

Guns and Gangstas Part Three: How the black community is trying to make a difference

25 September 2005 Deborah Gabriel

Young member who does justice to the memory of her murdered brother

The Trident Independent Advisory Group (IAG), chaired by Lee Jasper was set up by and is made up of a cross section of the black community.

The reason IAG was set up is to monitor the way in which police handle crime within the black community and to exert pressure on them to both protect and serve the black community respectfully and sensitively.

IAG works closely with Operation Trident, the tactical police unit set up especially to deal with black on black crime.

Twenty-three year old Ejos Ubiribu has been a member of IAG for the past 16 months.

She joined when during the preparation of her dissertation in the third year of her degree; she interviewed Head of Operation Trident, John Coles for her paper on black youths and gun crime.

As a result of the interview she was asked to join IAG and accepted.

Ms Ubiribu told Black Britain that the reason she had chosen this topic:

“Was a labour of love and stemmed from the fact that my brother was murdered at the age of 18.

This experience changed my whole family and definitely changed my whole outlook on life.”

Ms Ubiribu said that prior to her brother being murdered she had witnessed a series of violent incidents:

“A lot of the young men I had grown up with on the estate on which I lived were getting involved in this kind of lifestyle, so I was witnessing all these shootings.”

She added that: **“It’s only when it happened to a member of my family that it became the centre of my life.”**

Ms Ubiribu told Black Britain that when she first joined IAG **“I felt as if I was doing it for my brother. I felt that if I sat idly by and did nothing that I was doing an injustice to his memory.”**

In July of this year Ms Ubiribu took part in a discovery weekend with ten young people from inner London boroughs, including ex-offenders and other IAG members.

The young men spoke of their experiences as black males in British society and how being in prison affected them.

Ms Ubiribu said: **“We found that what the young people seemed to lack was interpersonal skills, confidence and self-esteem. There was very much a sense of them being at a loss about what to do with their lives.”**

There are plans to follow up that event with a programme of workshops in leadership and interpersonal skills and provide mentors to help them achieve their objectives.

Ms Ubiribu told Black Britain:

“This is one of the main reasons why I became involved with IAG, in order to make visible changes and to engage with young people on a grass roots level.”

Meeting the needs of black crime victims

Cheryl Sealey is one of the co-founders of the Independent Advisory Group who has been a member since its inception in 1990.

But her tireless work to help address the problem of crime in the black community does not stop there.

Many people have heard of the pressure group **Mothers Against Guns**, headed by Lucy Cope.

However, it was Cheryl Sealey who founded the group but stood aside, allowing Lucy Cope to front the organisation, as her son had been a victim of gun crime.

Since then Ms Sealey has gone on to set up a group to help victims of crime called **Community Victim Liaison** of which she is the director.

She told Black Britain that in the early days **“Although there was a lot of fear and people wanted to challenge gun crime, people were just not sure how to do it.”**

Ms Sealey said that with the very first case that Operation Trident dealt with they identified a gap in the system as issues were not being addressed.

So a year after his wife had been murdered, a widower with three young children to look after, still had benefit issues to be dealt with.

Ms Sealey told Black Britain: **“None of them were offered counselling and they were not rehoused although they could not get easy access to their home, which had been boarded up by the police.”**

Community Victim Liaison therefore exists to bridge the gap between the police and various authorities and to provide support to families whose loved ones have been victims of gun crimes.

Ms Sealey said: **“I saw a role there dealing with issues for black families as victims.**

Now I am not just looking at the immediate family but also the extended family because gun crime impacts on the community as a whole.”

Ms Sealey referred to the case of a young man whose friend was murdered and as a result he is close to a mental breakdown.

However, he is unable to get help from Victims Support as he is not a member of the immediate family.

Ms Sealey is arranging for him to have counselling as well as introducing him to a listener’s line enabling him to receive telephone support in complete anonymity.

Ms Sealey warned: **“If victims of gun crime do not get the support that they need I can see that this will have serious ramifications for the black community.”**

Speaking of the changes she has seen over the last fifteen years Ms Sealey told Black Britain that Operation Trident is more engaged with the black community and therefore their level of understanding has increased.

She said: **“In the fifteen years since I have been involved with the IAG I have seen black people stand up and take more responsibility for the issues in their community.”**

Driving the police to do their job properly

Fifty-year old Decima Francis, MBE, has been described as one of Southwark’s top community leaders.

She is co-founder and Executive Director of the **From Boyhood to Manhood Foundation**, as well as being a member of the Independent Advisory Group.

However, one of her frustrations is the fact that people who do not properly understand the nature of the work that IAG does have completely the wrong idea about the role of its members.

Ms Francis told Black Britain:

“We are not informers. Our job is to be friendly critics [of the police].”

IAG members **“also do amazing work in the community and the whole idea is to protect our community and to make sure we are being treated fairly.”**

She stressed that IAG is a community and not a police initiative. The whole idea of setting up IAG: **“was to get the police to take black-on-black crime very seriously.”**

IAG also lobbies the government to ensure that funding is available to stop young people from getting involved in crime in the first place.

Speaking of the rising problem of gun crime within the black community Ms Francis said:

“Our community, we are so angry that we are killing each other for no reason at all sometimes.”

Our young people – in fact all young people across London are beginning to believe that they should have a gun and that’s a very dangerous thing.”

Ms Francis told Black Britain that she does not feel adults fully appreciate the level at which society has changed for young people:-

“Everybody thinks that because their children are behaving at home, they are behaving.

But when the children step out of their homes, they are in a war zone, because that’s how the children feel, unprotected.”

As well as pushing for funding for preventative programmes, IAG has created a gun crime curriculum for schools, but Ms Francis said it is a challenge trying to push the agenda:

“It’s a very difficult thing for schools because they have to keep a very good reputation, so

they don't want to be seen to be engaged with that."

Ms Francis stated that IAG works at all levels to inform and teach and have worked through conferences such as 'Southwark Against Guns' taking a variety of different people including children in care and school children.

Ms Francis told Black Britain: **"We cannot have murderers in our community. A bullet can go through somebody and straight into someone else who is innocent."**

The kind of damage it does to the community, the damage it does to families is just not on."

Stressing again the despair that drove people to form IAG, Ms Francis said that the black community were fed up of hearing helicopters hovering over their homes and fed up the killings that went unanswered.

Ms Francis told Black Britain that although some people perceive the problem to be the police against the black community, she stated - **"it isn't it's us against us."**

Speaking of the fact that such crimes have to be dealt with by a special police force, Ms Francis said:

"We just need to really get serious. When we stop hating ourselves we won't need the likes of Operation Trident."

When we start doing what is right we won't need Operation Trident. We won't need Operation Jack."

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