

Petr Torak 0:05

Good evening, Dennis Ah, and thank you very much for participating at this mentoring and in a project that is aimed at inspiring young Roma people in here in the United Kingdom, but also anywhere else, because this will be streamlined and available to all young people. And, you know, the aim of this project is to motivated them to show them that it is possible to achieve what you know, other people have done and achieved in their lives. So, I really thank you for your time and for you sharing with us your story and some tips, how people can achieve. So, let's start then, so first question now, could you please tell us a little bit about yourself, you know maybe where you are from, from which city and from which country?

Denisa Gannon 1:00

Okay, well. My name is Denisa. And I'm originally from Czech Republic. But I live in the UK for 14 years now. And I am originally from a little town that's called Novy Bicov and that's I'm near Hradec Kralove. And I am Vlachi Romani. So in Czech context I'm from Vlachi Roma. And yeah, so and I came to UK and I kind of become a lawyer. funny stuff.

Petr Torak 1:52

It's absolutely brilliant obviously an amazing achievement. So, if you go back to Czech Republic, so. So, I think if you grew up in Czech Republic, so you went through all this, you know, from the schools, and potentially some work experience, so how is it to live in Czech Republic?

Denisa Gannon 2:12

Well, my life in Czech Republic was kind of a little bit chaotic, I would say. So, you know, I am from a family that is like, you know, they obviously like you know, all I scar family, you know, in, in Czech Republic. So it was, um, you know, and I got divorced as well. And I had, like, you know, three years old son. When I actually decided to move to UK, well, the reason why I decided to move, there was there wasn't only one reason, there was a number of reasons for me to move. So, the first was my, you know, divorce, you know, there was no future for me, then, being a Roma woman, you know, from a traditional or I scar family in Republic doesn't really help. Because obviously, I was looking for some sort of employment. But I wasn't very successful. So I was facing kind of issues such as I was capable to show good experiences on my CV or on an interview, but as soon as, you know, I actually show my face at work at the work placement, you know, obviously, I've been told, you know, the vacancy has been just fulfilled and there is no more work available. So, you know, are they just simply told me, they're gonna call me back. Of course, they never did, even though I felt the interview was quite successful. At the time. I was I had a Maturita so that's like a level. So that was at a time when I was in a Czech Republic that was quite unusual for Roma woman to actually have such a qualification, such educational qualification, and, but even I had a maturita, it wasn't enough. For me, being a Roma woman, even with Maturita, it wasn't enough to have a job. And I was looking for some, you know, exciting jobs. I was looking for really simple jobs. Like, you know, just working in a shop or just being really like a cleaner, but I wasn't able even to do that or even like, you know, simple waitressing or, you know, any sort of so unfortunately, I wasn't. I'm not capable to actually not well I was capable. But unfortunately, I wasn't successful with my applications due to my Roma background.

Petr Torak 5:27

And so when you said 14 years ago, you came into the UK, before you came into the UK, what was your expectations? What was your expectation, you know, in terms of what you're going to do in the UK, working and stuff like this?

Denisa Gannon 5:40

Well, I, you know, simple, very simple. I was just looking for work. And that was it. I didn't intend to become a lawyer. I didn't come to the UK with the intention, I got to become a lawyer. No, that wasn't, that would never ever cross my mind. But I just came to UK and you know, I was just able to have a cleaning job. And I was very happy because, you know, I had a job. And I was capable to take care of my son and myself. And you know, that that's why i relocate and start living in the UK. And you know, that that's how everything started.

Petr Torak 6:23  
That's amazing.

Denisa Gannon 6:24  
And I used to work as a cleaner. And you know, that was all.

Petr Torak 6:29  
Yeah, I was going to ask actually, so you started working as a cleaner? What was how you know is it was possible to you know from cleaner in job to get to the lawyer, your lawyer job you know, what was the journey? Like? What did it involve?

