

RD PEOPLE

The two teenagers were locked in a spiral of racist violence. What happened next astonished them both

From Gang Rivals to Best Mates

BY NICK MORGAN

ON HIS THIRD DAY at secondary school in Peterborough, Ricki Ulliot was warned by his older brother Wane that a gang of Asians were “kicking off”. At 12, one of the oldest in his year, Ricki was unimpressed. “Pakis don’t scare me.”

Later that day he was talking to a friend outside the dinner hall. Ricki heard his name called and looked up. A tall Asian boy from the upper years was glaring at him. “You’re Ulliot junior, aren’t you?” Before Ricki could reply he was falling to the floor screaming, reaching for the backs of his legs—when he brought his hands back, the palms were smeared in blood.

Wane had a reputation for fighting Asians and Ricki was



Shaahid Latif (left) and Ricki Ulliot hated each other for years

inevitably both a soft target and a way to settle old scores. A plank with five nails hammered through it was handed in to teachers. They were told it had been found in a nearby wood. The nails matched the deep wounds in Ricki's calves. No witnesses came forward and the culprits were never caught.

From that point, Ricki would freely call himself a racist. He started to swear at Asians and call them abusive names. He relished the aggravation: with little effort he earned respect and friends.

But his reputation began to get him into serious trouble. He was playing football when a small white boy came up and said, "A gang of Asians has been picking on me. Can you talk to them and make them stop?"

This was the first of many times Ricki was asked to intervene—all too often these talks turned into fights. As he got older the violence became more adult—and Ricki knew that some of the older Asian boys carried knives and hammers.

SHAAHID LATIF, like Ricki, had been picked on at school, not only because he was Asian but because he was overweight. When he was 12 his dad sent him to the local gym to train. Shaahid worked hard, sweating on the bench, pushing weights until his arms ached. Then he'd put on boxing gloves and attack the punchbag. By the time he was 14, he was fit, lean and fast.

A local nightclub called Liquid held "nappy nights" when the bar served

non-alcoholic drinks and the atmosphere was normally positive. Just after 10pm on one of these nights, Shaahid saw Ricki for the first time. He knew the white boy's reputation as a bully and racist. There was instant animosity.

As music boomed, dirty looks were exchanged. Shaahid walked up to Ricki and said, "What's the problem?" There was no reply. "Do you want to fight?" Still no reply. Shaahid smiled and began to turn away. From the corner of his eye he saw Ricki's right fist pull back. Shaahid ducked and the punch missed. Suddenly fists were flying between Ricki's and Shaahid's rival groups.

They were dragged apart by bouncers and held in separate rooms until police arrived. Ricki claimed Shaahid's gang were the aggressors and they were charged with affray. After a six-month court case, the charges against Shaahid were eventually thrown out; but Ricki had made himself an enemy.

In fact, Ricki found that being a "name" put him at risk, particularly after he found his name and photo on a hit list on an Asian hate website. Ricki's mother cried every day when he left for school.

Shortly after he turned 16, Ricki was visiting a friend at Jack Hunt School. It was 3pm and the grounds were busy. Someone shouted Ricki's name—there was panic in the voice. His friends were pointing at a black car that had just pulled up. A group of Asians in jeans and hoodies jumped out and walked towards him. Then a hatchback pulled up and more Asians stepped out. Turning to escape, Ricki found a third group.

Some of the Asians pulled hammers

from their jackets; others swung leather belts with large metal buckles. Ricki buried his head in his arms as blows fell furiously. When the attack stopped, Ricki's face was swollen, his lip split and his nose gushing blood. Even his eyes were bleeding. "They didn't want to kill me," Ricki thought grimly, "just to do some damage."

Ricki gave the names of nine Asians to the police; one was Shaahid, who,

one side and a thick hedge to the other. He looked up to see a group of Asians walking towards him. Turning, he saw a gang of white youths coming up behind. He knew what to expect. His girlfriend ran for the bushes, pleading with him to come, but Shaahid shook his head. He hadn't been looking for trouble, but it had found him.

After this fight Shaahid was permanently expelled. He was enraged; a fight

Shaahid was shocked to be paired with Ricki, the boy who'd caused so much trouble

Ricki knew, attended Jack Hunt School. Shaahid was able to prove he had been in the school library at the time. But he was furious: once again he was in trouble with the police because of Ricki.

But Shaahid's spiral into violence didn't need any help. Since the fight at Liquid, his fists had got him into lots of trouble. He'd been suspended three times for fights with white boys.

