

An unusual day in court

This was clearly not a normal day at Glasgow Sheriff Court.

Four mounted police constables provided visible presence outside the entrance whilst on the River Clyde two more cruised slowly up and down on a launch.

A police helicopter hovered overhead.

As the young gang members were escorted into the building they were taken through two separate metal detectors before being led in to a court room surrounded by police in fluorescent jackets and anti-stab vests. With rival gangs from all over the East End of Glasgow being brought together it was imperative that police were present in large enough numbers to immediately and decisively intervene should trouble arise. They had to ensure the safety of all in attendance.

The other side of the court was full of representatives of the various agencies who had committed themselves through the Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV) to do everything they could to help. Social workers sat with housing experts, criminologists with youth workers, ministers of religion with mothers of victims. All shared a feeling that; enough was enough, the gang violence had to come to an end and CIRV offered an alternative.

As the Sheriff entered all rose. In formal dress and solemn terms he declared his court in session and made it clear that he would brook no nonsense. Some of those young men present will have been before him and his colleagues before. Indeed some on day-release from Polmont Young Offenders Institution were led up from the cells to sit guarded in the dock.

All of these young men were here for one purpose. To be told that the violence in Glasgow's east end must stop. And to hear that if they cooperate with this an alternative and brighter future lay before them. The seriousness of the intent of the Sheriff and Police Chief were clear. The Chief Constable promised to deploy up to 8,000 Officers if necessary to stop the east end gang wars. He made it clear that if one gang member transgressed then, within the bounds of the law, all in that gang would be pursued.

Zero tolerance didn't even come close to encapsulating the determination to end violence that was being described. And as the masked riot police entered the court even those of us on the comfortable side of the bar felt wary. In the eyes of the young men present I saw wry amusement turn to anxiety and perhaps fear. Their attention had certainly been won.

Then the doctors stood up and showed gruesome slides of facial laceration and severe head injury. Images of young men cut and young lives cut short. And they told of their frustration and their desire to treat cancer and children with birth defects rather than spend time and resources on such avoidable damage.

A minister from the east end stood and told how people could find redemption her way or another way but find it they must, and a youth worker offered football as diversion and sporting competition as an alternative to gang fights.

When the mother of the victim stood and talked the young men listened. Perhaps many saw their own mother and heard for the first time of the pain that their actions inflict.

When the African American basketball star who now plays in Glasgow told of his gang member brother dying in his arms of gun shot wounds there were few anywhere in the court unmoved.

Ex cons were followed by ex gang members all sharing tales of redemption and championing change. There were hard men on both sides of the court and the feeling of them and us was breaking down.

The alternative option was a card for everyone with a free phone number; promising early response from a personal case worker and access to training and opportunities and employment and leisure and education and housing and a new life and a new start. A real opportunity to move on.

Yet still more was needed.

What would make the disillusioned young men, many of whom stared blankly across the court room, grasp this opportunity?

Would we be brave enough were we to ask?

Who would cross the bar of the court and change a dramatic day into an inspirational one?

As Jack Black rose to his feet few could have predicted what would result.

Perhaps even he had his doubts.

If so he did not show them. In measured tone he started describing how twenty years ago as a youth worker in Easterhouse he had worked to divert young men from violence through football and social clubs. How after one particularly successful football tournament in which one young man had lit up the competition with his skill and determination he had driven home feeling progress was being made. Only to find out the next morning that that same young man, that 'wee star' as Jack had called him, had been attacked on his way home. How a concrete slab had been smashed across his head; shattering his skull and ending his life.

As Jack's anger rose his voice grew louder and his language coarsened but there was no objection from the sheriff and no disrespect from the young men.

Here was a man who wasn't scared of them. Who had probably worked with some of their dads and uncles, who knew the streets where they had lived and fought; who was going to speak to them in language of colour and directness that they understood.

Then he flung open the gate to their side of the court and got amongst them; alternatively hectoring and encouraging them.

He would not be ignored.

He went from individual to individual and from group to group talking about their areas in the east end and the particular streets they were from. He began to get them to respond, acknowledging their areas and gang loyalties.

They would laugh when he made fun of them, but then gave him respectful silence when he made it clear that they could achieve so much more than they currently did. Here was a man who made thousands of pounds a day; working with top athletes and movie stars, with all of life's achievers yet who came from their background, knew their streets and who made it clear he would work with them for free.

As the tempo rose it was clear we were building to a conclusion.

'Which one of you is hard enough?' said Jack

"Hard enough to be the first guy to stand up and say they are going to ring this number. Hard enough to give up fighting and do something worthwhile. Who's going to do that?"

The risk seemed reckless. These were disaffected young men, alienated from the establishment, suspicious of authority and governed by peer pressure.

Surely none of them would stand up.

But then one did.

And then elsewhere in the court two more, and behind them three others.

And as Jack went from group to group, up they got and as the young men stood a quiet ripple of applause began at the back of the court.

And as more got to their feet it grew and as gang after gang responded it developed into a rolling, echoing, thunderous noise that shook and challenged even the most cynical of those present to look at another without a tear in the eye or a lump in the throat.

Talk of an emotional roller coaster may sound clichéd but remarkable hardly does justice to what we saw and felt that day.

And will it work?

That remains to be seen. But no one present that day on either side of the court will ever think of this issue in quite the same way again. And as we write over sixty young men have already contacted services for help and more are being accessed every day. They sign a pledge which delivers help and assistance in response for stopping carrying weapons and giving up violence. How they do and how the services respond is being evaluated.

As a piece of theatre, this day was unrivalled.

As a piece of practical Public Health or applied Criminology without personal parallel

And certainly, a very very different day in Glasgow Sheriff Court.

Prof Peter D Donnelly MD & Prof Jackie Tombs PhD,

1st December 2008