Denisa Gannon 6:42  
Well what does it involve? Okay. Well, when I came to England, I had very, very little English. Very, very little, I really understand quite like, you know, really little. But, you know, in my job, I was talking to the co-workers, and I started learning English. And I realised quite soon, you know, there is more opportunities. So basically, I realised, I don't need to stay all my life cleaner. Why don't you, why don't I, you know, maybe try to do something else. So, I enrol into a hairdressing course. Because obviously, at the time, you know, single parent, I kind of work out, you know, cup here, maybe is a good alternative career for me. So, I enrol into NVQ course, and start doing this course full time. But I had to work still part time in my cleaning job. Because obviously, you know, being a student, I wasn't entitled to, you know, any sort of sub you know, keep my I'm a part- time job as a cleaner and doing full time, a hairdressing course. So, I did that, I passed that. And I wanted to do level two, bar, unfortunately, I've been told kind of in a sort of polite way that I might not be the best hairdresser. So, it wasn't probably like, you know, I can cut hair, but not really well. So, they kind of suggested maybe level two is not my best option. So, I was kind of broken because I really thought Oh, my God, what I'm going to do now, I really saw myself to be a hairdresser. And I really wanted to cut hair and work in a salon and you know, be a hairdresser. And I could really see that carry out for me in the future. But they kind of cut my dream so I was quite kind of broken. So, I went to see a career advisor at the college. And he asked me what kind of education I have from my country of origin from Czech Republic. And I showed him my maturita diploma. And he told me, why do you wasting your time here, you don't need to do that. You can go university with this. And that was absolutely shocking, because I had no idea, I can do that. So, I took you know the booklet and I look it through and I kind of choose to kind of choose to do law.

Petr Torak 8:29  
That's amazing.

Denisa Gannon 9:29  
And that's what I did. So, I enrolled into straight law and at the University at Munford University in Leicester. Actually, my course was human rights and social justice. That was the law degree I actually did when I start my uni, well, you know, that was quite a strong experience, I have to say, you know, I realised my English was not good enough yet. I was struggling with English, but I managed to pass the first year. And, well, I gotta say, like, you know, I didn't had any, like, you know, a previous experience with a higher my British education. I didn't have any education in England at all. So my experience, the first year uni, was kind of low mind, like, you know, mind blowing, really. But I was very excited Anyway, it was so exciting to even say, yeah, I'm law students.

Petr Torak 11:17  
And how did your fellow students accepted you? you know, was there any issue with the fact that you were Roma and female was what they actually did they know what Roma means and what it was? were they behaving Okay?

Denisa Gannon 11:31  
I don't think they had any idea what Roma is. But it was completely irrelevant. Because nobody was interested in it, what kind of background you are. You know, I feel like we've been treated kind of

equally, but to be honest, I was hanging out the more with the migrants, sort of crew per rather than, you know, British, especially private, educated people. So, um, yeah, so you kind of, you know, at uni, I kind of realised, you know, this, there is this kind of distinguishment really, but being a role model was completely irrelevant. Nobody was interested in it. But when I mentioned somebody, even the lecturers i'm Roma, they were like, whatever, you know, we have, we have here so many people with different backgrounds, that, you know, being a Roma is nothing special here. It's, you know, you are one of the students, students like any other

Petr Torak 12:44

Did this help you also to concentrate more on your study, because obviously, some people I know, in Czech Republic and other countries, when they have to think about, you know, whether people like them or not, or whether they accept them, they cannot concentrate fully on their study. So, I guess, you know, you having the freedom in the UK, to study, it was much easier.

