

The Street Weapon's Commission – Birmingham

Mark Edwards

Chair - Cherie Booth

Well welcome Mark Edwards, founder of Young Disciples and working I think in the area of Layzell's where we were this morning ourselves. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and what Young Disciples does?

Mark Edwards

Okay my name's Mark Edwards as you know, founder member of Young Disciples which was founded about eight years ago. Bit about myself; I'm from Birmingham, I've lived in inner city areas for most of life, so I've experienced a lot of the traumas and the issues which disaffected young people face. Myself, I come from a poor family, grown up in a single parent environment, and that's basically it.

Chair - Cherie Booth

And the work that Young Disciples does?

Mark Edwards

Well Young Disciples, we work with socially excluded young persons and the families as well within the Birmingham area, with the key premise to work with the more extremely socially isolated young people who normally don't engage in public services or in any type of provision.

Chair - Cherie Booth

So how can you engage with these young people when other services are failing?

Mark Edwards

Well it's to do with the knowledge base. I would say that, because of my experience and my background, that we have a wider knowledge base of the

terrain in which we're working in, and also as well being from the local area it's more of a relationship that we have with the young people in the area. I think the reason why some of the agencies have a more distant relationship is because of the lack of knowledge of the terrain, so I think Young Disciples, what we use is that kind of niche to actually access these youngsters.

Chair - Cherie Booth

Mark.

Mark Johnson

Hi again Mark.

Mark Edwards

Hi.

Mark Johnson

So how much do you think, having had the experience yourself, it has an impact on the work you do with young people?

Mark Edwards

I think obviously me coming from a socially excluded background has a major impact...

Mark Johnson

What, excuse me, what does socially excluded mean?

Mark Edwards

Socially excluded means that you're actually excluded from most of the mainstream services, it could mean that you're deprived from education or excluded from education, it could mean that you're coming from a poor

working class background, and you could say touching the slants of under class.

Chair - Cherie Booth

And Mark you were a bad boy in fact weren't you?

Mark Edwards

Well...

Chair - Cherie Booth

In that, in inverted commas, I mean were involved in crime...

Mark Edwards

Yes I have been involved in crime.

Chair - Cherie Booth

... and guns.

Mark Edwards

Well [LAUGHING] I have experienced a lot of the issues which the young people in this area face and...

Chair - Cherie Booth

So is it boys like you that you're engaging with? Or like you were.

Mark Edwards

Yes I would say that, and I would say that that is one of the solutions. I don't know if you've heard of this metaphor before but if somebody has a snake bite and they actually used the same venom to create an antidote, and I believe that if somebody has come from a criminal background or from a

disaffected past, if they've been transformed or if they've gone through the process which I have done, and that they can be utilised to work back with the same client where they're coming from, we've seen these models rolled out across the world where ex offenders have actually gone back into prison to work with prisoners on rehabilitative programmes, we've seen the fact that persons who have turned their lives around within local communities have gone back and tried to put some type of structure in place to help young people not to go down the same routes that they went down, and I think that being bi-lingual I wanna say being bi-lingual, having the cultural literacy to understand where these youngsters come from, I think that I can actually help to translate some of the kind of challenges which the young people face.

Commissioner

Couple of things Mark, thanks for coming, I mean one thing about [Handsworth] [Aston] [Layzell's] [INAUDIBLE] New Town is that for 20 years, more than 20 years, hundreds of thousands, millions of pounds have been thrown at a range of different kind of challenges, and even walking around today we see the Methodist Youth Club, we see the whole school, we see you know, there's lots of things that could be happening, or should be happening, now you're relatively new, you set this up, you're another bit of the jigsaw, it seems that you're doing a good job but there's always the question about well why doesn't, why don't things knit together more effectively. Shop keepers, Faith groups, community projects, Local Authority, to address not just the kind of sharp end of the stuff that we're talking about, but also just education exclusion, and all the other things that concern you.

Mark Edwards

Well I think there's a number of issues around that I think obviously there are issues around social cohesion and around integration of communities and various networks as business and the business network and such forth, I think

that some of the reasons behind that, I don't really wanna go into but, when we talked about lots of resources is poured into Birmingham, that may be so, but on the front line where I'm at or what I represent which is a voluntary or the third sector, there is a lack of resource and that resource isn't going in the direction where it needs to go, and that's what I would say.

