

# Troubled teens box clever

## BOXING

### Hackney academy helps to steer youngsters on the right track

Nick Pitt

The most frequently advanced argument in favour of boxing is that it teaches discipline, takes kids off the streets. Morally, it's a force for good. Sometimes, that is a dubious notion, but in the case of the Boxing Academy in Hackney it is true.

"We have 40 of the most aggressive and unruly children in north and east London," said Anna Cain, the academy's principal. "They've been transferred to us because they have been excluded from mainstream schools, usually because of some violent incident, or more than one."

Sitting in her office, the between-class hubbub can be heard beyond the door: bells, feet tramping up and down stairs, laughter. It's universal school noise, but this is no ordinary school. The academy takes students from 14 to 16 years of age. All of them are excluded, damaged or dangerous children, depending on your point of view. They are taught boxing, which gives street credibility, and promotes the idea that learning might be useful, and takes them through GCSEs.

And it works. This year, every academy leaver had qualifications and went on to college or an apprenticeship. Equally important, the academy offers sanctuary from the gang culture that pervades young lives.

Personal experience led Cain to appreciate the value of boxing training. Her son was excluded from school and sent to the academy in its early days in Tottenham. "He was adopted aged three-and-a-half having suffered neglectful and abusive

treatment," Cain said. "When he went to secondary school, I knew he wouldn't be able to negotiate it. He was in trouble all the time and even turned on me. It was one of the worst times of my life."

The Boxing Academy welcomed Cain's son. He left with GCSEs, went to college and has forged a productive, positive adult life. Cain, who lost her job as a university researcher during her son's teenage turmoil, became principal of the academy.

Under Cain, it has progressed from a community project to become the only government-funded boxing-based school in Britain. "We set boundaries. If they're not in on time, they do push-ups. If they cause trouble in class, they'll be cleaning the gym or washing up. And when problems arise, we deal with them and get it over with. Above all, we talk to the kids. We find out what's behind their anger."

Down in the basement gym, taking the first boxing class of the day, is another pivotal figure, Jermaine Williams, the head of boxing. He takes 12 students, 11 boys and one girl, through routines of footwork, hitting punch bags and practising combinations while he holds the pads.

The respect in which Williams is held comes in part from a winning personality, in part from a remarkable life

story. He left Jamaica for England when he was 12, rejected by his mother and father. He was taken in by an aunt. That was not a good relationship either. School, in Eltham, was a bad experience. Racism was rife; on his way to school, Williams had to walk past the spot where Stephen Lawrence was murdered. He "bunked off" a good deal.

"School was not a safe place for me," Williams said. "I stayed away, became idle and met the wrong sort of people. We started shoplifting and then it escalated to street robbery, snatching wallets and phones. One day, we were in Peckham. It was not our area, so I carried a knife. There were three of us; we thought we were gods, untouchable. This fellow was looking at us and it started to kick off. I threw the first punch, then other guys leapt in."

Williams was arrested and faced five years in jail. On remand in HM Prison, Feltham, he helped other inmates by writing love letters for their girlfriends. "I sat in my cell facing the wall and decided I was meant to be better than this," Williams said.

Thrown a lifeline by a lenient judge, he worked on building sites and took up amateur boxing. The late Mick Carney, the legendary trainer at Fitzroy Lodge amateur boxing club, was a

key influence as Williams went on to win the English amateur title at middleweight.

One day, one of his boxing coaches told Williams about a job going at the Boxing Academy. "Work with kids? That's not for me," Williams said. A little while later, needing some money, he asked whether the job was still going and was taken on for a week's trial. Eight years on, aged 28 and an active boxer with championship intentions, he is still there.

"I tell the kids my story," Williams said. "They see themselves in me and I see myself in them. There is mutual respect. The reason boxing works here is that it gives them confidence. They learn what their limits are and how they can break through those limits. It helps to bring a positive outlook, a sense of personal achievement, but also of being part of a family."

One of Williams' most important contributions has been the development of a pod system in which boxing instructors act as mentors to groups of eight pupils. As well as taking boxing lessons, the pod leaders act as teaching assistants in academic lessons. If disruption occurs, the pod leader steps in, allowing the teacher to continue with the lesson.

Lives can change fast and fundamentally. Eleven months ago, Ali, who was halfway through Year 10 in a Hackney secondary school, was thrown out for fighting in class. "I was always messing around and getting caught," he said. "When I came here, Jermaine talked to me and I started taking things seriously. I've been learning a lot more. I'm taking my GCSEs next year and I'll go on to college."

Now a novice but improving boxer, Ali no longer feels the need to fight in the street. "I used to fight for no reason," he said. "Now I walk away. Knowing how to box makes you humble. It keeps me out of trouble."

PETER TARRY



Packing a punch: Jermaine Williams teaching the basics