

From boys to men



Sandy Campbell on a simple scheme that matches local tradesmen with willing young men for life-changing experiences

Teenage boys. What do we do with them? From gun crime in Peckham to hoodies in Paisley, all the angst is focused on the lads these days, and with good reason. But before I launch into some views on how we as a society need to reorganise ourselves to properly support boys through those 'Kevin' years, let me tell you a story.

Colin left school because he was expelled. He beat up a teacher. His dad died when he was 10 and his mum got through the chaos of what Colin brought home with him with a cocktail of anti-depressants and drink. The only men in Colin's life were the police. His talent went pear shaped when, after being given a trial with a premier league football club he was kicked out of that too, again, for fighting.

It was then when he heard about the TOIL Project in his home neighbourhood of Leith. Colin had no time for careers interviews and it felt like there were social work types coming out his ears, but one of his mates said this was different. "It's like a real job. No college, no tests and the pay's no that bad either. The tradesman I'm with

is great. He gets me working on real stuff and he's a real laugh. Treats me fair and teaches me things as we go along. He's strict on time-keeping though and there's no messing about. But then it's no' like school. There's no other lads there to mess about with anyway."

Colin got the number and phoned up Port of Leith Housing Association. Allan Nicol, who runs the TOIL Project from the Association's offices, gave him a time to turn up for an interview. This sounded serious. It felt like it too as he waited his turn in the reception area of these fancy looking offices. A far cry from all those inclusion, access and training schemes he was always being pushed towards.

When he met Allan it was straight down to business. Allan told him: "I don't care about your school record or what exams you've passed. All I want to know is, are you keen to get into a trade and can you get up in the morning? If you've been in trouble with the police that's no problem either so long as you tell me any forthcoming court appearances. I don't want you just not turning up one day."

Fast forward a few weeks. Colin is working with a couple of self-employed plasterers – Owen and Keith. Owen used to play for a second division Fife side years ago so football banter is quickly in the air. In fact it's led to Colin getting a start with a local amateur side with Owen and Keith's encouragement. They've even been down to see him play.

Fast forward a couple of months and Keith asks him one day: "How much are you giving your mum out of your wages?" "Nothing," says Colin. "Gimme yer phone. I'm telling your mum to take £15 off you this week." Colin complains and avoids handing over his phone but the ribbing doesn't stop. A week later his surprised mum gets £15 in her hand.

Fast forward another month and his mum is in tears at a chance encounter with Owen and Keith on the street. "You're the best thing that has happened to my lad." Later they hear that the anti-depressants are a thing of the past too.

And so on it goes. Colin is still with Owen and Keith three years later. They had no plans to keep him on at the start and certainly not to put him through an apprenticeship with all those blocks of college time away from the job. But just like so many other lads who have been through the six months placement that the TOIL Project gives them, Colin

had become part of the squad. "You want to see the lad get on. Now he's got a trade and a future."

This is learning on the job from men who come from the same background and know the community. Before we discovered that there was an SVQ for everything, this is what we as a society did. In fact this is how boys have become men since the dawn of time. Absolutely, boys need fathers in their lives, but there is a time when you just don't want to listen to dad anymore. This is where the wider community of men in community comes in. The chance to experience first hand a different version of what it is to be a man. And a chance to learn these lessons in the ways that boys learn best – by doing it, by facing challenges, by meeting practical tests in real time, set by their elders.

When boys are in trouble, so are we all. The next generation gets absent fathers; women get boys as partners and husbands. And society gets perpetual adolescents, kicking against the natural structures of society and any form of responsibility or authority. Locked in a perpetual ghetto of their peers, they never know the wisdom that comes from

being around elders, learning the 'wisdom' of life from rap lyrics. Teenage boys need good men in their communities to come forward and help them reach manhood. Paid work – a boy's first job – is the natural setting and self-employed tradesmen are good men to do it.

Just imagine the effect on society if there was a steady and noticeable change in the behaviour and maturity of 16 to 18-year-old lads in working class communities right across Scotland. And it could happen. The TOIL Project is the first of a new movement of schemes set up to deliver learning on the job from mentors that these boys can relate to. Further projects, following the same model, have been set up under the banner of "Working Rite" in Govan and Perth and across the border in Sheffield and Sunderland. The new Scottish Government is currently reviewing the whole work-based learning set-up in Scotland. In the SNP's election manifesto a commitment was made to "support the further development of work-based mentoring for young Scots, along the lines of the Working Rite model". Everyone remembers their first boss. Here is a chance to make that memory count for the good of us all.

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