Commissioner

Is there, I mean hand on heart there is a lack of resource? I mean some people would say that the voluntary sector has been almost over funded to deal with this particular group of young people you're talking about, so why hasn't it reached them, but you are?

Mark Edwards

Well if you look at, let's look at some costs then. To incarcerate a young offender in a YOI, a Young Offenders Institute, it costs the Government about £50,000. To house a young person which is in a secure unit costs about £200,000, so let's look at those costs. I run a youth programme for one year which has to engage over 30 young persons a week and I get £60,000, so the cost that the, the equation of the costs that it amounts to, to house one single young person...

Commissioner

No I wasn't talking about costs, you were damming about the absence of funding over the voluntary sector, I was suggesting that there is quite a lot of funding.

Mark Edwards

Yeah sorry for that, sorry. The reason why I was saying is to explain to you the kind of differences, or the imbalance then of that equation in the fact that us within the voluntary sector we have to work on shoestring budgets like

what I just mentioned to you, to create massive [mounting] outputs which sometimes is impossible. Now if that same resource which it takes to house one young offender was put back into the voluntary sector and we could use that resource to work with young people to prevent them from going to prison, I think that would be a lot way forward from where we are at now.

Chair - Cherie Booth

Liam.

Liam Black

Hi Mark. In a lot of the testimony we've heard it comes back to schools and education and the school system letting down young people who get excluded and then end up in trouble and so on, and in the paperwork that we've been provided about you one of your big views on resolving violent youth crime is about providing non-academic children with a meaningful experience, education should be more creative and more tailored to individuals. Can you be as specific as you can about what that person, that more tailored curriculum for individuals would look like.

Mark Edwards

I'll give you an example. At the moment we wanna a social inclusion programme through music, at the moment we're working with a wide range of youngsters around that, some extremely excluded young persons and some young persons which are at the verge, some of the young people we work with having learning difficulties, slightly dyslexic, slightly autistic, so their learning style is quite different to the general masses, so in a school setting they will struggle. Now what we do now through our music programme we introduce them to computers, so they become computer literate, in a school setting they're quite frightened of that setting, to go behind a computer, but because they learn in a more audio and pictorial way we've managed to

utilise our creativity and design programmes around that where they can still learn, and that is the initiation and then what we do is take them through a process, because after you've learnt them the literacy of computers you can then introduce them to the internet, then you can introduce them to the CLATE and then you can move them on and move them on. That's just one small example.

Commissioner

What's CLATE?

Mark Edwards

CLATE is a basic compute course which goes through word processing, PowerPoint and the basic Microsoft packages.

Commissioner

But I mean that doesn't sound very revolutionary, teaching them how to use computers and... what would be different, that goes on in schools, are you talking about it should be more of a one to one thing or...

Mark Edwards

Well to be honest with you, it's not really, there's no rocket science in what we're actually doing, it's just the variation of our approach. We're using the same mediums, we're using the same kind of processes but we're putting a bit of creativity in it. So, in other words, if we wanted to bring a young person through an academic programme and we wanted them, the outcome of that programme for them to learn something, if you're a teacher in a school and I'm a teacher in a community setting, you're more in a rigid structure, you have to follow a set curriculum, in my framework now I've got a more liberal experience that I can give to that youngster, I'm not bound...

Commissioner

So you're gonna exempt young people like this from the national curriculum?

Mark Edwards

Sorry say that again, sorry.

Commissioner

You'd exempt young people like this from the national curriculum?

Mark Edwards

Would I exempt?

Commissioner

Yes.

Mark Edwards

No I wouldn't say I would exempt, what I would do is intervene and offer them the assistance which they need. Now in a school setting, which we do a lot of work in, we actually support and assist teachers, it's not something which is extraordinary what we're doing, we work alongside at schools, alongside the curriculum but we approach it from a different way. We do have a lot of outreach programmes which is very effective in the schools, and some of the outputs of those programmes is that young persons who have been excluded have been re-integrated back into school and they haven't had no other problems from them, and since that we've now got a contract with the school and the success at the moment is 100 percent. So programmes like that should be looked at as good practice and should be capitalised on, things like that should be resourced, if something's good, you know, if a company or an organisation like Young Disciples in the voluntary sector who's in touch with the community, who's effective and has a knowledge base of the terrain, I

think that, you know, programmes like that should be resourced, should be highlighted as a good practice and rolled out in other localities.

