

The Street Weapons Commission

Geoff Thompson

Fay Selvan

Hello Geoff. Welcome to the fifth and final hearing of the commission here in Manchester, my home town. And we welcome you to give evidence to us today. Geoff Thompson you are the founder and executive Chair of Youth Charter, but I understand you became the world karate champion in 1986.

Geoff Thompson

'82, '84, '86 for the record.

Fay Selvan

So from karate to gangs and gun and knife crime. Can you tell us about how you're now involved in gun and knife crime?

Geoff Thompson

I think first and foremost speaking by way of my own incredible journey, overcoming my own social and cultural disaffection, when I asked normally as to what I'm doing here I present myself as the epitome of the post War socially and culturally disaffected potential bad boy who without the martial arts and sport would have been outside waiting for you rather than inside here talking to you. I think that is the very philosophy and essence as to why I'm here. But in understanding the work that I've been trying to do over the last 15 years in engaging with another generation who may not have had an opportunity to express and channel their aggression in a positive and forthright way, through the same opportunities that I will have had, and to see them unacceptably using that energy in an aggressive and violent way. And I suppose it was realising the opportunities that sport allowed by giving me a chance to develop the confidence that I lacked, having lost my father at a young age, my mother's tough love and moving from Wolverhampton to the

inner city East End of London, the colour of your skin wasn't so much the problem, it was your accent. So I started learning that there were different tools required to survive in life. I achieved in sport in the eighties, it was a wonderful time. I understood the arrogance of winning and the humility of losing. And found that whilst there were riots happening I was having a good time but they were the communities I came from. And I remember then talking to the Prince's Trust about how we could put something back in the inner cities. Three Prime Ministers, seven to eight Ministers of Sport, God knows how many Secretaries of State, Ministers later, I found myself in Manchester helping their Olympic aspirations and to coin a phrase from Will Carling, sitting around the table with people I might not wish to be. But competitors never sat round the decision process. I was appointed after the inner city riots, after a review group, to Sport England and I then contributed again over some 12 years the role of sport and its social importance in the behaviour, life style and achievement of young people. In 1993 that reality was brought to that point in your life where you need to stand and be counted. A 14 year old school boy was gunned down on the streets of Moss Side. His name was Benji Stanley. The Youth Charter was formed out of that tragedy and that's why I'm here today.

Fay Selvan

So the premise behind the Youth Charter is that sport and interventions like that divert young people way from crime and involvement in gun and knife crime. And you particularly in your evidence to us, you talked about there being a key two hours after school, 3.30 to 5.30, when children or young people are most at risk. How did you come to that conclusion?

Geoff Thompson

I think in realising that, yes, sport was a vaccine and the arts were vaccines, they were hooks. They were not the antidote in the treatment. You needed to

be able to provide vital links and in school the Youth Charter believes that prevention is getting a healthy exposure to the sometimes disruptive energies that you start to provide, in my view, the type of behavioural characteristics of attainment that can see the behaviour in the playground go beyond the school gate. Once you enter the community it's intervention. You've gotta have all those agencies that are supposed to be working with young people and plugging into schools at that front gate. Because there is also someone else on the more negative path that is looking to engage and captivate their hearts and minds. The choices for young people are a lot more varied now, it's a 24/7 society and the language and culture of bling bump and grind I'm afraid is far more appealing if we're not able to engage, motivate and inspire them. That to our window that I speak about is where they can be recruited or begin that first negative step into active life style and gang related activity.

Fay Selvan

So how have you come to that conclusion? Why that two hours?

Geoff Thompson

Many of the young men that we were able to speak to within the work we were developing in the Youth Charter, and one case in point that stays with me was the Moss Side Amateur Reserves. Simply a football team bringing two sides of a gang divide together, realising that they can kick lumps out of one another rather than killing one another. And it was there I began to understand the cause, the effect and the impact of what these young men were currently undergoing. The fear, the lack of hope, but more importantly the motivation to why they felt it was a far better life style choice to pursue recruitment and strengthen their particular part of the turf. Understanding that didn't exactly help because once we had them active and occupied, we needed to employ them. And I found there that it was employability, it was getting the things that they wanted far quicker than earning them. But

reaching that conclusion has come from working with the Moss Side Amateur Reserves and about 30 to 40 different projects that actually represented the arena of Moss Side, which is where the Youth Charter did most of its work and then rolled it out nationally and internationally.

