

SHELDON THOMAS

AN EX-GANG MEMBER ON UK KNIFE CRIME

DEFIANCE #023
WITH PETER MCCORMACK



DEF023 - SHELDON THOMAS INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION

AN EX-GANG MEMBER ON UK KNIFE CRIME

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Peter McCormack: 00:02:35

Good afternoon, Sheldon.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:02:36

Afternoon.

Peter McCormack: 00:02:36

Thank you for agreeing to do this, come into my town of Bedford. Really appreciate your time. I've been spending the last, I would say, two weeks now researching UK knife crimes. Something I've obviously been aware of is a major problem but seems to be a growing problem. I'm going to be doing a few interviews based around this now. And as I said to you in the prep, every time I look up knife crime, your name comes up, and I've seen a bunch of videos with you. So there's a lot to unpack here, but I think just for the sake of the audience, let's dive into your background. You're an ex gang member. Talk to me about your background and then we'll dive into the issues.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:03:17

No worries. For those who don't know me, I grew up in the '60s to two Jamaican parents who came over looking, or shall I say, they would come over to England to get a better life. And they didn't realise actually they were just being manipulated by colonialism. My parents came to England looking for a good life, but what they found wasn't exactly what they were looking for. My mom, before she met my dad, saw a sign, says, "No Blacks, no dogs, and no Irish."

Sheldon Thomas: 00:04:01

She was a bit disturbed by it because her friend told her that everything was going good because her friend had come to England two or three years previous to that and was trying to make her, "Oh, it's really great here." And actually her friend lied. It wasn't great here. But I won't go into that today because today's not about colonialism or slavery. It's about the gangs.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:04:30

How I came into it, obviously, born in the '60s. Grew up. My first experience was when I was nine years old in 1974. I went across the road to the park. All of us wanted to be like Pele. For us, the best football in the world was never a White person. It was always a Black person. It was always Pele for us, or Jairzinho, or Garrincha. We all wanted it to be them. We didn't support England. We all supported Brazil, which was really strange and we were only nine years old.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:05:06

Anyway, on the way across the road, a car pulled up. It was a police car that wind the window down. And if my memory serves me well, I think they either called me a Golliwog or a coon. That was the very first time I had heard those words.

Peter McCormack: 00:05:25

How old were you?

Sheldon Thomas: 00:05:26

Nine.

Peter McCormack: 00:05:27

Okay.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:05:28

I then ran back across the road to my mom, but this is where I mention colonialism. My mom took the side of the police and said, what did I do to offend them? And that broke me. I was only nine. I was hurt. I didn't know what my mom was trying to say. I'm nine years old. What on earth could a nine-year-old say to a police officer that will make him call him a Golliwog or a coon?

Sheldon Thomas: 00:05:57

Anyway, as time went on, the National Front got involved. We were chased. We were intimidated by police officers, bullied by police officers. Every name that you could think of, they called us. Jungle bunny, swinging the trees, go back to Africa. So if it wasn't the police, it was the National Front. If it wasn't the National Front, it was the police. And for those who don't know who the National Front are, it's what you would call EDL today, or what you would call the British National Party today. It's a party that believes in White supremacy.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:06:39

Again, I'm a young kid, but I wasn't getting any support at home. I wasn't getting any love at home, and I resented being at home. I resented it badly. I felt, even though I know my mom and dad had a hard time because they were Black in a mainly White country, and they're trying to make ends meet and we're all poor. We ain't got no money and my mom's got kids, and she's got to get two jobs. My dad's got to get two jobs. As a young man, I didn't know that because I'm nine, I'm 10, I'm 11. You're not sitting there thinking, "Oh, my mom hasn't got time to hug me." You don't think like that. You understand?

Sheldon Thomas: 00:07:21

So, for me, I felt I was in no man's land. I felt I wasn't wanted at home, and I felt wasn't wanted in Britain because everywhere I went, people were calling me names. That's when I had enough and I decided that I'm not going to walk streets on my own anymore. I'm going to get a gang. We didn't call it a gang, by the way. We kept away from the African-American terminology. We stayed with the Jamaican terminology because all of us were Jamaicans, yeah, born to Jamaican parents. So we used the word posse. Posse, and now some people's going to be like, what? Posse? What's that?

Sheldon Thomas: 00:08:04

Well, basically, in Jamaica, most Jamaicans who had a TV used to watch Clint Eastwood, and we loved Clint Eastwood. In those films, they were called spaghetti movies. And in those films, they would use the word posse. So anytime the sheriff was after somebody, he would say, "Come on, let's get the

posse. That's why a lot of Jamaicans in the early days never used the word gang, but used the word posse because we loved Clint Eastwood. We loved the Western movie. We loved the shooting up, and that's where we got it from. When you watch the film *The Harder They Come*, Jimmy Cliff who acts in that film is watching a Western movie before he goes out and buy a gun.

