

Street Weapons Commission Birmingham

Ann Oakes Odger

Cherie Blair

Well welcome Ann Oakes-Odger. You founded Knife Crimes.Org after your son, Westley, was stabbed to death in 2005.

Ann Oakes-Odger

Yes. Yes.

Cherie Blair

And I know that you feel very strongly that the authorities are not paying enough attention to the menace of knife crime.

Ann Oakes-Odger

Well I actually feel that over the last 15 years in particular we've had various people bring up the issue of knife crime, and actually bring it up in the Commons, and it's generally then faded away under the radar of gun crime. After this happened to Westley, I actually looked back over the previous 15 years going back to, for argument's sake, Stephen Lawrence, then followed by Philip Lawrence, the teacher at the school gates. And I really found that there was a relevance in what was happening in schools, linked again with the perpetrators of Westley's death, who both of them had a long history of carrying knives going back to their school years and their teens. One of the perpetrators was 31 and one was 36, so to me there was a relevance and a correlation to the way they had grown-up and progressed into crime. Prior to actually the petitions that I launched, and putting a memorandum into the Home Affairs Select Committee in March of 2007, I located some figures on knife fatalities via the local MP. And I actually found that we had in the previous nine years 2,026 knife fatalities, as opposed to 601 fatal gun incidents. So, therefore, we're looking at three to four times more likely that somebody would be involved in a knife incident. And I personally felt that well

youngsters don't automatically gravitate to becoming involved in guns, there's usually a progression, and how could we actually deal with that possible progression to serious crime? And to me the obvious element to start at is the issue of knife crime. Prior to April of last year, we never actually kept any figures as to how many knife incidents were actually happening on our streets. There were previous to that figures involving gun incidents and I think the public's perception of gun crime is you know vastly greater than the nine years' figures of 601 fatalities. Neither should be happening to anyone, whether it be a fatality from a knife or a gun, but in terms of how we tackle that issue I feel that knife crime is the serious element that we can start at first off.

Cherie Blair

Now you actually go into the schools and you target Year 7 pupils in particular and you try and speak to them in their language, if I can put it that way. I think you have a, you've brought us one of your publications here.

Ann Oakes-Odger

Yes. Initially I took a training course with Be Safe, which is ACPO recognised. And we go into the schools and show the young, Year 7s in particular, what can happen if they carry a weapon in the foolish belief that it will protect them. Generally speaking, somebody that comes at somebody with an attacking mentality, possibly to rob someone or in a confrontation, the mentality of the person coming at them is greater than the person who's looking to defend themselves. So it's actually more likely that the person that pulls out the knife to protect themselves will have that knife taken from them. And when you show young people graphic photographs of fingers hanging off and other injuries inflicted by their own knife, they do tend to take stock.

Cherie Blair

It's interesting that you identify this question of knives for protection, because when people are asked why they carry knives most people do not say, "I'm carrying a knife because I intend to attack anybody." Most of them say, "I've only got it there for my own protection." So you're addressing a very real issue.

Ann Oakes-Odger

Well, we're not only addressing an issue in the school level, but there are some people, as we all recognise, once they become embroiled in crime that will also say they carry it for protection. Unfortunately, they're not usually being very truthful about that. What my approach if you like, following the death of Westley, was to actually get to Year 7s in particular, because at Year 7 they're just going up into the senior school. They have to deal with older boys and girls that possibly will intimidate them. Many of the children that I've spoken to in different areas of the country, for argument's sake London, Basildon, which is Essex. I've been to Cleveland, to Leeds. Different areas children do respond differently. When you actually say to somebody in one county, "What does it conjure up when you think of a knife," there'll be a whole stream of slang words that may be used in one area that won't be used in another area. To actually try to say to Year 7s, "Look, you know to go through life without looking at the consequences of becoming involved in possible abuses, such as drugs and alcohol, to become involved possibly in crime through ignorance has huge consequences. It has consequences to other people, but it also has consequences to the person, through ignorance sometimes and through deliberate involvement in crime at other times. But when you actually point out that career prospects are affected, travel to America, for argument's sake, they're things that often youngsters don't think about. But in that first year of senior school, when they have so many things to think of as well as their becoming an adult from a child, you know there's the combination of puberty, of wanting to appear big and confident to other

people, this can often you know be something which fuels the possible carrying of something to protect themselves.

Cherie Blair

And bullying in school presumably also plays a part in that?

