

# 'It's time to focus on the positive and change lives'

Earlier this year **Ethan**, aged 17, interviewed Rt Hon Beverley Hughes MP, Minister of State for Children, Young People and Families.



**E**than was presented with a Diana Award for being the most inspirational young person in his area, Croydon.

The Diana Award charity, set up in memory of Diana, Princess of Wales, gives recognition to outstanding young people aged 12-18 who make selfless contributions to their communities and invest a huge amount of energy and compassion to improve the lives of others (For more information, see [www.diana-award.org.uk](http://www.diana-award.org.uk)).

**E:** Hello, you are listening to DJ May E (Ethan) from the Diana Award. I'm here today with Beverley Hughes to talk about my project 'Change Lives Before Knives'. Can you tell me a little about your job role please?

**BH:** Hello Ethan, well it's really nice to talk to you. My official title is that I'm the Minister of State for Children, Young People and Families. That means

that I work as a minister in the government and my areas of responsibility cover a whole range of areas in terms of young people. I'm responsible for developing children's centres and services for families with very young children, right through to improving the prospects for young people and that includes some aspects of work with vulnerable young people, but it also includes trying to improve the positive activities available for mainstream young people right across all sections of society. I've also got responsibility for policy on support for parents and families more generally.

**E:** So your main job is to take care of the youth of today in every way possible?

**BH:** That's one of the most important things. It's my job to advise Gordon Brown on what we need to be doing to take that forward.

**E: I'm here today to talk about 'Change Lives Before Knives'. This is basically a scheme that I started up. The principle of it is to get to the children before they do the crime, because not everyone starts with a knife or gun in their hand, they are driven to that or they are forced to do so. What are your ideas on this?**

BH: Well first of all, I think that the whole objective of preventing people from falling into that kind of activity is extremely important. I think one of the ways in which we are trying to do that is to make sure that there are enough positive, constructive activities for young people to do in every locality. And we're doing that in a number of ways, by supporting the building and refurbishment of really world class places for young people to go, not the old style youth centre, but outstanding places where there's the kind of things that today's young people want to do – very often focused on music, on sport, on drama. And that's a really important set of opportunities we need to make available to young people. Making sure that those things are open on a Friday and Saturday night in particular – that's a campaign I've got going at the moment. Because you often find that the very things the young people want to do may be there in their area, but they may not be open on Friday and Saturday. But secondly, making sure that there's people around who can support young people who may be at risk, so we're putting in place street teams of detached youth workers; people who are really experienced in dealing with young people, getting them out on the street, talking to young people who maybe scared themselves and making sure that they don't fall into that kind of activity as far as we can.

**E: In the media today, they portray children of 2009 to be dangerous and violent. Do you feel that is the case?**

BH: I genuinely don't feel that that is the case. And I know it's not true. It's true of a minority, and I guess part of what the media does, and in a way has to do, is tell the story of problems in society and the problem is that those stories about a minority of young people, they get taken to be a picture of young people as a whole and that is not the case. I found that if you give young people the chance to participate, to take part in decision making in things that are going on around them they really, really rise to the occasion. We've done that in one particular way in something called the Youth Opportunity Fund in which we gave a substantial amount of money to every local authority and said to them; 'You've got to use this to improve the area for young people, but you've also got to involve young people in the decisions about how it's spent and you've got to let young people put bids in for how the money is spent and let them have control'. And honestly, I can tell you we've had the most tremendous response from

that and tremendous projects are going forward led by young people. So we are building on that and we are trying to turn around this negative stereotype in a number of other ways too. For example, we've got ten local authorities who we are working with at the moment to put on, in a pilot basis to see how it works, a celebration event. It's young people led again, they are going to organise it, they're going to lead it, and it's going to be an event in each of those areas to celebrate the contribution, the good things that the young people there are doing. Secondly this year, we are going to have a National Youth Week, again to try and celebrate on a national scale, some of the fantastic things that young people like you and others are doing. So we are really trying our best to make sure we can balance this negative picture by showcasing all the great things that most young people are doing.

**E: One of the things that we hear today is that children carry knives to protect themselves and because they are afraid of someone else. With the media's help, do you think we can take that and turn it around and say that you don't need a knife to protect yourself?**

BH: I think we have to do that and say not only do you not need a knife to protect yourself, but if you carry a knife, and statistics actually show this, you are more likely to get involved in something that's going to harm you or somebody else. So it's positively more dangerous to carry a knife and I think we have to absolutely get that message across.

**E: I interviewed a lad the other day living in 2009's youth world and he is part of the scene (street life/crime) and I spoke to him about knife crime. What he said to me was that he would happily walk down the street without a knife or a gun on him, but if someone feels like they have the heart to want to stab or shoot him, then he has the heart to do it back. Do you feel that's the case with a lot of youth today?**

BH: No, I don't think that's the case with a lot of young people. I think a lot of young people in certain areas, and they have told me this because I have been out there to talk to them, tell me that they feel scared. They are scared that they might find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time, confronted by the wrong people and that's what makes them scared. And I think we've got a real responsibility to try and help those young people feel safe and that means you know, doing something to clean up those areas, to make it not the case that gangs rule the roost and that is not right. But I don't think the vast majority of young people, although some maybe scared, feel that they want to harm other people and will do that. But our job is to protect the vast majority of really good young people who just want to get on with the good things in their life and

not have to worry about what's going to happen to them.

**E:** On the topic of youth and places for them to go, I had a meeting with Junction 49 (part of TimeBank's community-led projects) and I created this idea of a youth-run youth club. The principle of it is that the local council pays for the building and the estate has to raise money to pay for the rent, furniture and TVs and games. Do you feel like this would work?

**BH:** Well, I've seen it work and that's a fantastic idea of yours and there are not that many places doing that. I have been to one or two places where that kind of partnership between the local authority and the local community is working and to support that we have put some new money in so called Youth Capital Funds. Again we've got to talk to young people about how that money is spent, but its to refurbish existing premises, particularly in hard-pressed areas and bring them up to scratch and I think you should go and see your local council, they've all got some of this money, most of them, and I think they should be able to support what you are doing.

**E:** As a final thought, with children like me helping out the children of today, do you think we can change around the world, and make life a better place?

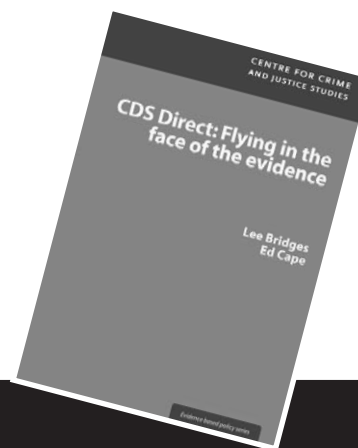
**BH:** Look Ethan, young people of today are our future. They are the adults of tomorrow. I think it's inspiring when young people feel that they can show leadership now. They can show that things will be different in those communities where there are most problems and that they can make a real contribution, not later on when they are grown up, but here and now. They can really make a vital contribution and can be, I think, tremendous role models for young people generally, so congratulations and well done to you on doing that and to other people who are doing similar things. I think in this country we can be really proud of our young people and we ought to say that more often.

**E:** Thank you for that, that was Beverley Hughes, this is DJ May E with the Diana Award. ■

CENTRE FOR CRIME  
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This report examines in detail the introduction of two related schemes, in 2008, for the delivery of advice to those arrested and detained by the police: Criminal Defence Service (CDS) Direct and the Defence Solicitor Call Centre (DSCC). It finds that a previous government commitment to equitable access to legal representation has been replaced by a drive to secure convictions and limit access to legal services.



**A copy of the report is available to download at**  
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