Academically he had been doing well and was hoping to get at least three GCSE A grades. But his parents worried that the suspensions would threaten his results. Often, when he came home from school, his father would ask him, "Why are you throwing away your future?" Shaahid would brush off these queries, saying, "Nothing's going to happen."

But a few months before his exams, Shaahid was walking with his girlfriend in school along an alley with a wall to

he hadn't started was going to cost him his qualifications.

As he went with two friends to clear out his locker, he saw a white teen who had been in the fight. "He hasn't even been suspended," Shaahid thought. The three Asians charged. The white boy was punched unconscious.

SHAAHID COULDN'T believe it when the judge gave him a four-month custodial sentence at a young offenders' institution. He looked up to meet the eyes of his parents, his mother crying, his father ashamed.

Although Shaahid was only inside for two months, he saw the same faces discharged one week and returning the next. Some were friends. They were bright—but couldn't break the pattern.

"Why didn't I listen to my father?" Shaahid asked himself. When he was



The best of friends. "If we can make peace," says Ricki, "there's hope for everyone"

released he promised his family things would change.

In the summer of 2001, Bradford, Burnley and Oldham were seeing their worst race violence for decades and in Peterborough tension was stoked by the murder of 17-year-old Ross Parker with a foot-long hunting knife.

Despite all their work to promote the celebration of ethnic diversity, Peterborough City Council's Youth Service looked on in horror as the city polarised. Area manager Javed Ahmed sat at his desk and sighed—if only these teens, who divided so bloodily along lines of race, realised how much they actually had in common. He knew they all faced the same problems with friendships and family, unemployment and training. They supported the same football teams and listened to the same music. He

started to outline a new project that would celebrate not diversity but unity.

A year later, Javed's project was given a green light—and a tight budget. He knew he'd have to pick teens who had the status to influence others.

LAST YEAR, Shaahid Latif received a phone call inviting him to attend a two-day Unity Youth Crew residential course. Immediately he thought this could be the opportunity he needed to change his life. He accepted.

But on the first day of the course, Shaahid was in for a shock when he saw the other six participants—one of them was Ricki Ulliot. Here was the racist who had got him into so much trouble. He clenched his fists. "No," he thought,

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breathing deeply, "I've come this far. I can control it."

Ricki had taken longer to persuade. He knew Shaahid would be there—but he also knew his current road would lead to prison, hospital or a morgue.

Ricki and Shaahid were paired and told to build a paper tower using only paper, sticky tape and paper clips. Both felt the urge to build a big structure, but as Ricki held two bits of paper he saw there was only one roll of tape. "Could you..." he choked "...pass me the tape?" Shaahid glared. Then he smiled: the only way to build a really big tower was to work together. As he handed the tape over, Ricki managed a soft "Thanks".

Next they were asked to sit back to back. Shaahid had an abstract picture of circles, squares and triangles. Ricki had a blank sheet of paper and a pen. Shaahid had to describe the picture to Ricki and he had to draw it. At first Ricki thought it was pointless. Then he saw how he was forced to listen to what Shaahid was saying; there were no interruptions and they had to trust each other to get a result. Five minutes later, the two pictures were almost identical.

In the evening they found they were

sharing a room. Shaahid seethed again. Yet despite himself he found they talked through the night. The next day there were more exercises, then they played football together. Later, Shaahid taught Ricki bhangra dancing. After 48 hours the two entrenched racists had discovered they quite liked each other. Ricki paused for a moment and asked, "Why was there so much hate between us?" Shaahid replied, "I didn't know you then. I just knew what my mates said."

Ricki and Shaahid both accepted voluntary roles in the Unity Youth Crew and last December they were awarded the Millennium Volunteers Award for their work. Next month they travel to Belfast to visit projects involved in mediation and conflict resolution.

Although Shaahid's approval has protected Ricki from Asian violence, his past is hard to escape—he has been attacked by white gangs shouting "Paki lover". But his resolve remains firm and he has started a peacemaker course.

"If Shaahid and me can make peace," he says, "there's hope for everyone."

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FINAL PROOF

From *The Guardian's* "Corrections and Clarifications":

"In a column headed 'Save us from the armchair generals', (page 5, G2), the writer, having referred to the matter of gay people in the armed forces, noted that 'former admiral of the fleet Peter Norton-Hill has gone a little quiet on the subject'. That is because he died in May."