Fay Selvan

Let me ask if my panel members would like to ask anything. Ian.

Ian

In light of the present climate where the facilities for engagement in sports at a very early age in school is constantly being reduced, do you find that your work is that much harder? For example, school playing fields being sold off, etc. Do you find that that presents any major obstacle to the work that you do?

Geoff Thompson

It's the single biggest obstacle. There were three coined phrases we brought back from Los Angeles in 1993 when the times likened Moss Side to LA and Beirut. I've been to LA, haven't been to Beirut, but I couldn't believe that Moss Side would end up like that. And we found the single most important factor was young people needed somewhere to go. Once they've got something, somewhere to go they need something to do. And more importantly once they've got something to do they need someone to show them. Whilst sport has not become sport for all, but only sport for a few, whilst it is not a worthwhile and positive life habit, the disciplines, the channelling of energy and aggression, cannot see us achieve what I would state now for the be-medalled golden era of the eighties, up to 70% of the sports men and women who distinguished themselves for Britain came from socially economically deprived backgrounds. 20% of us could have been at Her Majesty's pleasure rather than leisure. It's a powerful statistic but at the

very heart of what still motivates me but yet frustrates me. Young people need to be taken off the streets, then you can give them some positive activity and more importantly they can start to manage their own activity. And it's one of the major factors we've been overlooking in recent years and I would argue that sport is nowhere near playing its full and wholesome part.

Commissioner

High Geoff. I can understand how important it is for giving kids something to do and training and stuff, but how does that, how do sports tackle some of the deeper, more emotional deprivations of young people?

Geoff Thompson

Let me give you an example. We have three main areas of activity. We go into the schools, we go into the community and we go into young offenders' institutions. Now I said the martial arts have been part of my life since the age of 14. I went through puberty, I had a lot of aggression, testosterone kicked in as the first what I call natural drug, I needed to channel that energy. I walked into one of six facilities. One was a leisure centre. And I played all other sport but I was still too aggressive. But I walked through a doorway, I paid £1.50 and it changed my life. There was this five foot four Japanese instructor disposing of about three to four individuals of six foot four and over, and I was hooked. I learnt self discipline with the martial arts and I actually believe our combat sports, and I'm talking about any combat sport, that takes that edge that's in the classroom at this present moment in time, that teachers cannot channel and engage cos they're not given the tools or powers to. That then sees them wanting to cred as well as seek credibility, I'm saying they need to be using the weapons positively of their mind, their body and their spirit. They need to be given consistent physical challenges, boundaries, of self discipline, collective discipline, self respect, collective respect. The martial arts and combat sports can do that. I do not feel that they have been

used in the right way of late and that's over the last 15 years. And I can give you so many examples of so many young men who walked through a church hall, a school, a leisure centre and had their lives changed. But at the very heart of this problem, this challenge and this crisis, is the channelling of energies. But more importantly what we now have are young men predominantly who cannot defend themselves, who don't understand that a confident persona, communicating, articulating in a positive way, is the first line of self defence. That's a youth wise approach we project. I've got them breaking wood instead of breaking ribs. It's gotta be a far better option and as a school teacher told me, we don't like boxing. I said do you want a black eye or bullet wound? She went for boxing. Now I'm not saying that, it is not the solution. It is a very vital engagement tool, and it can be not over a six week programme or eight week programme, a life long experience. I still need it at 50 as I needed it at 14. I'm still aggressive, I'm still angry.

Commissioner

So with the sport activities do you have any other intervention attached to that?

Geoff Thompson

Absolutely. The first and single most important thing is to find anything that will engage the interest of young people. So any form of positive activity will assist. In Cuba they were using chess. The mind is a very good arena. So we will use anything that will engage them and then we re-connect them. And by that we re-connect them with their community, with the people that should be the role models. Another thing I want to advocate to this Commission is sports men and women are not role models. We're heroes and heroines capable of great stupidity and great brilliance. That's why companies use us to engage young hearts and minds. But at the end of the day young people are well switched on, well wired up and they can run rings round us. That's

what's I've learned. So I listen to them. I listen to them. They help me, they support me and they challenge me. But at the end of the day sport and the arts are the cultural bridges that re-engage, re-connect and then you've got to find the other agencies in the social support network that can provide the vocational training. But once we decide or identify their gifts we can employ them. Because the other single biggest factor is if we cannot employ these energies they will find alternative activity.

