

Street Weapons Commission - Birmingham

Barbara Sawyer

Cherie Blair

Well, Barbara Sawyers, thank you for coming. You of course lost your son, Daniel, in what turned out to be quite an infamous shooting...

Barbara Sawyers

Yeah.

Cherie Blair

...here in Birmingham.

Barbara Sawyers

Yeah.

Cherie Blair

And now you're involved in an organisation called Mothers In Pain. And I wonder whether you would tell us something about what it's like to be the victim of this sort of terrible crime.

Barbara Sawyers

Well it's something that I wouldn't wish on anybody. And my son, August coming it'll be five years, and I can't really explain it. It's like I take a day at a time; I go day-to-day. And it really saddens me now that nearly every other day you read or you watch the television it's still happening. And that just ... I'm very saddened by that. It breaks my heart to know ... well whatever's happening it's not enough basically. Whatever the Government are doing it's not enough.

Cherie Blair

And what does Mothers In Pain do?

Barbara Sawyers

Well what we do, we came about – it's not just myself, it's another named Thelma Perkins – her son was shot, but he didn't die. That was about four years ago. My son's would have been five. And we just got together because we realised there was nothing out there for us. There was no ... no offence to the police – in my case the police done an excellent job – they caught the criminals and they're now behind bars – but there was other I found we ... going around Birmingham finding there's other families who the police weren't so supportive to them. You know there was one instance where as a mother who's son got shot the police actually wrote their details on a packet of...a Rizla paper. You know there's no feeling in it and we're saying, "Who's caring for us?" So we just set up this organisation on the back-end of that, like we support parents who've gotta go to court with their children or problems at school, and we also have a Saturday class that we take in children, teach them to cook, creative stuff and one-to-one sessions, group sessions and ... not so much mentoring, but we talk to them to try and show them the life of the gun and the knife is not the way. You know we try to build ... I dunno, I suppose boost them up and give them some kind of self-worth.

Cherie Blair

But were you aware that your son was involved in what we've been calling gang culture?

Barbara Sawyers

My son wasn't involved in a gang culture. The court, the judge actually said, the findings were, which I hate this term...

Cherie Blair

Mmm hmm.

Barbara Sawyers

...my son was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Cherie Blair

Mmm hmm.

Barbara Sawyers

And he was born here, but is the wrong place at the wrong time. And it was mistaken identity.

Cherie Blair

But...

Barbara Sawyers

He had no criminal convictions, nothing like that. He worked at McDonald's part-time and college the other half of his life.

Cherie Blair

But in fact I think the reason your son was killed was because of a sort of squabble between gangs, even though he was the wrong...

Barbara Sawyers

Yeah, it was gang-related.

Cherie Blair

Yeah.

Barbara Sawyers

It was to do with drugs and things which had nothing to do with my son.

Cherie Blair

Yeah.

Barbara Sawyers

Which makes me even sadder. He would have been – he was 19 when they shot him, he would have been 24 now.

Cherie Blair

Mmm hmm.

Barbara Sawyers

I have two more children and my life's changed completely cos I'm very protective. I mean so much so that me and my son, who'll be 21 this year, we kinda like clash because if I hear a siren I'm phoning him, "Are you alright?"

Cherie Blair

Yeah. You're frightened for him.

Barbara Sawyers

Yeah. And I'm not giving him a chance to live his life cos I'm that frightened.

Cherie Blair

But with your, now with your...through your Mothers In Pain...

Barbara Sawyers

Mmm.

Cherie Blair

...you must have come through and met with other mothers whose children have been involved in gangs?

Barbara Sawyers

Oh, well, yeah. One of the mothers, I mean the one thing I do admire about her she will say

her son was affiliated with the gangs.

Cherie Blair

Mmm hmm.

Barbara Sawyers

You know and that's why I have that respect for her because quite...what I find in like people that we mingle with, they're like in denial: my son or my child wouldn't do that. And we know full well they are. They're not as innocent as they make out some of them. But we're not here to judge anybody, we're just trying to get them to understand ... stop doing that and try and live as decent a life as possible.

Cherie Blair

But sometimes I think it's hard for parents, isn't it, to actually know what's happening with their children, because not every child who's involved in gang culture is necessarily a bad boy or obviously identified as a child that's going off the rails? Sometimes it comes as a complete surprise to the parents to find out what their children are doing outside of home. Would you find that?

