



THE way Jacob tells it, the turning point came last year when two rival gang members threatened him with knives as he was being taken away at McDonald's and he pulled out a gun ready to reciprocate with interest.

"I was laughing, thinking what you gonna do with a knife? I got a gun. I kicked the knife out of his hand and lunged at him and people started screaming. 'Take it outside or we'll call the police', so we went outside and I pointed my gun to finish them off."

David Cohen



Instead of pulling the trigger, Jacob, then 15 and already the don of a Redbridge street gang, pulled out his phone and called Sheldon Thomas, the founder of Gangsline.

"I shouted at Sheldon, 'I just been caught slipping [without his gang], I got my ting, I'm gonna do madness'."

Mr Thomas, 49, who had been contacted by the local Youth Offending Team as a last resort to turn Jacob around instead of locking him up for a string of fraud, robbery and drug offences, tried to keep cool.

"Jacob!" he shouted. "Think! You have made so much progress. You are on the verge of making it in football, you are rebuilding your relationship with your dad, do you really want to go to jail for life?"

For two hours, he kept Jacob on the phone, reasoning with him, talking him down. "I was in a complete state,"

I shouted down the phone, 'I got my gun, I'm gonna do madness'

Ex-gang leader tells how he was saved from shooting two rivals by a call to the founder of Gangsline – which our Dispossessed Fund is helping

FRONTLINE LONDON
Evening Standard Campaign

recalled Jacob, 16, who has a scar on his neck after being stabbed with a screwdriver when he was 14. "After that I thought, 'I got to fix up, I can't be doing this sort of thing'. So I got rid of my gun. I stopped doing stabbings and shooting [dealing drugs]. I was still doing fraud, but after a few months, I gave that up too."

"I have been clean nine months. Now I'm playing football with an elite squad at a major London team and with a chance to turn professional. I am doing my level 2 sports diploma to become a sports coach as a back-up plan. I got into gangs when I was 11 because I wanted to be like my older brother who had the tag 'Ruthless', but now my life is on track, thanks to Sheldon and Gangsline."

Gangsline has been awarded a £49,896 grant by the Evening Standard Dispossessed Fund to deliver their outreach and one-to-one mentoring programme to 100 young people who, like Jacob, have got caught up in gang activities in Redbridge.

It is one of three grants amounting to almost £150,000 that the fund is giving to charities transforming the lives of at-risk young Londoners, including gang members. It will be

paid out of the £1 million windfall we announced in November, of which £800,000 came from the Government in response to our Frontline London campaign. The balance of the £1 million will be given in grants next year, in consultation with the Cabinet Office and The London Community Foundation, who administer the fund.

Of £11.2 million raised by the Dispossessed Fund since it was founded in July 2010, grants of £6.3 million have been disbursed to 737 groups.

NICK HURD, minister for civil society, said: "Sheldon Thomas's work is inspirational and shows how people can turn their lives around with support from people who understand. Gangsline is making a serious difference to vulnerable young people in or on the edges of gangs."

"It's why I believe voluntary organisations can make the most effective inroads into exiting people from gangs. It's why I have committed £300,000 in London and another £3 million countrywide to support more grassroots organisations to carry on the crucial work they do."

Mr Thomas, a former gang member,

WHO HAS GOT GRANTS FROM DISPOSSESSED FUND

GANGSLINE

What they do: Founded in 2008 by former gang leader Sheldon Thomas who decided to change his life after seeing his friend murdered in a gang related attack. Thomas was mentored by Bernie Grant MP and Jesse Jackson before setting up Gangsline in East London to help gang nominals exit gang life.

Grant: £49,896 for use over two years.

Where: Redbridge.

How grant will be used: To deliver their outreach and one-to-one mentoring programme to 100 young people immersed in gang activities in Redbridge to help them exit gang life.

BEYOND YOUTH

What they do: Established in 2006 by criminologist Emma Morris, who rebuilt her life

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prison or at risk of criminalisation.

STREETS OF GROWTH

What they do: Founded in 2001 by community activist Darren Way, Streets of Growth provide street-based outreach, coaching, an enterprise programme and getting young people involved in regeneration projects.

Grant: £49,994 for use over two years.

Where: Tower Hamlets.

How grant will be used: To support 120 at risk young people aged 13-21, including those associated with gangs, through their Earning Your Vision and VisionXcite interventions which use one-to-one coaching and focus on building self-esteem and getting young people into education, and employment.

after being a homeless teenager, Beyond Youth has delivered its therapy-based programme to 1,400 offenders and has achieved a 74 per cent non re-offending rate, three times better than the national average.

Grant: £49,578 for use over two years.

Where: Wandsworth and Lambeth.

How grant will be used: To deliver their Chance2Change programme, which uses a cognitive behaviour therapy approach, to 160 young people aged 16-21 who are exiting

Sound advice: mentor Sheldon Thomas – who changed his life after seeing a friend murdered – talks to Jacob. Jacob credits the Gangsline founder with helping him make a new start in professional football



GLEN COPUS

started Gangsline in 2008 in east London to mentor and extricate gang members, just as he was mentored 28 years ago by Haringey council leader Bernie Grant, who later became MP for Tottenham.

"We called our gang the Black Moriah Posse after the infamous Jamaican Shower Posse, but unlike today, we were more concerned with fighting the National Front and racist police than killing other gang members," he said. "Later, our gang got involved in the drug scene and things became extremely violent."

Mr Thomas's turning point was in 1985 at the age of 20 when he was about to go on stage to perform at a gig in Brixton. "One minute my friend was beside me, the next his head was blown off and I was covered in his blood," he said.

"Bernie Grant had heard about me and took me under his wing. He said, 'You are allowing your environment to dictate who you are going to be.' I thought, 'What the hell does he mean?' He flew me to America where I met Jesse Jackson. Those two men did for me what I am trying to do for others – they made me believe I could be somebody." But change did

not happen overnight. "I stopped the violence quickly, but the anger took me 10 years," said Mr Thomas. "It helped when I married Michelle and became a father for the first time."

Mr Thomas, now a father of four, and his team of 10 work from their Newham base to transform the lives of gang members, as well as running a 24-hour free helpline for those who

'Sheldon Thomas's work is inspirational and shows how people can turn their lives around with support'

Minister Nick Hurd

want advice and support about gangs in their area.

"We do street-based outreach to target leaders like Jacob and we try to extricate the entire gang," he said. "We make them see that gang life is a one-way ticket to the grave, but winning trust takes time. We are engaged with gangs in Newham, Hackney and Lewisham, and the Standard's grant will help us access the 300-strong gangs in Redbridge,

such as MOD, HQ, Purple gang, Blue gang and Orange gang."

So far, Gangsline have engaged with 500 gang nominals (people identified as serious gang members by the police), responded to 38 "critical incidents" to reduce reprisals and supported 20 people to leave gangs. They include four men from The Money Hungry gang in Hackney who have since gone to university, one to Oxford and two to Brunel. The fourth is a John Lewis manager.

Mr Thomas said Frontline London had "kicked up a storm". "The Standard has made the authorities in government and City Hall acknowledge that they are not tackling this issue with the vigour it needs. Every estate in East London has a gang on it. The fear they cause is massive."

Jacob said: "Where I live, hardly a day goes by without violence. If not for Sheldon, I would be with my best mate, serving life. Sheldon has taken me to watch football, enrolled me in a team, seen my potential, helped build my career. He has been like a second father. Now I go into estates as a Gangsline volunteer and I tell gang members, 'Trust me bruv, there is a better way.'"

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