

WORKING WITH THREAT

Jeff Maxwell

In the late 1980s I was a youth worker in North Belfast. I was working with young people who were being knee-capped or were under the threat of being punished and I suppose that's where the interest came around how to support young people when this was happening to them. People were aware that punishment beatings were happening, but not at that scale and it was something that the majority of people didn't really want to know about. There's always been that misconception that punishment beatings were about young people who were joyriders - that was comfortable for communities because if they were joy riders and young people doing drugs there was a reason for punishments - almost a reaction of "well it's terrible, but here, they didn't get it for nothing". If they had accepted that it was an injustice, then there would have been an onus on them to do something about it.

In 1990 I started working with a number of peace groups dealing with victims of paramilitary violence and in 1994 I commenced working for Base 2 which is a crisis intervention service for individuals and families who are at risk of paramilitary or community threat. It started as a response to the very high levels of predominantly young males who were being punished or put out of the country. I've since dealt with about 5,000 cases where people have been under threat or at risk. The job involves meeting with community/paramilitary contacts to verify if the threat is genuine and what level of threat exists. We see if we can get the threat lifted or if there is a possibility of a mediation to address the issue. If it isn't possible to get the threat lifted we'll assist that person to relocate, usually within Northern Ireland, but during the height of the conflict, often out of the country.

The very first time I was involved in moving people out of the country was two young lads who had been put under threat. We'd arranged for them to



go to England on the boat. We picked the two lads up, but they had to get their belongings from their house - they couldn't go back into the area because they were under threat, so we went to one of the lad's house to meet his mother. She got a sports bag with a pair of jeans, a few jumpers and a poster from the bedroom wall. She opened her purse and gave me a tenner for him – it was the last note that she had in her purse. So you get the young people out and then the reality sinks in of how on earth are they going to survive on the other side? If you were to look at a group within our society who are least capable of being lifted and taken elsewhere, it's that group. Here was a 17 year old fella going to a city to start a new life with a sports bag, a poster and ten pounds. Six to Eight months down the line he made approaches to come home and one of the other paramilitary organisations claimed that young lad: "if you come home and you join us - you'll be all right they won't be able to touch you". So he came home, joined that organisation and ended up with a serious conviction as a result of his involvement. So it cost him in the end. That was the price of being able to return home because he couldn't survive. That was his only way back – to go and join another organisation and ultimately that cost him 10 years of his life, but that's how organisations manipulated and used people.

It's not a 9-5 job and it does impact on you outside of work. On occasions when out in town, I have been approached by individuals asking for support to return to their areas or for mediation. Obviously people are sitting at nearby tables and I'm thinking people will assume I'm part of the paramilitary organisation that's keeping him out!

Things have progressed now – there isn't the same level of physical assaults and better mechanisms for mediation. Communities are more open to restorative processes. Back in the 1990s there would have been higher levels of violence and risk of personal attack. And you did live with that for a while and that certainly did put massive strains on relationships and everything else. But most of society lived with risk at that time.

