

'If you want to join a gang, join my gang ... but you'll do all your fighting in the ring'

With help from the generosity of Evening Standard readers, boxing champion Rebecca Donnelly is helping young Londoners stay away from crime and turn their lives around. **David Cohen** finds out how she does it



MAT WITTE

THE DISPOSSESSED FUND

THE Fight For Change boxing gymnasium on the run-down site of the former Lilian Baylis School in Lambeth is no place for the faint-hearted. Every Monday evening, dozens of young men, including tagged criminals on pre-release and gang members referred by the local Youth Offending Team are put through their paces by their coach. "Ten, nine, eight... c'mon, focus, you can do better than that!" yells the coach, counting down their sit-up crunches and pushing them to the limits of endurance.

In most respects, this gym full of sweat-soaked men resembles any boxing club in London, except one – the coach shouting the odds is a woman. Rebecca Donnelly, 34, is a former world Thai boxing champion and one of the UK's top female amateur boxers. Three years ago, she founded Fight For Change, a charity that uses her sport as the hook to attract marginalised young men, and mentors them to become positive members of society. "Some people say boxing is violent, but I see it as an engagement tool for people who have run away into gangs," said Ms Donnelly. "The adrenaline rush youngsters get from crime is hard to beat, but it can be replicated in the ring, and by adding discipline and mentoring, we give these lads a second chance."

Last year, a £19,930 grant from the Evening Standard Dispossessed Fund was awarded to Fight For Change to run courses for 150 young people wanting to be gym instructors, boxing coaches or youth workers. The grant came out of a £1 million injection to the fund by Comic Relief, and was one of 66 grants we made to groups tackling poverty in London. So far the Dispossessed Fund has raised £9.3 million, and 650 awards worth £4.6 million have been disbursed since it was founded in July 2010.

This year, once again, the Standard has joined forces with Comic Relief. We have asked readers to wear pyjamas to work on Red Nose Day tomorrow and get sponsored, because without your generosity, groups such as Fight For Change would cease to operate.

Twenty-nine years ago, Ms Donnelly's father, a bus driver from Catford, fell victim to horrifying gang violence: "My dad was attacked by youths on Christmas Eve while on the job. He was bottled round the face and stabbed in the stomach and would have bled to death if not for a passenger who saved his life". Rebecca was five and remembers visiting her father in hospital, terrified at the tubes coming out of him, not knowing if he would die. "The gang were jailed, but dad was paralysed

down the side of his face and he never drove a bus again. He retrained, though, as a plasterer and I will never forget how he refused to give up. Dad was a role model to me – he said there were no boundaries except in your head. I told myself that every day when I broke the mould and became a boxer."

Indeed, it was her father's suggestion that she learn self-defence as a teenager that led her to take up boxing and fall passionately in love with the sport. By her early twenties, with a degree in business from Greenwich University, she was competing on the world stage and at 27 she became the world under-57kg Thai Boxing champion. She also fought for the UK amateur boxing title, and narrowly lost out in her bid to represent Britain in last year's Olympics.

MEANWHILE, she joined the Kickstart Youth Inclusion Programme and set up projects to help young people at risk of offending. In 2005, her anti-gun-crime film *The Endz*, starring youths who had never acted before, won best short film at the Raindance festival. Later she joined charity Active Communities Network, where she met former world super-middleweight boxing champion Richie Woodhall, who encouraged her to start Fight For Change. Today it runs boxing and fitness sessions in Lambeth and Southwark, engaging 500 people a year in high schools and at gyms. Ms Donnelly redirects hard-to-reach youths into training, education and jobs, all on a budget of just £80,000 a year.

Joseph Banton, 21, who grew up on the Springfield Estate in Stockwell with a criminal brother, is a case in point. "When I was 12, my 17-year-old brother who I idolised was jailed for armed robbery and got six years," he said. "I remember visiting him in Feltham and thinking, 'You ain't got no freedom, you



Support: Rebecca Donnelly and Joseph Banton at the Fight for Change gym

HOW GRANT PACKED A PUNCH

What they do: Founded by Rebecca Donnelly in 2009, Fight For Change is a charity based in Lambeth that uses boxing to engage hard-to-reach young people and redirects them into further education, training or employment.
Grant: the amount awarded to the

charity by the Dispossessed Fund last year was £19,930.
How the grant has been used: To engage 150 young people in courses on gym instruction and boxing, as well as youth work and conflict resolution.
Website: www.fight4change.org.uk/

TO DONATE OR APPLY FOR GRANTS GO TO: standard.co.uk/dispossessed

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can't do nothing, I don't want to end up like you."
"At the time, despite having caring parents who both held down decent jobs, I was heading the same way as my brother, beating people up for no reason and doing petty crimes. I wish I could say the penny dropped, but I left school with only one GCSE and although I had a desire to change, I honestly didn't know where to start."

TWO years ago, Mr Banton started going to the gym at Lilian Baylis, where Ms Donnelly took him under her wing. She enrolled him on the course funded by the Dispossessed Fund and he qualified as a boxing coach. She helped him secure a degree in sports science from Lambeth College and got him a paid apprenticeship at Guy's and St Thomas' Hospital, where

he is a supervisor in housekeeping with the rapid response team. Ms Donnelly, taking a break from sparring with Mr Banton, smiled: "We get a lot of tear-ups like Joseph. But in three years, far as I recall, we've never had a single person who's come to us after jail who has reoffended. It's acceptable for them to leave the gang or the world of crime if they go into boxing, because boxing is seen as 'hard'. I tell them, "If you want to be part of a gang, be part of our gang, but you do all your fighting in the ring and Queensberry Rules apply." I insult them, I tell them they're not working hard enough. But boxing is a weird sport, you push somebody to breaking point and they call you their mentor."

Mr Banton said: "Rebecca is like a mum to me. She changed my life – my outlook, my prospects. She taught me how to fight to change."

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