

# THE BIG ISSUE

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# Alternative Roots

Paul Atherton outside his apartment



## TV Calling

An ex-homeless man now directs a TV company with a difference

**D**ressed sharply in a black suit and trilby, Paul Atherton (above) is sitting on the leather sofa of his large apartment overlooking the river Thames. To say that his life has been an extraordinary one would be an understatement. The founder of Simple TV Productions, his career path has ranged from pulling pints to assessing benefit claims and delivering silk underwear to order – he once spent six months living in a lift.

Now celebrating his fourth year in business as the managing director of Simple TV, whose mission is to bring about change on social issues, Atherton has just launched his domestic violence docudrama, *Silent Voices*, on DVD to raise funds for the National Centre For Domestic Violence. "We have got such a huge response from the public for *Silent Voices*," says Atherton. "I didn't realise so many people had experienced domestic violence."

Born in 1968 "to two white parents the wrong shade of brown", Atherton was abandoned in a tent in a derelict airport in Cardiff. He was found and fostered by a white family in the Welsh village of Ystrad Mynach, where he was "the only black in the village".

His first experience of homelessness came after having been in and out of children's care homes when, aged 18, his relationship with an older woman broke down. He moved into the

lift shaft of a Cardiff car park, where he lived off food he found in bins.

"It was enormously cathartic," he says. "I had no life plan. I just lived a day-to-day existence. I had to find out who the hell I was and where I wanted to sit in the world."

It was an experience he was to repeat twice more, spending months sleeping in parks, on piers and in doss houses, before he fulfilled a promise to his foster mum and did a degree at Cardiff Business School. Atherton found he had a natural business sense, and so started his personal reinvention as an entrepreneur.

**"I had to find out who the hell I was and where I wanted to sit in the world"**

In 2004 he set up his TV production company to make use of what he believes is "the most powerful but underused communication device devised by mankind". Now working on a documentary called *Black Bollocks*, a retaliation against political correctness gone wrong, he hopes to swap the "fodder" filling the airwaves with programmes that "get the British public thinking".

So, what have living at the two extremes of British society taught him? "That most of our everyday lives are nonsense," he laughs. "We go to such lengths to pursue these things that actually have no value, and certainly don't bring us happiness."

For more information on *Silent Voices* go to [www.simpletvproductions.co.uk](http://www.simpletvproductions.co.uk) and [www.ncdv.org.uk](http://www.ncdv.org.uk)

## Flower Power

Not-for-profit stall trains young unemployed in business skills



**A** revolutionary flower stall is transforming the lives of young people in London. Situated outside St Anselm's Church in Kennington Cross, south London, the not-for-profit stall is training unemployed people aged between 16 and 25 in money management, marketing, customer service and communications.

Selling everything from roses to Christmas trees, many of those involved have recently left prison or been homeless, and are gaining invaluable experience about the working world.

Jan Tomlinson, who oversees the project, said: "They often arrive expecting to just stand here and sell flowers, so they get a bit of a shock when they have to work out the VAT and retail price of all the stock and get involved with the marketing. They are good kids, though, and all they need is to be given an opportunity."

Since opening in May this year, nine trainees have worked on the stall, and it has proved a successful stepping stone to employment. Those completing the four-week programme have gone on to win apprenticeships at Jamie Oliver's Fifteen restaurant, returned to college, and others have been inspired to find paid work.

Tomlinson said: "Often people have not trusted these young people, and they have never been given any responsibility. I let them run the stall pretty much on their own and they take responsibility for everything, which really builds their self esteem."

The popularity of the stall among the local community has won them commissions for floral displays around the borough, as well as regular arrangements for St Anselm's church. A highlight of their work for the church was when they were asked to do the flowers for the funeral of the late Lord Thompson, a minister in Harold Wilson's government, who died in October.

The current flower stall workers are 20-year-old Abraham Habte Michael and 18-year-old Phearon Williams, who live in a hostel for the homeless in Elephant and Castle, also in south London. Williams said: "It's really good fun because you learn new skills and meet new people every day. It's a new experience and it's on my CV. I have a job interview lined up at Argos on Wednesday – I'm really hoping to get that and start working."

Visit the flower stall outside St Anselm's Church, Kennington Cross, on Fridays, 11am-7pm and Saturdays, 10am-4pm