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VIEWS & REVIEWS

An unusual day in court

PERSONAL VIEW Peter D Donnelly, Jackie Tombs

This was clearly not a normal day at Glasgow Sheriff Court. Four mounted police constables provided a visible presence outside the entrance, while on the River Clyde two more constables 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, surrounded by police in fluorescent jackets and anti-stab vests, into a courtroom. 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 intervene immediately and decisively 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 Glasgow's community initiative to reduce violence (CIRV), being launched this week, to do everything they could to help. Social workers sat with housing

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experts, criminologists with youth workers, ministers of religion with mothers of victims. All shared a feeling that enough was enough, that the gang violence had to come to an end, and the initiative offered an alternative.

As the sheriff entered all rose. 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 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 an alternative and brighter future lay before them. The chief constable promised to deploy up to 8000 officers if necessary to stop the East End's 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 the 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.

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.

When the mother of a victim stood and talked the young men listened. When the black American basketball star who now plays in Glasgow told of his gang member brother dying in his arms of gunshot wounds, few anywhere in the court remained unmoved. Former cons were followed by former gang members, all sharing tales of redemption and championing change. There were hard men on both sides of the court, and the "them and us" mentality was breaking down.

The alternative option was a card for everyone with a free phone number, promising an 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 grasp this opportunity?

As Jack Black rose to his feet few could have predicted what would result. In a measured tone this former youth worker and now an expert in personal development started describing how 20 years ago 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 the feeling that progress was being made. Only to find out the next morning that that same young man 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. Then he flung open the gate to their side of the court and went among them, alternately hectoring and encouraging them. They would laugh when he made fun of them but



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then gave him respectful silence when he made it clear that they could achieve so much more than they currently did.

"Which one of you is hard enough?" asked 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?"

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 the applause 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.

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, more than 60 young men have already contacted services for help, and more are being accessed every day. They sign a pledge that delivers assistance in response to their stopping carrying weapons and giving up violence.

As a piece of theatre this day was unrivalled. As a piece of practical public health or applied criminology it was without parallel in our experience. And it was certainly a very different day in Glasgow Sheriff Court.

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