Commissioner

And you, Young Disciples, is it a religious organisation? Is it Disciples as in...

Mark Edwards

I wouldn't say it's a religious organisation but it does have a very high moral fibre in the fact that if you look at the world Disciple I think this whole world has been disciplined, but in various ways. We try to disciple young people in a positive way, just like how Jesus did with his 12 Disciples.

Chair - Cherie Booth

Ian.

Ian Levy

Hi Mark. Just a couple of questions. I notice you mentioned the word good practices, I'm not a fan of those words, but what I would like to get at, we're here to sort of gather some of the good practices if you like to see, you know, what people are doing in various areas, one of the things I'd like to know from your projects that you run, what sort of progression route have you got for any of the young people who you engage with. So, for example, you know, you come into contact with a young person, you've done, you've brought him in under your Disciple-ship if you like and you've done all that you can for him, what is the next step for that young person?

Mark Edwards

Okay, can I speak about individual that I've previously worked with and use that as a case study?

Commissioner

Yes.

Mark Edwards

A young person who I was working with came out of prison, he was inside for over five years, came out and the transition from prison through University now into a job, that's the type of progression that I'm dealing with personally. What we look to do is align ourselves with the existing agencies and actually work in partnership with [INAUDIBLE] We have partnerships with local colleges and we refer young people on to those colleges, but what we try to do is be a bit more pastoral in what we're doing, we try to be a bit more caring and also, you know, it's not like a cattle farm, like a careers office, it's more personal, we can sit down, we can have more time with an individual and work out in a one to one formation what that individual wants to do, and then we can, you know, access the powers that be or the agencies that be, which can assist with that, whether it's further education or higher education.

Ian Levy

So is there support right through the whole progression of this young person so once you come into contact with them you've done your part, you pass them on to a college but you still support them right the way through to the end?

Mark Edwards

Yes. We believe in pastoral mentoring whereby you just don't mentor the person until they're referred to an agency. You [INAUDIBLE] them all the way through because obviously problems might still occur. If I'm getting a young person...

Ian Levy

[INAUDIBLE]

Mark Edwards

Yeah, who's hardcore, coming from a hardcore background, never worked in his life, has minimal experience within an academical setting. If I've put that person in college after working with them I think that they would still need some type of, you know, support, some type of life coaching to bring them through that process, which I think that there isn't a lot of that around. We hear of mentoring but mentoring in that format we don't really see it, we do see learning mentors and community mentors but in that pastoral way it's very few and far between.

Ian Levy

Okay one final question. We, earlier we visited one of your local areas, and one of the things that came across from the businesses is that there's this divide between the business community and people like yourselves, some of them don't, aren't even aware of the existence of projects like yours, and I'm wondering if there could be any sort of link between yourself and the businesses there, which could provide an opportunity for the youngsters, and also the knock on effect could be that they develop a sense of pride in the community.

Mark Edwards

I think, yes, I think there needs to be some relationship building between, you know, the private sector and the voluntary sector for a number of reasons, and the young people as well who are socially excluded because a lot of them actually could be the workforce for these businesses, or potential workforce, and also as well in areas whereby you've got a lot of issues around community safety and anti-social behaviour, and crime, I think that does have impact on businesses so businesses should have a corporate and social

responsibility or invested interest in trying to help to reduce that type of output, and the way that they could do that is probably trying to align themselves around assisting, around some kind of prevention programmes.

Ian Levy

But if they don't know about these prevention programmes that you yourself run, then they can't access it, they can't do that dialogue, so what I'm saying is do you think, you know, there is some value in you getting yourself known to these businesses?

Mark Edwards

I think it would be a, it would be a good thing. I don't think it would be a bad thing, but the thing about it is that it's quite difficult for us to market ourselves and do the work. I don't wanna really go into the culture of the environment of what we work in, because I'm not here for that, but if I could probably have a discussion with you after this I could break it down to you. It's quite difficult to do that. if we could get assistance of some sort of how somebody could lever in that relationship or lever in that support, you know, the voluntary sector I'm sure would, you know, open their arms to it.

Chair - Cherie Booth

Well Mark Edwards, thank you for that.

Mark Edwards

Thank you.

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