

#HIDDENHEROES

THE YOUTH JUSTICE WORKER



THE BUTLER TRUST



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INTRODUCTION

The six youth justice workers profiled here came into the sector through different routes, and bring a wide and impressive range of skills to their practice. Taken together, certain themes emerge, and reflect some of the very best elements found in those working in youth justice (each has been recognised as a Butler Trust winner.)

Whether originally a plumber and heating engineer like Ed Horwood, a single mother like Sue Pearson, or a football coach like Denis Lewis, an enduring interest in people – and relationship-building – is a clear factor. So is communication: an inevitable element in making change happen either individually or within organisations. Vanessa O'Dare and Sarah Caden both bring an enormous commitment to effective communication – in their case, around young offenders and young victims who may lack appropriate skills in this area.

Above all, it's clear that youth justice workers absolutely value their colleagues and thrive on the challenges and rewards of a job where real change is possible – and enormously satisfying when achieved.



SUE PEARSON

I can't imagine doing anything different



Sue is an Education Officer for the Leeds Youth Offending Team who won a 2018-19 Butler Trust Award for her pioneering work developing Parents And Children Together (PACT), a twelve-week programme tackling violence by children against their parents. The route she took into her sterling career in youth justice is interesting – a stay at home single mother with young children, who had also worked for her dad in the family business, it was a friend's suggestion that led her to an Access Course. She jokes that her written work seemed challenging initially, "as the longest thing I'd written since school was a shopping list."

Soon she was heading to York University for an Educational Studies degree. She recalls that "I'd stop being a mum at Tadcaster and then I'd be a student." She "walked out with a First" and thought to herself, "I've got to do something." She knew a teacher at a pupil referral unit and asked to volunteer. "I got masses of experience," she says, and then applied for a job in the Social Exclusion Team.

It's one of the most rewarding things I've ever done.

"My job was to put them back into school," she says, "and I worked with lots of amazing parents, young people and schools. Then a YJS job came up working with some amazing people who do amazing work, and now I can't imagine doing anything different!"

Sue clearly loves her work. “It’s different every day, and you are making a difference.” She points out that she gets “a lot of support from colleagues and managers.” She also “loves being with the young people and the mums and passing on the information that can help,” and notes that “the energy that they give me – and especially when a young person engages with you – it’s just amazing.”

The skills she brings to the work include, she says, “Patience! And the ability to listen, to understand – and to be there for them.” It helps to be passionate, too, says Sue. “You’ve got to like doing it. Every day I like it. Sometimes it’s a really challenging day, but a young person will ring up and say ‘thanks for that, Sue’, or ‘I made my mum a cup of tea today’. It’s those little things that really make it rewarding.” Sue also notes the value of resilience – and a sense of your work being recognised by colleagues and managers, too.

It makes a difference
in people’s lives, and
they make a difference
to my life, too.

Sue says her award-winning PACT work – described in more detail at www.butlertrust.org.uk/sue-pearson – is “one of the most rewarding things I’ve ever done.” It grew from an awareness of a very real problem having hugely deleterious impacts on families into a year of research into interventions around

the world. As Sue says, “once you have all that knowledge you can’t do nothing with it.” Her successful initiative has now led to her supporting a multidisciplinary programme that has transformed hundreds of families lives.

Sue is very impressed by the mutual support among the parents which she says “is really magic.” She describes parents in the first week, “who haven’t been out and are so exhausted” who, over the weeks, start growing and reclaiming their lives. Although this is a highly specific context, this theme of professional satisfaction in helping create real change for some of the most challenging lives, is common to youth justice practitioners.

It’s different every day.

Juggling her role as an Education Officer, which might involve “buying a young person breakfast at Gregg’s on the way to school” with being half-time PACT programme co-ordinator is not without its challenges. She is often tackling logistics for her work, whether in terms of helping arrange transport to ferry parents and young people “from a-to-b,” completing paperwork, or “endless computer time.”