Denisa Gannon 13:06

No, it was, yeah, yeah, I know what you mean, yeah, I felt kind of relaxed, obviously, because I couldn't think about, I am Roma, I can't do that. And I can't do that, you know, I was treated completely the same way as any other student. And that was kind of, you know, relaxing feeling because I realised, you know, it's only up to me what I'm going to do with my degree. So I soon realised I need a good grades, if I'm not going to have a good grades, I never kind of managed to become a lawyer. And there is no point of doing law degree and not become a lawyer. That's the way I was thinking. But of course, that, you know, my fellow students, you know, they were lots of people, they actually were doing law degree, but they didn't want to become lawyers. They just wanted to do it, because they know it's a good degree. So that in my mind, you know, my focus was to become a lawyer. So that's what I was getting ready for. And that's how I was treating my preparation. So I kind of knew, you know, I need a minimum of two one a grade in my all subjects, otherwise, to become a lawyer, it's impossible with other grades, so but Despite facing all those difficulties in my first year. You know, I managed to actually finish my degree with high to one. And I just want to mention in my experience in my first exam, in my degree, so obviously, my first exam was in a criminal law. Well, I failed of course I was absolutely shocked because I learned so much and I memorise so many things. And I just couldn't understand why I failed. So I went to see my lecture and I asked him, Why did I fail? What happened? And he told me, well, you wrote a lot of stuff about criminal law. And I can see that you have a very good knowledge of everything they learn. But you actually didn't answer my question. That was like, you know, that was like, I just, I just set like, you know, I was sitting there. And I was like, Wow, that was completely Absolutely. I have to change everything. What I learn so far, because in Czech Republic, the learning is only by memorising, so everything you memorise, that's it, if you can memorise whatever you can, you're fine. But that that's what I thought in my first exam, I actually thought like, you know, if I memorise everything and many to write it off, on a paper, I'm gonna do all right. But that was, you know, that wasn't the case. So, I had to completely change everything, my everything I learned so far. And I have to learn the new kind of way of answering my exams and the way I learn. But in the end of my third year, I had my exams results on 17th. So that's like, you know, first grade, so I did manage it. All right, in the end.

Petr Torak 16:58

And how was it with your family? You know, how your parents from the, you know, where they supporting you in your decision to go to university? How was it for them?

Denisa Gannon 17:07

Oh, yeah, they always supported, you know, me studying and my mom and dad. They can't read and write, but they were always telling me to learn. They were always telling me Chara, you seek your drama. So, I ended, you know, when they heard I want to go to, like, you know, university, so I had to explain to them, I'm going to big school. And they were happy. They were fine with that. Yeah.

Petr Torak 17:40

And for many, you know, young people that I speak to, especially young ladies, they worry about, you know, one obviously the community expectation, but also managing family, you know, maybe child,

you know, at your age, you know, and maybe having a boyfriend or husband, how did you manage to, you know, look after your own child and family, and having potentially having a job and also studying university? Was it possible to put this all together?

Denisa Gannon 18:09

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, if you have to you, you put it all together, you know, there is no, there is no choice really, you just have to do it but I never saw children as a, you know, obstacle of doing some, you know, career or even having a husband or boyfriend to have a career. You just have to go and do it. That's what I think really, I had a little boy, when I start university, I have to say he was already six years old, you know when I started my university, so he was going to school. So you know, he gone to school, so mommy gone to school. So, you know, and then when I finish, I pick him up from school. So, but I have to say like, you know, my timetable, you know, I really, I was really, really busy. And they have a lot of case work and, you know, lots of work and studying to do during my university course. You know, I really had to, like, you know, count every minute, you know, towards think I was doing so, really I was really focused

Petr Torak 19:30

And how many years you were studying?

Denisa Gannon 19:31

Well, that's a good question. Well, the degree is three years. So that's three years at the uni. And then if you want to become a lawyer, you have to do the legal practice course. That's a full time or part time postgraduate qualification. So you'll have to do that and then in my days, you need to have a training contract another two years. So I managed so I finished my degree in 2012. The same year I started my legal practice course. And I finish my legal qualifications and educations then, I found my training contract in 2018. And I found my training contract through an organisation that is called Legal Education Foundation, that is charitable organisation based in London. They help people they want to become lawyers, but they would like to become lawyers in the legal field and legal aid, I mean, in legal aid field, or you know, welfare and social justice field. And I managed to get into this scheme, the scheme is called justice first fellowship. And my hosting organisation that that's like, you know, where the actual training was, is in it was in Coventry Law Centre. So now it's known as a central England Law Centre, and that's basically a charitable organisation that provides legal representation and legal advice with our legal charge.

Petr Torak 21:37

And is this were you work currently?

Petr Torak 21:39

Sorry,

Petr Torak 21:40

is this were you work now?

Denisa Gannon 21:42

Yes, I still work for the central England Law Centre. And I am working now as an immigration lawyer. So I am a qualified Legal Aid, immigration lawyer. So that's a special accreditation. So in addition to my qualification, as a lawyer, I had to do another accreditation through the Law Society to be able to provide immigration Legal Aid advice.

