Afrasiab Anwar is 28 and lives with his family in Burnley. He is a Sports Development Officer for Burnley Council. He did a Social Sciences degree at Leeds University, preceded by A-Levels in History, English and Communications Studies at Accrington and Rossendale College. He became involved as a volunteer in his local community in the wake of the disturbances in Burnley. He set up a community football club, which is only the second club in Burnley to gain Charter standard from the Lancashire FA. In 2003 he was nominated for the Whitbread Young Sports Achiever Award and was a runner up in the national final.

“My dad always says that you can go get a flash car and house, but no one can take away the knowledge in your head”

My family are my biggest inspiration. My parents have lived in Daneshouse in Burnley all my life. They’ve worked so hard to have enough money for us. They weren’t educated so they had to do working class jobs. They did that to ensure we had the opportunity to get an education. My dad always says that you can go get a flash car and house, but no one can take away the knowledge in your head. If you go and make yourself better, then you have a choice. My parents believing in me has been really important. My 2 brothers and 3 sisters are also mentioned a lot in the community for their contributions.

My family has got involved in the community centre, my brother is a football coach and all my nephews and nieces are involved.

My mum and dad are very religious, so I’ve had that upbringing.

“The thing about school and college is you don’t realise that they have your best interests at heart”

In terms of education, I’ve always been the kid who’s told ‘you’ve got loads of potential, but…!’ At school I was always the joker, so I didn’t get the GCSE results I wanted; the same at college. I went to university and did a degree in social sciences and I didn’t get what I should have got there either.

The thing about school and college is you don’t realise that they have your best interests at heart. There are always a couple of teachers the memory of whom sticks with you. They told me ‘you’ve got to get your act together.’ Some teachers just see it as a job, but some really care and make the time for you.

“Sport is a great tool as no one cares what colour you are so long as you can play football”

I finished university and when I came back home I went to a community meeting (the year after the major disturbances in Burnley). One of the things that was highlighted in Lord Clark’s report on the disturbances was that there was nothing for young people to do in the area. So we decided to do something ourselves. We went round the room asking ‘who’s going to do it?’ I was doing some voluntary work for Sure Start at the time – a dads and lads football scheme; and I felt at the end of the meeting that no one was going to step forward. So I went off and booked local Astroturf and asked some kids if they were interested in joining the football club. I had about 5 young people initially and I was paying more to hire the facility than I was getting from the rate the kids paid to play. But in the 4th week, over 20 kids showed up. Over time, more and more people showed up. A part-time sports officer job came up in Accrington. Although I had a degree in social sciences, when I went to the interview I later learned that what put me
above other candidates was the fact I was doing something voluntary already. I’d taken lads of 16 or 17 and I got them qualified as coaches. The football club was growing all the time.

I was asked to be an active community officer, who would go out and increase the participation of black and minority ethnic groups. I was doing it voluntarily in my local community anyway so it sounded great.

In the first year, when we entered the football league, there were only 5 Asian lads playing in the local league, and now there are loads. Now we have 160 members, 15 qualified coaches and several teams. That has happened because of all the work I’ve done with the coaches. Since I’ve come to Burnley, I’ve been getting paid to do something I really, really enjoy. I’d be doing it anyway though.

Sport is a great tool as no one cares what colour you are so long as you can play football. We’ve used sport as the medium and breaking down the barriers has just happened, it’s secondary.

We became a hub for the local community; we’re not just seen as a football club. There was an empty mosque in our community. I approached the mosque committee to ask if we could use it as a youth club. We couldn’t afford rent, but we agreed to pay bills. We got grants and people donated equipment. It’s now used by the whole community for birthday parties, meetings etc.

The 3rd and 4th generation of Asian Muslims have an identity crisis. Are we British Muslims? What’s our identity? Before that I used to think I was a Pakistani Muslim. But when I went there I was seen clearly as British. The only thing people can’t take away from me is that I’m from Burnley. So I’m passionate about Burnley. Other jobs have come up, but I’m passionate about this town. No one else has that passion. I want people to talk to each other in Burnley and communicate through sport. It’s about identity and knowing where you come from and fitting in.

One of the local people who runs the community development trust inspired me to set up the football club in part. The belief that I could set up the club came from inside me. It’s like a religious belief that nothing’s impossible.