Fay Selvan

So you, just to clarify this then following on from Mark, you get them involved in something they're interested sport wise and then you pass them on to other agencies to take it further.

Geoff Thompson

Absolutely. Because they're not all gonna be winners but they can be winners in life. A key mission aim of the Youth Charter is that through sport, arts and cultural activity that they develop, not achieve medals, they develop opportunities in life. Education, health, social order and the environment are the key pillars.

Fay Selvan

Great, thanks. Gus, did you want to?

Gus

I've got several questions there. I'll try and limit them. To Geoff, welcome. You identify 1993 and Benji Stanley's murder as a key turning point in the lives of young people in Moss Side and Brushholme, alongside those areas. Why do you think we as a community didn't recover from, or learn from, Benji Stanley's death to the extent that we could anticipate what was happening amongst young people and do something about it?

Geoff Thompson

I believe as a community, as the black community, we were exhausted, tired. The elders who had fought long and hard following I think the self examination, the cultural examination and the wider societal examination of us following the riots, had brought a case of looking inwardly but looking outwardly. I believe that as society began to afford more opportunity that a post war migration will only look to improve their lives and the lives of those that they had left in the Caribbean, and beyond for that matter in Africa. I do however believe that we took our eye off the ball. I believe there are a number of factors that saw our energies and time taken up elsewhere because we felt we had a community. I felt there were issues about succeeding our elders, our elders having the trust in us as the upstarts and the energies and hopefully the success of the struggle to be able to play our part in a multi cultural society.

Gus

So do you see that representing a failure if you like of the youth workers and the youth service provision that went before?

Geoff Thompson

No, I think to look at it in isolation is possibly where the problem's always been, because we've always looked to tick boxes as a result of policy and saying there's only a proportion of a pie that can go around, which is why I still believe that once you have the cultural confidence as to why you're here in a society, in a country, you should be able to step up and compete in a multi cultural society. I do not believe that our community have been ever equipped with that confidence to be able to compete in a multi cultural society and as a consequence and a result many young men have said to me that whilst they thought I was an Uncle Tom it wasn't till I got real with them that

they understood that it is an ongoing challenge, that you have to become more equipped to compete, and our young have not been equipped to compete and compete in life. Consequently they'll take the short cut and the short option.

Gus

So tell me how does the Power House set out to change all that?

Geoff Thompson

The Moss Side Millennium Power House was set up to address just that. Somewhere within their community in which they could go, they could develop, they could grow and realise their potential. It was inspired by 20 young people who went to Los Angeles and they asked for a facility that had everything under the roof. Sport, culture, arts, vocation training, employment opportunities and enterprise. It more importantly reflected that historical inter-generational effort. It also provided a place with multi agency work looking to work with ethnic minorities from minority communities could also plug in because they had boxes they wished to tick. But more importantly removed what I believe was the turf post code culture into embracing other cultures, and that inter neighbourhood dialogue. I've heard that the Commission have been to the United States at Winshaw. I've been to other estates where no one looked like me but I have the cred of being a sports man so I was allowed in, and it gave me a unique insight. So we're all in the same boat. Just by the demographics and politics we're in a partial extreme. The Power House was that and it symbolised and succeeded. I then learned that there can be envy, there can be negativity and a community can take its eye off the ball. And, you know, everything from the Commonwealth Games which for me really brought to the fore the reality of what could be achieved positively and extending that. Ten communities from the Stonebridge Estate in London, from Wolverhampton, Birmingham, Leeds, all came to the Commonwealth