Petr Torak 22:14

Okay. And so thinking about your legal and confirm you know this background and where you are now, where do you see yourself in 10 years time?

Denisa Gannon 22:24

Okay, that's quite interesting. Um, well, I want to be a judge now. So the rules are you you've got to be qualified for five years. And then you can start applying for like, you know, judiciary positions. And

you also have to be able to be a citizen, which I'm not yet hopefully, I'm going to become one, one day.

Denisa Gannon 23:00

At the moment, yep. But at the moment, I am a qualified for three years. So I am post qualified three years now. And so I still have to wait another two years to start my judiciary applications. But in the meantime, I'm really hoping to kind of have my sort of own legal practice to be able to give legal advice in my own sort of expertise.

Petr Torak 23:39

Oh, well done. We send good luck obviously to your future plans. It's very, very good plans. I like it. It will be the probably the first ever Roma judge in the world.

Denisa Gannon 23:51

Well I really hope it will be quite fun to do.

Petr Torak 23:54

So what does it mean to you to be Roma?

Denisa Gannon 23:59

Yeah, I speak Yes. I am. fluent Romanes. Yes. Yeah, so I still enjoy to speak Romanes. And, you know, it's just that, I don't know, it's just, you know, all the traditions we have. And, you know, all my parents teach me. You know, all the stuff I grow up in Navic Bicov, and that's that, you know, all that stuff actually helped me here in the UK to be independent, and to pursue my dream to become a lawyer. So, you know, my parents actually they are uneducated, you know, they never gone to school. You know, they never, you know, had any, any education. But, you know, we are six siblings, but they managed to raise us, you know, into independent adults. Take care you know, we are able to take care of ourselves and our children. So what I'm trying to say, even though without any education, they managed to raise us all of us to, you know, absolutely brilliant standard. So

Petr Torak 25:14

Mhh, that's amazing. Do you see the role of Roma women changing in the society in these days?

Denisa Gannon 25:22

I'm having lots of inquiries. You know, through social media, young people are asking me questions about how I become a lawyer, how I funded it, and how I managed to do it, whether I can advise them, or maybe whether I can suggest anything that can help them. You know, I can see, like, you know, um, you know, things in a community are changing, you know, the children, theyse3 really wanted they really doing well in schools. And they have a great potential to do you know, everything they want.

Petr Torak 26:07

And that's actually my last question about what you just said, What would you say to all those young people, you know, that you've mentioned, you know, what those young Roma children and young people that are thinking and listening to your obvious story and thinking what they could do? What would you recommend to them? What would be your tip?

Denisa Gannon 26:27

Well, you know, when I start my law degree, you know, obviously, with my background, I didn't realise that at the time about, you know, being a migrant, single parent, being a woman, being from working class, you know, that was actually all barriers for me to become a lawyer. But, you know, I just ignore that. And I just, you know, I just kept going, and I was like, Yes, I'm going to be a lawyer one day, whatever it cost. So, you know, if you really thinking about to do something, just do it. Don't Don't think about all barriers well. Okay, you gotta be realistic still. Yeah. So I know, like, for example, I can't become like, you know, a singer because that wouldn't work at all for me, yeah, but, you know, my first dream get crushed I wanted to be a hairdresser that dream Like you know that was gone. And but

I found another one, and that one worked out. So, you know, if one thing doesn't work out, maybe another one will. And, you know, the second thing, what I want to suggest, especially about exams, you know, if you fail, don't worry, you're gonna retake the exam, and you're gonna do even better, because, you know, I fail my first exam but, you know, that didn't. That didn't influence my how to say that, my excitement about the subject, you know, I was like oh okay, I failed but I'm gonna retake that exam and I'm gonna do really well on it. And I'm going to do everything what it costs to do better. So that's, that's the approach if you fail exam.

Petr Torak 28:26

That's absolutely true. That's amazing Denisa, thank you very much. It was very lovely to talk to you and very inspiring what you just said. So thank you very much. I hope obviously hope to stay in touch and to see you again soon. And I'm sure that if you know if any young people have got any questions for you, are they all right to ask?

Denisa Gannon 28:49

Yeah, sure. Yes. I'm like, you know, I'm quite happy to answer any questions if anybody is very interested in it I'm happy to answer any questions.