



FRANCIS'S STORY

A former gang member has set up a charity where he delivers presentations to others to help them steer away from a life of crime.

Francis, a notorious gang member has spent nearly a third of his life in prison after committing a serious offence. He has set up a charity to tell others about his offending, his experiences of prison and how he has improved his life chances, to inspire others to do the same.

Francis's story begins when he was only a very young boy. At the age of seven he moved to the UK from Africa. At school the other children bullied and teased Francis. He felt like an outsider.

In his teenage years, Francis decided to join a gang. This gave him a new sense of belonging and also made him feel like people were looking up to him. He says that he was totally caught up in the gang.

"I knew what I was doing in the gang was wrong. My parents hadn't brought me up that way, but I just put up shutters to the crime and switched off to get through it. I was basically living the movie the 'Godfather'. There were drugs and there were guns. I didn't know how to break away."

Francis did finally manage to break away but it came at a huge price. The courts had convicted him of a serious offence and they had sentenced him to 14 years in prison. Going to prison for the first time was a huge shock from Francis. Inside and with lots of time to think about his actions, he came to the decision that he never wanted to end up in prison again and he certainly didn't want to rejoin the gang he had been part of.

Instead, Francis wanted to use his time constructively and started studying for a degree in social work. This meant that when the parole board finally released him on a licence with Kent Probation, and having graduated, he was able to find a job in a residential unit for clients with learning disability.

Still full of determination, Francis started as a Support Worker and worked his way up to a management position within a few years.

While enjoying his new found success, Francis was not content with having turned his life around, but he also wanted to help others like him.

He founded a charity 'Reform, Restore and Respect'. The work of 'Reform, Restore and Respect' is a multi-strand strategy involving both preventative and responsive elements. The Charity's aim is to reach young people and adults who may be involved or about to be involved in criminal activity or join gangs. The Charity also advises the already convicted of the consequences and ramifications of being involved in serious criminal behaviour. The Charity has a desistance element at its core with practical and advisory strands as well. The work of the Charity includes presentations by serving prisoners which adds to the legitimacy of the interventions.

His Probation Officer was aware of Francis's early intervention work and asked him if he would also present to a group of other offenders on the Reducing Re-offending specified activity requirement. The idea was that as a fellow peer the group were more likely to listen to him and to also see him as a role model, something they too could aspire to.

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Francis delivered his first presentation to the Tunbridge Wells group in 08/11/12. The first presentation went really well and a number of offender managers commented how some of the group members who had not really spoken before, had really opened up when Francis was presenting. Emily Rutland co-facilitator of the SAR said:

"I worked with Francis earlier in his sentence in 2008 when he completed the Think First programme which I was facilitating. From the start it was apparent that he had already committed and taken steps to addressing his behaviour, and was pursuing his desire to use his experiences to assist others. It was therefore a real pleasure to be approached by his Offender Manager regarding Francis facilitating a guest speaker session within our Reducing Reoffending Specified Activity. I observed this session and admired his honesty with the group and his clear passion to impart his own experiences and learning in order to aid desistance in others. Francis had also invited two serving prisoners to talk to the group about their circumstances, and together the three of them highlighted some of the finer, less attractive details of serving a custodial sentence, such as sharing a room with others and having to use the toilet facilities in front of them.

Francis has a good grasp of the factors contributing to offending and how best these may be addressed. He is also realistic, in that he understands an individual's motivation for change cannot be rushed and he talked to me about his satisfaction in knowing that an individual may reflect on his work at a later stage rather than in the present moment."

Francis is now inspired to deliver more presentations to these groups, and is working with the Central and West Kent team to discuss any future possibilities. He is keen to expand his work within Kent Probation and would consider other opportunities that arose within the organisation.

Francis said: "As a gang member I was lucky that I didn't end up dead. I am truly grateful to have the opportunity to share my experiences with others and to help them to see that they too can turn their life's around as I have done."

Francis's website is www.reformrestorerrespect.org