In terms of motivation, in our community there aren’t many role models that are positive. There was a vacuum when I was younger, but now we’ve got to a stage where there are more young people doing positive things.

“When we started off, Asian footballers were unheard of. People said stick to cricket”

The biggest challenge I’ve faced has got to be football and leisure being seen as someone else’s responsibility. Also, my community doesn’t always value volunteering. When you speak to people in the community say- ‘why are you doing this? What are you getting out of it?’ They’d say ‘you’re a mug- why do it for free?’ I said to my dad ‘well why do you help out in the mosque? Because it’s God’s work, right?’ ‘Well this is God’s work too- helping and putting something back into the community.’

When I was looking for jobs, I sat down and thought to myself- you’ve got the potential but are you ever going to use it? I wanted to prove people wrong about me not fulfilling my potential.
When we started off, Asian footballers were unheard of. People said stick to cricket because we didn’t have the experience. But now we’ve invested in our young people and now we generally win!

Because we’ve been so successful, we got chartered standard from the FA. We won an award in 2005 and then we won club of the year from the FA in 2008. Because of the quality of the work, people don’t realise it’s all run by volunteers. It’s a challenge getting over that perception.

I’m passionate about Burnley. When I was younger I went to a predominantly white school and was labelled as coloured. At college in Accrington I was seen as someone from a different area. It was the same at Leeds and the same again when I worked in London. I was always an outsider.

Burnley is very territorial, so going into areas where we’ve never been before can also be challenging. We’ve broken down barriers. When you mention Daneshouse (my area) now, you associate it with all the positives.

“I genuinely want to help people and God has rewarded me for that”
Faith has played a major part in my life. But what tends to happen is you go home and get into your traditional gear. But when you leave the house you want to be one of the crowd. You find yourself wanting to step out of the traditional thing. At home we speak Punjabi and wear traditional clothes and then outside I speak English and wear jeans. You kind of live parallel lives.

Sometimes when people talk about faith, they talk about being Jewish or Muslim, but the underlying tenets are all the same. I’m really interested in Christianity and Judaism because they are similar to Islam. The morals are all the same- work hard and love your family. It is about faith, but it’s also about giving your kids what you didn’t have.

The mosque education I had was very intense. I’d go to school and then straight to mosque every day. Religion tells you how important education is.

Especially in the current climate, people react to Islam in different ways. When some people see someone with a beard, they might label them as a terrorist. Some Muslims I know would not keep the beard especially for that reason. But my reason for not doing that doesn’t mean my faith isn’t strong.

My idea is that I’d rather change perceptions of what a good Muslim is. I can pray 5 times a day, but if the intentions from my heart aren’t there, then I’m not being a good Muslim. If I’m doing good work that is consequently changing people’s perceptions about Islam, then that’s rewarding. That’s my take on life.

For me religion is about changing people’s ideas about Islam and doing something positive.

You can go get any education you want, but in terms of where you end up, that’s where God comes into it. When I was growing up, I wanted to be a teacher. I’ve ended up here doing a job I love. God has been good to me. I genuinely want to help people and God has seen that and God has rewarded me for that.
“The thank you or the smile from young people and parents is more rewarding than what money can buy you”

I want to get rid of the perception, particularly in the Muslim community, that you don’t get anything back for volunteering. The thank you or the smile from young people and parents is more rewarding than anything money can buy you.

People doing positive things don’t get the recognition for what they are doing. I don’t know whether it’s my background or field, but I tend to get coverage. I’d like to show Muslims that they can do something positive and they will be recognised and not just judged on their culture.

We’re bringing different communities together. People look beyond colour where the football club is concerned. Through being polite to people, we have broken down barriers- we say to our young people that they have to leave a good impression of their families, then people will think everyone from Daneshouse is like that. As a club we tend to have a positive relationship with all the other sports clubs. But we use football as a tool to break down barriers.

“I want to make a positive contribution to Burnley”

In ten years time I’d like, on a professional level to do more management - managing other coaches and stepping up to a more senior level. I don’t want to leave Burnley as I don’t want to leave the football club. But I want to make it sustainable and community owned, leaving a legacy. I want to make a positive contribution to Burnley.