Ann Oakes-Odger

Well, yes, very much so. I mean we know that people talk about making families responsible if people get involved in antisocial behaviour. But realistically we can't go into people's home and say you know, "Hey, let's look at how you're interacting with your child in terms of good behaviour." So to me the school is the perfect place to speak to young people, where we can of course invite parents as well.

Cherie Blair

Let me bring Mark in here.

Mark Johnson

My question was so am I right in thinking that it's an information giving sort of project, or do you actually engage sort of one-on-one with individual children or it says there about the victims of crime and stuff? Do you engage or is it just information on drugs, knife and...?

Ann Oakes-Odger

Well last year, for argument's sake, we had a number of fatalities in the Basildon area, and I linked in with the Safer Schools Officer and went and gave talks to the children there on the basis of assemblies. I took pictures of Westley growing-up and focused on Westley at their age. So in terms of speaking to them, they were becoming...Westley was a real person to them by the time I explained to them what actually happened to Westley. Not only

was the information about the loss of Westley and the knock-on effect to us as a family and the ripple effect out into the community, but also I gave them something else to think about, which is the perpetrators and the knock-on effect within their family and their community and what actually happens when somebody goes to prison. So, you know there's more than one aspect to the information that they're given. Now there was a huge resistance last year with many schools and many headteachers feeling concerned that if they had, for argument's sake, weapons awareness in their schools that people would think they have a problem. So I've taken the view throughout 2007, that we would have a programme in 2008 that reached every Year 7 in Essex. And how we tackled that was by linking in with Essex Police, who have been very, very forward-thinking and I believe leading the way in tackling antisocial behaviour, and we worked together to broaden the scope of the 2 Smart Roadshow that is running at the moment. The previous 11 years, that roadshow, which is very professional, focused on mainly drugs. What we have done is broadened the programme to engage bullying, drugs, alcohol and knives. So the roadshow, which is in progress at the moment, by the end of July will reach approximately 15,000 Year 7s in Essex. And that links in with other agencies in terms of drugs, the CDRP; we also link that in with victims' support groups. And from the roadshows I am already booked for a number of schools that last year were horrified at the thought of having weapons awareness. Now how we are following up the roadshows is in a number of ways. That's with the Safer Schools Officers. The Safer Schools Programme is UK-wide, so you know that is something that is already established within each police force. The Essex Policy Authority also are running a youth engagement, so that we are having a sequence of citizenship days, assemblies. This will reinforce the information that is in the programmes that each child will receive.

Cherie Blair

Let me bring Geoffrey in.

Lord Geoffrey Dear

Mrs Oakes-Odger, thank you very much for coming. I wonder if I could just switch the focus a little bit onto video gaming. We received some evidence in London I think it was earlier, but not in this session, from people who tended to say that video gaming, particularly with virtual reality video gaming, was one of the drivers behind violent behaviour. And I wondered if you had a view on that, dealing as you do close-up with young and impressionable children and young people who very often are exposed to this sort of technology? Did you have a view on that?

Ann Oakes-Odger

Well I do have a view on that. I think that you know if you look back to the original days when advertising first became a medium used on the TV, there used to be such a thing as subliminal shots, which was banned. Now, subliminal shots were banned because it was considered that it was basically interrupting the normal psyche of one's thinking. And I believe that video games and violent PlayStation games have the same effect. I do think that also, rightly or wrongly – if I should say this or not – I'm going to say it anyway, I do think that many of the soaps also could tone and should tone some of the storylines, because the young mind is very impressionable. And it's been proven by a number of studies that throughout even our adult years our minds are still capable of being, what's the word, malleable to information. And I do think we have a responsibility as adults to protect our children and the information that is input. And if we cannot actually tone the information that they're receiving, because I find it very difficult to believe we can turn back the tide of video streaming, we must give them the balance of information. We cannot allow young people to live in a twilight zone of reality and non-reality.

Lord Geoffrey Dear

Yeah, thank you for that. Thank.

Cherie Blair

Let me just bring Howard in here.

Howard Williamson

Ann, yeah, well thanks for coming again, because I know you've come a very long way. I was interested in this point that you make about the weapons awareness interventions, and in the paperwork it says you're drawing on a wealth of experience in the field of drug and addictions counselling. And given the fact that there's a million ways to present this kind of stuff to different children of different ages...