Games, you know, gave them 1,000 tickets and all went back with their lives changed. But it was maintaining that enthusiasm and the Secretary General hosting them at the Moss Side Millennium Power House told me that it was global but it was local. I think 18 months ago, just over 18 months ago, we had the body of a 15 year old (PAUSE). When the body of Jesse James was found outside the basket ball court of the cage it broke my heart. I never became more aggressive or frustrated as to how something so positive could be poisoned. The Moss Side Millennium Power House was for the young. It was meant to take them off the streets. His body was not supposed to be found in the very grounds of that building. I will never forget where I was on that Saturday morning when I was informed at 10.24 of what had happened, and since that time I've been back on those streets every single day. I've tried to ask myself what I could have done that would have improved the situation. We have reached a generation removed now. They weren't the first generation. We have a new generation. They have no values, they have no interests, they have no hope, they have no sense of belonging, they don't know where they've come from. Our generation have become removed from our young and the village does not bring up the child. So how can a community engage with other neighbourhoods? If the police do not have a relationship and are not seen as an occupying force, and if they cannot play a football match or play a game of basket ball with them, as we found with the LAPD in LA, how can you engender a culture of trust, dignity and respect? The fact that the community have not given up those who murdered Jesse James haunts me. But it also inspires me because I'm absolutely convinced that what is not now a Moss Side phenomenon, not a black phenomenon, it's a youth culture crisis and it needs to be addressed in that way. Mothers have lost their sons and don't think it's not down to just the boys, the girls are now involved. And I was warned ten years ago what the girls would be up to. Now we really have got a problem. But it is achievable cos we don't give up on our young or else we give up on our future. But the Moss Side Millennium

Power House was a symbol of hope and it needs to be re-powered.

Gus

If I could just stay for a minute with the issue of communities and the role of communities, as someone who's worked in Manchester since 1971 off and on, and given that sense of togetherness which you mentioned earlier, I've always found it very strange that the adult community could allow a neighbourhood to be so polarised that one side of a road doesn't talk to the other. And people are fearful of one another and therefore carry knives and guns and so on. How do you think that could be corrected?

Geoff Thompson

I think we need to return back to our spirituality. I think there is a moral vacuum in our culture, in our community. I think we can then start to re-establish our values. We can start to re-establish, and that's all the Power House was. It was a place of energy. For example on a Monday night the women played their netball, they brought their daughters, their sisters, their aunts, all their friends came. The boys would be playing what they needed to play but they would behave cos they would respect their mothers, their sisters, their girlfriends, whoever they wished to impress. It was what I call natural security. I remember the netball team being told they had to leave and the behaviour just immediately evaporated. Everybody disrespected everybody. A tackle became more than it needed to be and then it was gonna be sorted out on the street. It's interesting to note that I went to the local church next to, the United Reform Church, right next door to the Power House – Church have got a prophesy, they'd never been in the Power House, Power House had never been in there. And one of the young men we'd helped, Byron Columb, was christening his daughter so it was an important time. He was alive and his daughter and the relationship was blossoming. To see our generation, and I'm talking about that post war generation, to be the

youngest representation, and more importantly the girls who went to that church soon after the floral tributes that were being laid at Jesse's place of murder and loss of life, I asked them where the boys were. And they said there aren't any boys. And I said well where are they? They said they're all dead. They all went to that church and it was then I realised we needed to find ourselves spiritually before anything practically could come about. And it has been my experience, whether it be in Liverpool, whether it be in London, Birmingham in Beeston, where the young Asian men they want, they need to find themselves. It's a new set of values.

Fay Selvan

Just on that, if you were to become Prime Minister tomorrow, obviously you need a lot of charisma to be Prime Minister and you certainly have it, what would it be that you would want to do to make a big difference in gun and knife crime? What would be your one intervention?

Geoff Thompson

A Royal Commission. It deserves it, it demands it. We've had task forces. We've had too many initiatives. I do believe that there is, dare I say it, an aid culture. There are agencies trying to do things to community. If want to sustain, if we want to hit our targets, if we want to achieve inclusion, if we want to achieve cohesion, empower communities, entrust communities and they will make errors, but they won't make mistakes. Those are the communities I came from. Gus will tell you of the activism days. You have to have an edge to what you're doing. And yes, from our cultural stand point, without my mother's tough love and the tough love of others, I would not be here today. But what I would say is this. It demands a Royal Commission. We need a Royal Commission on youth. It will be able to draw together and move out the political arena something that should transcend political boundaries and bi-partisan activity, and let young people lead. They're more

switched on than us. But yes, we have the wisdom, they have the knowledge, they have the experience. But this isn't a Prime Minister's burden, it's a national burden. Every single person can play a part, and if they do I believe that we can re-balance this. I thought we could prevent it but going up and down the country I'm as haunted as I'm going into the schools, I go into communities and young offenders' institutions, and just very quickly there. There's no use preventing schools, intervening in the community and not rehabilitating them back into our community, or else it just destroys all the good work that we've done. It must be a cycle of wealth.

Fay Selvan

Okay, thank you very much Geoff Thompson.

Geoff Thompson

Thank you.

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