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Brave new approach to ending gang violence

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"THIS is a sad place. A place where young people walk downstairs from the dock, and are driven away to custody. But it doesn't have to be that way for you – you have a choice."

The words of a sheriff signalling Court Room 8 at Glasgow Sheriff Court was in session, were not typical of the kind of introductions that normally precede such events. But then, this was by no means a typical day in court.

Prior to the sheriff's

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entry, the court had witnessed a powerful slide show by Glasgow-based photographer David Gillanders, illustrating images of horrific knife injuries brought about through gang violence.

The audience for this courtroom drama comprised 70 gang members aged under 16 from all over the east end of Glasgow, who were brought together in an attempt to bring an end to violence and to change their lives forever.

The Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV) is a collaborative venture between the national Violence Reduction Unit and local partners across Glasgow, which seeks to reduce violent behaviour among gang members, re-engage young people in alternative recreational activities and help them access services to make them ready for employment.

Modelled on examples in Boston and Cincinnati, the initiative is sponsored by the Scottish Government for an initial two-year period. The session held at Glasgow Sheriff Court was one of six similar events during the past 18 months, which have contributed to a 49.2 per cent reduction in the level of violent offending by the gang members.

Reformed gang members urged the youngsters to choose a different path, including one ex-murderer who described himself as a "coward" and appealed to them not to end up like him.

One ex-prisoner highlighted the hollow influence of peer pressure, describing his own bitter experience of finding himself behind bars, abandoned by his so-called "mates".

"They wouldn't pay £30 to travel up and visit me in jail," he said. "They'd rather spend it on a bottle of Buckfast or a couple of grams of hash".

But the most powerful voice undoubtedly belonged to Joyce, a young mother who lost her son through gang violence when he was just 18. A hushed silence fell as she described how she lived through a five-hour surgery to try to save her son's life following a knife injury, only to witness his death at the end of it.

"The next time you go the kitchen drawer to pick up a knife, think about my face," was her simple plea.

By 2011, the Scottish Government aims to create strong, supportive communities where levels of violence have diminished and access to amenities has grown.

My hope is the Scottish Government continues to fund this project, and more youngsters can begin to engage in the alternative opportunities it offers. As I left the sheriff court, the image of Joyce's face and the memory of her poignant words stayed with me.

Let us hope they also stick in the minds of the young people who were there, and that this will be their last visit to this "sad place".

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