Barbara Sawyers

I do find that, but like I say I mean in my experiences a lot of these parents do know. Some of them do know that their children are involved. And like I say it's this denial thing, my child wouldn't do that, when we know. I mean we have to go work, those of us who choose to work, and it is hard when you're trying to juggle work and a family. You know having to leave them and you know put your trust in them. You think 'I've gotta work because we've gotta pay bills'. I mean when my son died I took the first six months I took off work I had a letter come through the post from where I work I'm going into half pay. And it was as real to me as that. I mean I was mourning and grieving for my son, but life still went on.

Cherie Blair

Mmm hmm.

Barbara Sawyers

I had to pay bills. And it's little things like that and this is the reality of the like little...it's probably trivial things, but you're thinking 'I can't even grieve for my child. I've got to go on as normal'.

Cherie Blair

Yeah, that's not trivial at all. But do you think that this whole question...a lot of people have said you know it's the family's fault, it's family breakdown. What's your feeling about that?

Barbara Sawyers

I think it's a mixture of everything. I think it's...I mean this is me personally, it's just me, I mean there's no disciplines in schools anymore. I mean I was born here, I was schooled here. I'm not saying I enforce punishment like the cane and things, but there were deterrents for us and there's nothing now. I mean these children they're kind of even, for their ages, are very tall and big

for their ages and muscular you know and these little teachers. And things like you can't even speak to them some of them. And if you do, "I'm gonna tell my mum or my dad," and the parents come up and wanna have a go as well. There's just nothing. And as I say some parents are like that. They are that way; they just don't care. And it makes it look bad for all of us cos some

of us do care. We're not all bad and we're not all out there to think 'Well, I've got my children, let them look after their self,' because I know a lot of parents who let their children fend for their selves. And it's not because they're working, they're out there doing nothing.

Cherie Blair

Ian, do you want?

Ian Levy

From your biog here I've seen where you said, "One of the things that is lacking is more things for young people to do." That is something that we've come across quite a bit with people constantly asking for more things for young people to do. But do you think that we will get to a point that you know how much is more that is needed, and also what do you think is needed?

Barbara Sawyers

When I say more it's ... I mean I tend, like I say, I'm just an ordinary mother. I turn the television on and I see the Government say the statistics are going down in crime and millions of pounds have been sent out. I live in an area known as Smethwick where my son was murdered. There's nothing there. There's nothing for the children. So I'm a mother, I'm a victim, my son is dead

and I'm saying to myself, "Well, five years down the line in my case where is this money going? Is it going to the right people?" Because where I live they hang out on street corners, they do nothing. There's no youth clubs, there's nothing for them. So the question is it's not a case of more. What I think is, my concern is the way the funding's ... how you go about applying for

funding. And I think if you can't use the right jargon your application's not even looked at. And I haven't got the experience as...

Cherie Blair

We've noticed that a number of times.

Commissioner

Yeah.

Barbara Sawyers

...professional people to write the fancy words. The only experience I have is I buried my son at 19. That's all I've got. And I think that should be enough. I am not in it for financial

gain, I'm in it to make a difference; to say, "I don't want another family to feel like how we are feeling." And we'll be feeling like this the rest of our life.

Cherie Blair

Liam, I think.

Liam Black

Hi, Barbara.

Barbara Sawyers

Hi.

Liam Black

One of the purposes of this Commission is to try and identify stuff that's going on locally that's good stuff and to try and find ways that that could be scaled up or replicated to have a beneficial impact on other parts of the country. In the background papers that have been given to us about you, it's said that you argue that too many organisations and groups involved in tackling violent youth crime do not in truth really want to put an end to it, because that would mean an end to their funding and their sense of self-importance.

Barbara Sawyers

This is what I believe. It's my...

Liam Black

That's quite a claim.

Barbara Sawyers

It's my personal exp...I mean the first time, like five years ago, I'm not gonna name – I don't do that, I won't name anybody, I mean that's for the Government to find out – they're

sending the money out, it's for them to find out where it's going – but this particular trust came up to me, I'm a vulnerable mother, I've lost my son, "Oh, we can help to do this." That's all I wanted to

her cos I wanted to make this difference. And all this person done was use my name on his application bid to get money. I never seen him again. You know and this is – I know that for a fact – and this is what I'm saying. There's a lot of people, and I actually use the word, they're prostituting off, or pimping even, off people like my dead child. Because it's ... without my son and

people like them who are dead, and they are innocent – whether they're innocent or guilty they're dead – they're young kids – they're our future – they're dead – they're dying – some people think 'Oh yes, I can jump onto this and I can make money'. They don't want it to end. Not all, because there's some really good causes out there and there's a lot of things happening that