But Sue is very clear about recommending youth justice as a career. “Do it! At the end of the day, I have a job, I have a great job, it’s flexible, I work with some great people. It’s a good job. And it makes a difference in people’s lives – and they make a difference to my life too.”



DENIS LEWIS

I want the best for people



Denis is an Operational Manager for the Leeds Youth Justice Service, and originally came into the sector having worked as a football coach, where he'd honed his empathetic gifts supporting often troubled young people, especially those from minority backgrounds. Originally slated for "three to five years on secondment" from the probation service, he soon found he loved the work, and clearly had a great skill set to bring to it – so an outstanding career began. "I realised that working with the young ones was where I needed to be – it was the point where I could make the most impact."

His love for the work is reflected in a string of glowing testimonials from his colleagues, in support of his Butler Trust Award 2019-20 (which you can read about at www.butlertrust.org.uk/denis-lewis), and they all describe a real passion to make a difference. For Denis, that can begin anywhere. "I see young people coming into the building," he says, "and it's easy to forget that this can be an intimidating and alien place – so I think about what I can do to make them more comfortable. How can I make them see that the people working in that building are like them?"

Practice Manager Trevor Woodhouse says Denis is well-known for often taking his lunch with the children, "engaging them in conversation and bringing a sense of normality to their lives." Trevor adds that Denis is also particularly good at "dispelling myths" about what it is "to be a man," and he excels "at portraying a positive male image" that isn't "judgemental

or confrontational” – but does challenge stereotypes. He also calls Denis, simply, “the manager that has inspired me the greatest.”

Denis has a longstanding passion to increase diversity in the sector in general, and across his own team in particular. That commitment extends to a deep reading of what diversity is and what it can bring.

One challenge he faces, as many managers do, is spending more time than he would care to negotiating resource-constraints while simultaneously tackling the ‘process-driven’ tasks increasingly attached to work in this sector. He’s understandably concerned that over-emphasising these skills might end up diminishing diversity in the sector. He notes that those with the kind of lived experience that might help really establish bonds, for instance, may not excel at, say, admin – and their resultant loss, he argues, would diminish the sector overall, as well as the diversity he works so hard to breathe into it.

I need to be where I can make the most impact.

Deputy Service Manager Rebecca Gilmour, who has worked with Denis for over twenty years, points to his knack for “spotting potential, encouraging and motivating people from a non-traditional background who have lived experience of the criminal justice system into work with young people.” She calls this his “vocation,” and says that his “belief and support at a critical time for these individuals has enabled several of them to become valuable members of YJS staff.”

Rebecca recalls once asking Denis how he manages to stay so positive on the job, day in

and day out, and vividly recalls him replying that “I’ve done this job so long that this job is me. I love it and I can’t imagine doing anything else.”

I love it and I can’t imagine doing anything else.

As well as good humour, resilience, patience, and being “down to earth and sorted,” Denis clearly has a very strong desire to really connect with people – and that includes bringing the kind of mentorship skills to his work that help colleagues along their career paths, too.

He sees relationship-building as the heart of what he’s doing – and gives credit in part to a father who modelled both discipline and a warm “kindness and generosity” – a mix of ‘soft’ and ‘hard skills’ which he deploys to this day.



VANESSA O'DARE

I say the team I work for is like a family
– because that's how we are



Vanessa, who won a 2018-19 Butler Trust Award while working as an Operational Manager for the Manchester Youth

Offending Team, originally came into the Youth Justice field as a social work student on a placement. Her interest was informed, too, by her background and early work experience across a range of carer roles – for her mother (who was also a carer), for older people, and for those with physical or learning difficulties. Although initially studying law, she felt “a passion for social work,” and says “it just clicked.”

You're often trying to
unravel a complicated life.

Vanessa really loves working with her colleagues, too, as well as the fact that “each day is always varied.” She recognises it can be challenging, and demands resilience and self-care, but says that when “you get your small successes and the odd win – and you don't get as many as you'd like – there's a 'mini-fist pump', and you think 'that was worth it!'”

