, she rose to become a world-class athlete, becoming the first British woman to set a javelin world record in 1986 and the first to win gold in the event in 1987, an achievement that earned her an MBE. She went on to win multiple Sports Personality of the Year awards for her accomplishments both on and off the field, and has remained committed to using her platform to advocate for vulnerable children navigating the care system today.

Despite her eventual success, Fatima still remembers being told by those in authority at the care home that she would never amount to anything. After enduring abandonment, abuse, neglect, and cruelty, she somehow found the strength and determination to pursue her dreams and to break the cycle.





**“You are more than you appear
to be. All the world’s strength
and power rests inside you.”**



Now, she is committed to offering that same helping hand to the next generation, multiplying its impact across the nation. Fatima believes that every young person in care deserves a champion, someone who believes in them, guides them, and helps them thrive.

A series of injuries forced Fatima into early retirement, but she didn't step away from the sport she loved. Instead, she launched the first sports marketing company in Europe dedicated solely to track and field. Working closely with local authorities and athletics clubs, she began scouting for the next generation of stars, the future Fatima Whitbreads, Steve Cram, Ovetts, and Coes. "We had to start at the bottom of the pyramid and build our way up, and I loved that," she says.

Fatima also saw the need to engage schools and raise awareness of specialist events. "So I used to run development programmes at the local track and invite twelve schools from the surrounding area. Each would bring a minibus full of kids, and we'd spend the day introducing them to athletics in a hands-on way," she explains. "I'd bring in top athletes, people like Linford Christie, and Colin Jackson, and during the lunch break, we'd all sit in the stands and hold a Q&A session. The kids got to ask us anything they wanted. It was a brilliant way to motivate and inspire them."

Just as she advocates for change in the care system, Fatima built a joined-up approach to athletics, one rooted in collaboration and communication. “There was a clear pathway for young talent,” she explains. “When teachers spotted someone with potential, they signposted them to local athletic clubs. It was all about giving kids the best chance.”

Beyond the golds and silvers, one of Fatima’s proudest moments was becoming a mum at the age of thirty-seven. “I wanted to break the cycle in terms of being a good mum, and give my son the best that I could,” she says. A passionate book lover, Fatima placed great importance on education while raising her son, Ryan, who went on to earn a first-class honours degree in economics from Loughborough University. He now works in the City as a registered wealth investment manager. It’s clear how proud Fatima is of the “lovely, kind, rounded young man” she has raised.

As a mother, Fatima makes a heartfelt appeal to the world’s leaders: “We’ve lived through an era marked by some of the poorest leadership in history. What’s missing today is humanity and kindness. It’s those values we urgently need to instil in our young people if we want a better future. It’s so important that we reinstall humanity and bring back stronger communities and kinder societies,” she says. “And if the leaders aren’t doing that, then we, as society, need to.”

For Fatima, it has been a journey of deep self-growth. “Getting to know who I am, understanding my limits, and discovering how I might help others, that kind of growth is priceless. I always say it’s not the external things that matter most. It’s not about the car you drive or the holidays you take, those are nice, of course, but they’re not life’s true treasures. What really counts are the people around you: your family, your friends, and the time and care you give each other. That’s what fills your soul. That’s what lasts. And I suppose, when it comes down to it, that’s me in a nutshell.”



**“Love, strength, and kindness
will make the world complete.”**



**“It’s OK to not be OK, and it’s OK to talk about
it. Mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of,
but stigma and bias shame us all.”**



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