are positive. But I think the Government need to sift out the rubbish and move it on and put people who the interest is sincere. How you're gonna do that I don't know, but if it was me I would say to you when the Government actually read a bid I think they just stamp it because it looks nice. They need to send people out to these organisations or trust or however they give their

money to and they need to say, "I need to see the success. I want to see the bodies behind these names. And I want them to give a testimony and say to me how has this organisation changed their life." I personally think it should be done like that. Not like a written document. Someone sits there, 'Oh yes, it sounds nice. We'll stamp it and give it to them'. Because I find, this is five

years in my life, I don't see nothing, not much has changed. Not a lot. It should be a lot more that's changed. I mean how I say, how I've come to that conclusion, turn the television on, people are still dying. Children are still dying.

Cherie Blair

Geoffrey I think has a question.

Lord Geoffrey Dear

Barbara, I really wanted to change the subject if I may. First of all thank you for coming. It's very good of you to come and sit there in front of the cameras. We were taking evidence in London last week and there seemed to be a division of opinion from some of the people that we spoke to about whether gangs really exist. Groups exist, some people were saying, but gangs not, which surprised me. And I noticed in the written material you provided us with before we came here that you're talking about violent youth crime in Birmingham and you think it's a very real issue, and statistically it is; the youths are getting younger, and I think that's a statistic as well; and you talk about postcode identities with gangs. And I wondered if you could help

us to – or help me particularly – to understand how gangs are formed, how they operate, cos you're working very closely to these groupings now and whether you think the gang is really a problem rather than just groups of youths?

Barbara Sawyers

Well I would ask the question does it matter what you call them, groups or gangs?

Lord Geoffrey Dear

Yeah.

Barbara Sawyers

They are...It doesn't make...I don't...With terminology that doesn't really matter to me.

Lord Geoffrey Dear

Yeah.

Barbara Sawyers

You might say groups, you might say gangs.

Lord Geoffrey Dear

Yeah.

Barbara Sawyers

There are young people that are ... they have no confidence in anything, they have no self-worth. They feel they join together and do whatever they want to do. And they are starting very young. I mean I know there's people at the age of ten.

Lord Geoffrey Dear

Can you tell me something about this postcode identity, which seems to indicate they do form into a group or gang, whichever you call it, which is identifiable?

Barbara Sawyers

Well it's basically where you come from. Where you live...

Lord Geoffrey Dear

Yeah.

Barbara Sawyers

...you class that as your postcode area.

Lord Geoffrey Dear

Mmm.

Barbara Sawyers

I think America they use something else. London do, I think they all do it.

Lord Geoffrey Dear

Yeah. Yeah.

Barbara Sawyers

I mean I'm not into all those figures and things like that, you'll have to ask somebody else who knows that, but what my experience is, like I live in an area known as Smethwick and that's classed as B66.

Lord Geoffrey Dear

Yeah.

Barbara Sawyers

And everywhere you go you see this graffiti, B66 Smether-up Crew and all the rest of it. And then there's the Raiders that belong to I believe it's West Brom. I don't even remember. And then there's the postcode to do with Lozells areas. But what makes me kind of...fascinates me, how do they know who belongs to who because as far as I see all I see is young people. And even where we keep our, for example, even where we keep our Saturday day class session, some of them are very wary of coming into that area because they don't want to crossover because they don't wanna be seen by somebody else.

Lord Geoffrey Dear

Do you see a hierarchy in those groupings, with somebody or a small number leading and the rest following? Do you see that?

Barbara Sawyers

Not so much now, but I think years ago when it was known as the Johnsons and the Burgers, the older generation...

Lord Geoffrey Dear

Mmm.

Barbara Sawyers

...I think the young ones are just doing it for the sake of...they like dropping off the big seed

so to speak and they're doing their own little...forming their own little groups. I mean if you ask them why they don't even know. Whatever they tell it makes no sense. No disrespect to the young people, it doesn't make any sense.

Lord Geoffrey Dear

Mmm.

Barbara Sawyers

Cos how can you tell somebody, "You can't go to that shop there because it's, you know..."

Lord Geoffrey Dear

The wrong postcode.

Barbara Sawyers

Yeah, and this is what we're trying to get round to them: you're actually being silly, you know in a nice way. We try to school them and say, "Well what's this postcode all about?" And half of the things the young people don't even know. Cos what we...we'll go anywhere and what we find they like the same food, they dress the same, the listen to the same music. They all are the same and this is what I can't understand. So really that question shouldn't be asked to me, it should be asked to them.

Lord Geoffrey Dear

Yeah.