Looking around her colleagues, she adds that “the type of people in this job are genuinely compassionate and passionate. They're not in it for the money.” Vanessa also thinks there's “a kind of personality, too,” among those in the field, “and you can have banter, because we're in it together.” She says that the team she works for “is like a family, because that's how we are. You are going to enjoy getting up and going to work.”

Patience is an important quality in the role, Vanessa feels, too, alongside excellent listening skills. “In a job interview, you’d say you have to be able to listen. And that is important – but you have to really listen.” And, of course, you have to care. “I always say to the people I work with,” adds Vanessa, “if this was your own child, would you speak like this? Would you want the same? Work as though it was your own child.” In short, a child-centric version of the ancient Golden Rule prevalent in so many philosophies: ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.’

We’re in it together.

Vanessa calls herself “passionate about the importance of education,” and once she’d homed in on this area, she started working closely with colleagues to identify a range of initiatives and build the case for them. Among many projects, her literacy programme, That Reading Thing, for example, offers training and enhanced support for young people.

The Butler Trust’s Director, Simon Shepherd, often observes, from his own experience as a former Prison Psychologist and through his work at the Trust, that one of the characteristics among those working in the

criminal justice sector is an ability to not only identify a gap or area where a solution might improve things, but a kind of undaunted resilience in finding a way forward to make change happen.

The type of people in this job are genuinely compassionate and passionate.

In addition to the classic challenges in this sector – money and resources – Vanessa highlights that young people can themselves also be challenging. “You’re talking about young people who have got their own challenges,” she says, “their own experiences. So, there will always be pulls and pushes.” In response to this challenge, Vanessa says she thrives on getting young people “to see a different point of view.” The particular challenge here, she notes, is that “you’re often trying to unravel a complicated life, years of trauma, and you’re a total stranger. Especially as a teenager, how do you begin to trust someone?” Vanessa is full of praise for those staff who can do that and make a connection so that, over time and working together you can help them become “equipped for life.”





Photos courtesy of the Youth Justice Board





JO BENSON

I love my job

Jo says that her enduring interest in criminal justice was “just something in my head, from the first year of secondary school. I had a real interest in crime in the wider sense.” So, when her friends started applying to the armed forces, teaching and physical education, Jo googled the courses available and found it “was a toss-up between criminology and the law.” Criminology won. After graduating from Sunderland University, she found a role as a Bail Support Worker in Darlington with the Youth Offending Team. “Then I got a full-time position,” she says, and “worked my way up.”

After 24 years, Jo is now Head of Service

and proud to have “brought a lot of staff through with me over the years.” She thinks it’s important to “grow your own” talent and “bring them through.” Jo adds that her own experience means that she doesn’t think a social work background is absolutely essential to the role, and “over time I’ve created a greater understanding that you don’t need to be a social worker to be really good at the work.”

She says, quite simply, “I love my job,” and is proud that her service received an ‘Outstanding’ assessment in a recent inspection – not least, she says, “because we are, I really believe, providing a truly outstanding service.”

“Over time,” she says, “I’ve loved different aspects – going to court, sitting with young people and engaging with them. Loved working with girls – they’re much more expressive, whereas the boys would grunt! I liked the thought of even attempting to change one aspect of their life – even just an uptick in attendance at school.”

Jo is still in touch with some of the people she supported early on in her career (which you can read about at www.butlertrust.org.uk/joanne-benson), and still “very interested in the topic of criminal justice.” She says that “we have a great collaboration with the police and we’ve worked very hard on diversion. It is about relationship-building, keeping them out of custody, and keeping them on a straight road.” The results can make an all-important difference to their lives.

Jo thinks that “you have to be a people person more than anything else” in this work, but a certain humility helps, too – “don’t profess you know anything.” She also sees “supporting each other and partnership working” as absolutely vital. She adds that “you have to have a forward-thinking mind – to ask yourself ‘What do we do to maintain this standard? To push it forward?’” Her ‘constant’ interest includes reading inspection reports for ideas and insights she can bring to her team.

