

The ugly truth of prison

Edges Magazine thanks the contributor for this article.

New project at Wellingborough Prison shows teenagers the ugly truth about being in jail

A ground-breaking project by inmates at Wellingborough Prison is giving teenagers a shocking look at life behind bars.

Reporter Hillary Scott and photographer Hannah Dennis were allowed exclusive access to the Youth and Community Project...

An amazing project is under way at Wellingborough Prison and aims to show teenagers what can happen if they get involved in crime.

The scheme, which took six months to get off the ground, sees a group of schoolchildren aged between 13 and 18 going to the prison to watch a play performed by a group of 25 inmates.

Prisoners, some serving life for murder, tell the children their life stories, explaining why wrong choices led to them losing their families, job, and liberty.

Many have been involved in drugs and have found themselves repeatedly behind bars. The stories pull no punches.

The scheme, co-ordinated by probation officer Glenn Banks, was put together after father and son bank robbers, serving their sentences at Wellingborough, asked Glenn if they would come up with a play to show children the truth about crime.

They were given the green light by deputy governor Eric Rowett while he was acting governor. New governor Peter Bennett watched the play for the first time alongside us and was keen to give the scheme his backing too.

The main story, re-enacted by the prisoners, tells of the ten years old friends, Steve and Matt. Steve gets involved in crime, starting with shoplifting and escalating as he gets older into drug taking, dealing, handling stolen goods, theft, joyriding and even violent assault. Matt, meanwhile, is tempted by easy picking of crime but chooses to say no to pressure from Steve and stays straight.

When Steve is released from prison, he finds it impossible to get work because of his criminal record, and it is Matt who gives his friend the employment he needs to start anew.

Throughout the play, Alex of Corby, serving eight and a half years for dealing cocaine, and Jimmy from Lancashire, who has been in and out prison since 1968 for burglary, give a running commentary. They ask the teenagers how the characters could behave differently. All the prisoners tell the children how making the right choices can keep them away from prison.

The children are also shown a shocking video about what life is really like behind a bars. They see photos of horrific injuries inflicted on inmates by fellow prisoners.

Alex tells them : "There's nowhere to run and hide in here. Weapons are made from things such as combs, toothbrushes, and broom handles. I've seen faces slashed open, burns from boiling water thrown to someone's face. Some end up being raped. A friend of mine cut his own throat at Christmas.

"Another prisoner broke up his mattress and stuffed it inside his clothes and set himself alight. You could hear his screams as he burned to death. Don't kid yourself that it's cool to be in prison. It's a terrible, terrible place."