Barbara Sawyers

They'll probably tell you more than I could.

Lord Geoffrey Dear

Thank you.

Cherie Blair

Howard, yeah.

Howard Williamson

Yes, Barbara, another change of tack. Schools and education. A lot of people are telling us that it's gotta start with education. And the paperwork we've got from you tells us that you're concerned about kids getting excluded from school and then abandoned, forgotten about.

Barbara Sawyers

Yeah. Yeah.

Howard Williamson

And we're looking for sort of concrete ideas about well what would you do? I mean how would you not abandon and try to help them stay on the right track?

Barbara Sawyers

Well the thing is there's all these titles out there. When these kids are excluded from school there's all these places where they're supposed to go.

Howard Williamson

Mmm.

Barbara Sawyers

And I know for a fact these children they're not forced to go there.

Howard Williamson

Mmm.

Barbara Sawyers

You know I don't know if it's law that they have to go there but they don't get up. They're just...it's an excuse. Once they're excluded that is when they start...that's definitely when they're gonna end up the wrong side of the coin so to speak. You'll hear about all these services then I'll call them. But I don't...whether they exist or not they're not really effective. They're not effective for the young people because...

Howard Williamson

Well what would you do?

Barbara Sawyers

I wouldn't really exclude them like that. I'd, personally speaking, I'd try to understand them, because I don't think ... unless you're born bad – I don't know if that's something for a psychologist to ask answer – but there's usually problems in someone's life why they have to act a certain way. You know and you don't just distance them, you bring them in a bit more I think. I mean it's easy said than done, but probably therapy or whatever. But you can't just throw them out. And you're talking about like 10/11-year-old. You can't just throw them out and...I mean I've got a mother who's had four children and bar one of her children they've all been thrown out of school at the age of ten. And she had no aftercare, nothing. And it's not because she hasn't hunted for it. She says, "Everywhere I go, Barbara, no one cares." She's done all the so-called channels where she's supposed to go down the avenues, nobody cares. And it's only when the kids get into the system of like prison system that is when people wanna care for them. It's too late. Is there nothing to prevent them before that? If you can spot something, I mean teachers are trained to be psychologists or whatever, can't they spot when something isn't right? It can be any reason. You can't just pick on a child because you don't like the child or ... there's gotta be a reason why they cause so much trouble.

Howard Williamson

So you're arguing for strong punishment later down the track, if young people get that far, but...

Barbara Sawyers

I'm not saying...Yeah.

Howard Williamson

...early on arguing for a lot more support, intervention?

Barbara Sawyers

Yeah. They need a lot more, because I'm saying, "Why is it that the support comes always when they're always in the prison system?" When they've already gone bad that's when people wanna help them if you understand what I'm saying.

Howard Williamson

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Barbara Sawyers

What about long before? If you can identify things. You know there's little ... if there's like even community groups that you can call in to schools to speak to them, because there's gotta be somebody who will be willing to listen to them and they will be willing to listen to the ... you know. Do you understand what I'm saying?

Howard Williamson

Yeah. Sure. Okay. Thank you.

Cherie Blair

Well I think, Barbara, you yourself going into, as you do, and you talk about these things...

Barbara Sawyers

Mmm.

Cherie Blair

...you're able to make a connection with some of these kids at least.

Barbara Sawyers

Well, yeah. We had a young man the other day, he was an ASBO, and we took him in under our wing as Mothers In Pain. He's now doing three days a week mentoring young people in the schools. And he was like basically given up to say 'Well he's finished' And we...

Cherie Blair

He's jut a bad boy.

Barbara Sawyers

Yeah, well that's what he was labelled as.

Cherie Blair

Mmm hmm.

Barbara Sawyers

But you just, and sometime it's just having the time to talk and the right people to talk to these. It's not, no offence to these – sorry, this is my language, it's the way I talk – there's no offence to the stuck-up snobs and that, but get people on their level who understand them. It's no point having somebody who's just come out of university talking to them, because they're gonna be thinking 'What the hell are you talking about?' You need people of the same community or the same understanding to understand. And like people like us we're living the problem every day. People like us we're living it every day and we know what the problems are. We probably can't solve them without help, but we can try and get in there at least rather than just give them up.

Cherie Blair

Well, thank you, Barbara Sawyers, for coming in and sharing that with us. And interestingly this morning that was also the message that the people who'd had businesses in [INAUDIBLE] were telling us to.

Barbara Sawyers

Thank you.

Commissioner

Yeah, thanks, Barbara.

Barbara Sawyers

Thanks.

Commissioner

Thank you very much.

CHATTER

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