You have to be a people person more than anything else.

Jo is also clear about the role of managers in supporting her team, especially those who are on the front line. She credits her own “amazing manager who left a huge legacy,” and recalls thinking “I’d never fill her boots – but now I’m

thinking the same: what is the enduring legacy I can leave?” She says that her role has taught her that “you have to be strong; you have to be confident; I’m not scared to express my opinion!”

You don’t need to be a social worker to be really good at the work.

A key challenge, alluded to by all, is “too much bureaucracy.” In some ways, working in the Covid pandemic has forced approaches with “different ways of offering support and advice and intervention,” she adds, “and we’ve had to be creative.” But the role of senior managers, she believes, is “to let my managers get on with it. I ask them: ‘what do you think?’ And if you think that, then I’ll tell them; ‘you can do it, and I’ll take the brunt!’” She concludes by adding “we need to listen to the young more – and we’re getting that in lockdown, because it’s afforded us the creativity, and allowed us to think differently.”



ED HORWOOD

I realised I was interested in working with people, not pipes!



Ed is a Reparation & Volunteer Development Officer for the North Yorkshire Youth Offending Team who won a Commendation in the 2019-20 Butler Trust Awards for his innovative ‘pop-up’ workshop – a brilliantly tailored solution for England’s largest rural county. A former plumber and heating installer, it was his wife who, working in children’s residential care and training in social work, helped him realise “I was interested in working with people, not pipes.”

Volunteering at a local YMCA and soon “completing all the training going,” he took a Community and Youth Work diploma and then discovered “the more challenging, harder to reach young people” interested him most. He talks, too, about “the pride in belonging to a caring, highly skilled, motivated and professional team,” and values “working with volunteers and others from my local community.” He particularly enjoys “the amount of autonomy within my role – and the feeling of just being able to do something positive for young people and our community.”

I’m proud to belong to a caring, highly skilled, motivated and professional team.

He thrives at “the challenge of gaining the trust of, and building a positive relationship and rapport with, the young people we work with – the strength of that relationship can make all

the difference when trying to motivate, build confidence, support and assist young people in achieving positive outcomes for themselves.”

Ed says a positive relationship is crucial “when you have to hold them to account for their actions or when they are going through challenging times.” A particular highlight, he says, is “when young people I’ve worked with seek me out to tell me how they are doing...and reminisce about conversations or experiences we shared that clearly still resonate with them. The fact that they still wish to engage with me when they have no obligation to do so is very humbling and reminds me of why I do my job.”

Young people are the best authority on themselves and their lives.

Ed notes that “everyone who works with people of any age, in any setting, draws on a huge range of skills throughout their working day and as such, it’s difficult to give a set list” but adds that, from his own experience, “the skills that have served me best in most situations are active listening, patience, impartiality, being able to communicate clearly and to stay calm and positive.”

He also tries to remember that “young people are the best authority on themselves and their lives.” He says that “building trust and respect with an adult to the point where young people feel able to talk about their thoughts, feelings and what’s going on in their life, even to a limited extent, can make all the difference in terms of your chances of being able to help and support.”

Ed often reflects on his own experiences and the adults who showed him patience, support, encouragement and understanding, whether

family members, neighbours, teachers, or sometimes, even complete strangers. “I try to emulate them in being the best role model I can,” he says, “in the hope that young people might find some worth from their involvement with me.”

Ed’s a great believer in “looking after yourself” in order to build the resilience to “go the extra mile on occasion – so getting the proper work-life balance is essential.” The better you look after yourself, the more effective you will be at doing your job and being of benefit to others. A man with a gift for seeing the silver lining, he points out that the challenges of less funding and resources can also create the space for creative and innovative solutions – exactly as he did when developing the Pop Up Shed.

Ed notes, too, that “today’s young people find themselves in a far more complex environment, particularly in terms of technology, communication and social media.” Because many of the young people he works with “are only too happy to educate me about these things,” he sees another silver lining: “it’s great for breaking down barriers and demonstrating that the young have plenty they can teach adults, too.”





