



Qasim Rafique visits a primary school in Accra, the capital city of Ghana, while filming the documentary *My Wee African Village* in April this year

THE first time 'Mr Kenya' came into Solly's, he felt like he had come home. What caught his eye were the displays of money hanging from the ceiling: currencies from all over the African continent, and some of the rest of the world, that later became so heavy they almost brought the ceiling down. The Kenyan shilling was there. "I thought, 'Hold on a minute, that looks familiar,'" he says. "You walk in and you find so many things you can relate to. You come here once, and you have to come back. Not just to buy things but also you get to meet a lot of people from your home country, from other African countries. It's like a meeting point."

Mr Kenya is not alone. Film director Aimara Reques had that same feeling of familiarity on wandering into the shop. She is Venezuelan, though that didn't seem to matter. There were, after all, on the shelves, the Supermalts that she drank back home, corn and, more importantly, an atmosphere, something you didn't find anywhere else in Glasgow, a feeling that the rules were different here.

Solly's is more than just a shop, it's an institution, a gathering place, an advice centre, a piece of elsewhere, a wardrobe into another world. On Saturdays it packs to brimming, queues of shoppers and visitors spilling on to Glasgow's Great Western Road in the west end, crowds gossiping. Sometimes, when the music is turned up loud, there is dancing between the sweet potatoes and the hair relaxants.

There are discussions about politics back home in Zimbabwe or Kenya. People have

proposed marriage in Solly's. Others have cried on walking through the door. Reques decided to make a documentary; not about Solly's itself, but about Qasim Rafique, the 27-year-old son of Sohail 'Solly' Rafique who opened the shop 20 years ago. Rafique, who helps his father run the shop, had a dream, a grand plan: the creation of an Afro-Caribbean supermarket modelled on a traditional African village, with palm trees and, well, more palm trees in, of all places, economically deprived Possil. It would be like Solly's only bigger. It would bring together produce and people from Africa and the Caribbean all under one roof at The Point Retail Park. It would deliver a bit of Africa, its style, its culture, its etiquette, its way of living, into Glasgow. Reques would follow Rafique over the year of his attempt to pull his plan together.

Rafique slips between languages; he speaks six. "Bonjour madame," he says, "Ca va?" "Muchas gracias." The ring tone, customised for one of his callers, is the Islamic call to prayer. He names most of his customers by country – Mr Nigeria, Mr Kenya, Mr Ghana. The Mr Kenya 1 talk to is Maurice, his manager. Rafique's own family are from the Seychelles – his father came over in the Seventies – though they have relatives in Africa and Pakistan and friends, it seems, all over the world.

He says that food is a means of communication, a way of bringing people together, and he believes Scots have lost their relationship with it. People don't view it as important. "They would spend their last fiver on something else. We wouldn't. We would spend it on food."

Recently Rafique helped some teachers create an African event around food and cooking, in an attempt to help bring together the pupils of different nationalities. There had been many refugees and immigrants in the school and they had been struggling to bring them together, to integrate the many groups. The food, they found, had the required effect and, in a day, connections were formed. A friend, he says, told him he would be the next Jamie Oliver, a crusader for the culturally binding powers of the cooking pot.

It was four years ago, after his mother's death, that Rafique started to formulate the idea for his village. Asphia Rafique, just 42, died suddenly of a heart attack in her sleep.

She had woken to pray one morning and then gone back to bed. Rafique, who is the eldest of three children, remembers his father crying out, calls for the ambulance, her final dying moments. "We actually got a chance to sit there and have our last words with her. I put my hand to my mum's forehead and made an oath that day that I was going to make sure the family stayed strong, and I would look after my father, look after the business."

Since then, he has had a "massive, mental, radical drive" to make sure the business runs well and the family is "happy and kushy".

"I've utilised all my experiences," he says, "the discipline of sport (he almost played in-line hockey for Britain), the discipline of free-diving, and just gathered it all together and learnt to become a businessman, which I guess a lot of people say is already in my genes."