Ann Oakes-Odger

Mmm hmm.

Howard Williamson

...I was just wondering what you mean by that and what you draw from that to inform the job that you're trying to do in schools?

Ann Oakes-Odger

Well, initially I'll draw you back to the roadshows. The roadshow goes out in a very interactive way. We have Nav Oojageer, who you will see on the front cover, who is a basketball player. He covers the issue of drugs in an interactive way with that age group by linking that in with sports, linking that in with the fact that in order for him to have played for England as he did as he went through his growing-up years, he could only learn to play basketball by playing netball with the girls. And therefore the message that goes across to

young people is this: that sometimes to achieve our dreams you know we have to endure and be courageous about how we get there and not be tempted by drug enhancements, such as steroids, or being put off by bullying, which is one of our main messages. The rest of the show covers all the issues that we feel fuel antisocial behaviour, by again interactively sending out the message through theatre. We have the London Bus Theatre Company, which actually does various different scenarios throughout the show. On each day that we perform the roadshow, there's 90 minutes of interactive information that goes out to those children that view the shows. And thereafter, once we have the bookings to go into the school, we then take that on a much more serious level, because at that point you've opened the door to raising the awareness of the consequences of possible...

Cherie Blair

Let me bring Ian in.

Ian Levy

Okay. Yeah, thank you.

Ann Oakes-Odger

Yeah.

Ian Levy

Hi, Ann. I'm just looking at the figures that you've got here with the amount of fatalities, knife fatalities, between 2000 and – sorry, between 1997 and 2006. What are your views in relation to the availability of knives? Obviously these kids are getting knives or are having knives. It must come from some source. What are your views on the source of knives and what should be done about the actual people who sell knives?

Ann Oakes-Odger

Well I think that certainly the Violent Crime Reduction Act, which was at the bill stage when this actually happened to Westley, through various petitions the penalties for being caught carrying a weapon were increased. Unfortunately, I think a lot of the time those that are carrying knives out on our street, those that are beyond if you like the school message of prevention, those that are actually taking part in violence and carrying knives with intent, aren't really having those penalties imposed to send out the correct message. But going back to your point about knives, that's why the education is so important. We cannot say, "Well we're going to ban knives," because we eat our food with knives. This is the important message that we need to get across to young people, and that is at what point do we take the knife that is our you know implement that we use to eat our food, prepare our food, at what point does that become the lethal weapon and the very crucial killing machine that a knife is, at what point do you see that as a young person as becoming a weapon? And the answer is as soon as they take that from the front door.

Ian Levy

I notice that there's a correlation between the use of gun and the use of knife. Well what I'm trying to get at is that at the moment there's a mandatory sentence for carrying a gun.

Ann Oakes-Odger

Mmm hmm.

Ian Levy

Are you suggesting or advocating that there should also be a mandatory sentence for carrying a knife instead of a maximum sentence, that is now available?

Ann Oakes-Odger

Well I do think that we, in terms of carrying a gun, a person being found carrying a gun, a person being found carrying a knife, I think that what we have in place is fine enough as a message of deterrent if that is actually enforced. I know of many instances where the mandatory sentence for being found to carrying a gun is not actually implemented. So, I'm not actually looking to say, "Well we need a mandatory sentence for somebody being found carrying a knife." What I would say is that whatever laws that we have in place should be seen as a clear message of deterrent by those sentences being enforced when a person you know is caught. You know we have to not only give young people the opportunity of having information that arms them with becoming responsible members of society, but we also need to show them that if they step and make the choice, the wrong choice, to go down the wrong road, then those penalties are there and clear and are delivered. The one thing that I find a good thing and refreshing is the response I've received from 11 and 12-year-olds to the story and to the message that I have been taking into those schools. When they realise that I am a mother who is telling a real story about my son's life having been taken, and they see the pictures of him wearing a school uniform the same as they are, you can hear a pin drop. They do take that onboard. And equally I'm in favour of those youngsters that veer off the correct road when they leave school getting the help that they need to steer them back on the right road. But equally those that persistently decide to continue to have a criminal mentality and a recidivist attitude towards society must pay the penalty and seen to pay that penalty. You know we must reward good children as well as you know steer others that are going off the rails back on the rails.

Cherie Blair

Ann Oakes-Odger, thank you.

Ann Oakes-Odger

Thank you.

Commissioner

Thank you very much.

Commissioner

Thank you.

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