SARAH CADEN

Working with challenging young people is the best job!

In her role as a Practice Improvement Officer at County Durham Youth Offending Service (CDYOS), and working alongside a Speech Therapist colleague, Susan Stewart, Sarah won a 2015-16 Butler Trust Award. Together they helped change the way that young offenders with communication difficulties are supported and managed. A core feature of Sarah's work in youth justice has been to speak to the communication needs of young people. She credits her background in drama in some ways as giving her a wider set of communication skills to deploy in her work.

Sarah was formerly employed as a Development Officer "for issue-based drama with young people," and says she "loved it." She went on to work "for years with challenging young people" and calls Youth Justice "the best job," for which her drama work was "really helpful background."

I love that our service is innovative.

Her enthusiasm for her work is infectious. "I am absolutely passionate about making things

better for young people,” she says. “Hugely passionate – and that’s what I love about the job.” Sarah adds that, in particular, she “loves County Durham Youth Offending Service,” noting that “our staff don’t move because it’s such a great place to work.” She describes how “I love that our service is innovative,” and that she particularly likes an environment where bringing new ideas to the work is welcomed.

In terms of what works among those working in the sector, Sarah says, “You have to have people skills, of course, but I also think you need to be thoughtful and reflective. You need to really want to do it. You’ve got to have quite an investigative mind.” As well as that, she says, you’ve got to be “good at looking after yourself – and your colleagues.”

There’s a real creativity you get from working with other people.

A related challenge in recent years, says Sarah, has been “generally making sure people don’t get overly bombarded with ‘change fatigue’.” My role is trying to bring things in, and get people to understand and take it on board. So, it’s about carefully picking the right things to change.” She adds that “We want to learn, and we want to move on, and we do have to change and grow, but you have to balance that with staff trying to manage a day job.”

Sarah points out that “in youth justice our assessments are so wide – covering subjects like substance misuse, mental health, psychology, family backgrounds and so on – the demands are massive.” It’s work that is centred in partnerships, and that takes “energy, creativity, innovation and teamwork.”

Her work takes a highly inclusive approach that involves working closely with a wide range of people, including staff colleagues, volunteers, young people (including offenders and victims), parents and carers, as well as the many other partners like the Local Authority, health practitioners and others in criminal justice.

There is a growing recognition of the importance of achieving a much better understanding of the role of communication in youth justice, against a context that can include both learning difficulties and disabilities. (A practice-focused 2014 Butler Trust Workshop on the topic highlighted challenging and profoundly moving additional problems so many in the justice system face.)

Sarah’s enthusiasm and support for her colleagues has been sharpened by Covid. She calls those who are “out there, going for walks and meeting young people” the real “hidden heroes of the service” – noting that, like so many, she’s been doing her work from home. She’s been missing spending time with her colleagues, “and missing that face-to-face contact – there’s a real creativity you get from working with other people.”



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THE YOUTH JUSTICE WORKER

FINAL WORD

Those involved in youth justice have been extremely successful in reducing the numbers of children in the criminal justice system. Yet the children they support on behalf of society have increasingly complex needs, and are often victims too. Youth justice workers are often the catalyst in bringing people and agencies together to support best outcomes for children and to protect communities. Having worked alongside youth offending teams and others I know from first-hand experience the recognition that their work deserves, and have always been impressed by the unwavering commitment they show to children and communities.

Their work is often unseen, but deserves the highest praise. Thank you to the Butler Trust for raising the profile of the work they do.



Keith Fraser
Chair of the Youth Justice Board



This is one of three publications recognising the *#HiddenHeroes* working across the criminal justice sector, and is part of our wider work to celebrate all that you do on behalf of both the public you serve and the people in your care.

You can find out more about the Butler Trust and our *#HiddenHeroes* programme at www.butlertrust.org.uk and www.hiddenheroes.uk