Peter McCormack: 00:08:49

Oh, I didn't know that. And there was a there was a hip-hop band, London Posse.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:08:53

Yeah, there's a gang... I'm sorry, a group called the London Posse as well.

Peter McCormack: 00:08:56

How's Life In London.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:08:57

Yeah. Most of us at that time tend to use Jamaican slang because we wanted to represent Jamaica. Now-

Peter McCormack: 00:09:08

Is that to give yourself an identity that isn't British-

Sheldon Thomas: 00:09:11

Yeah.

Peter McCormack: 00:09:11

... because you were so fed up with-

Sheldon Thomas: 00:09:12

We wanted to grab an identity. We wanted to grab what was Black. So Jamaican Africa to us was Black, you understand? So for us was we just wanted to get away from anything that was Western. The word gang is Western. So we just said, "No, we don't want that. We're going to use posse." And that's when I think my life went downhill. I think when you don't feel loved, when you don't feel wanted by anybody, and you're a young kid, you're going through hormone changes... Because when you're between the age of 10 to 15, your body changes internally.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:09:58

Some people get bumps on their forehead. Some people get acne and all of

that stuff. Some people go for different levels. I went through the anger level and I became a nasty guy. I hated everyone. Anyone that wasn't Black, I hated. And I decided that any White person that calls me a name, I was going to kill. My whole motive in life was kill the White man, because when we learned what we learned about slavery and colonialism, and then to come to England and still to be treated as if we're slaves was too much. And I think the worst part was that mom accepted it, my mom and dad accepted to keep your head down. Don't say nothing. If they call you a Golliwog, don't say nothing. Keep your head down. And it hurt me.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:11:06

How we started as a gang, and how many gangs started, you will find started in the same way. The Bloods and the Crips all started fighting racism.

Peter McCormack: 00:11:16

But when you first started, you were a group of mates, right?

Sheldon Thomas: 00:11:19

Yeah.

Peter McCormack: 00:11:19

Just a group of friends hanging around. When did that stop being a group of mates and started to venture into what you would say is criminal activity?

Sheldon Thomas: 00:11:29

The minute we attacked police. I remember the first time we attacked a police. We were sitting in a bus. The bus conductor came up. We went to pay the fare and we were making jokes in Jamaican slang. And a police officer was on the bus. He came up to us and said, "Why don't you Blackies speak bloody English mate?" And that was the first time we decided enough's enough. I think at that time I was 12. I kicked him down the stairs and obviously kicked him off the bus while the bus was moving. realise what I'd done because he rolled on the... and cards just missed going over his head.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:12:18

Before we know it, we ran off the bus. All hell broke loose, and I think, for us, that was the time we turned. We turned from just walking in a park into now striking out against police brutality. And for me that's when we became criminal. Now, some people would say, "You were just because they called you all these names. They were brutalising. They were intimidating you." But we

just got more angry. And then 1977 happened. 1977 the National Front decided to march in Lewisham, and we just said, "We're not allowing it."

Sheldon Thomas: 00:13:05

We went down there, 13 men, and all hell broke loose. Then from then, we started to do sabotage. So we would leave from Brixton and go to Hilton. That was where the headquarters of the National Front was at the time, throw bricks through the window. When police officers drove past in Brixton, we'd smash up the windows, and we started to turn it. So we started to be known as a gang that would confront the White people, even though they were like seven years older than us.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:13:44

Most of the National Front guys, they were 19. We were young kids. We were like 12, 13. But there were a lot of us. My gang had 25 men deep. I was big. And so, we started to get a reputation of fighting police officers, fighting the National Front, a real reputation. By the time 1980 had come, when Brixton then was burnt to the ground, our reputation exceeded because people were like, yeah, that Monday, let's go and get them because they're not scared of no one. You know what I'm saying?

Sheldon Thomas: 00:14:24

When you look at the footage of the Brixton riots, you will see my gang is at the front, and we're kids. We're not adults. We're kids. And the adults were behind us. So I think, for us, we had a violent reputation. But things got worse because drugs got involved. Now-

Peter McCormack: 00:14:45

Taking or dealing or both?

Sheldon Thomas: 00:14:47

Both. What happened was, as we were fighting police officers, we were getting arrested, obviously, yeah? Some of us were being charged. Some of us were going to borstal. There was no youth-offending institute then it was called borstal. And then they were like, "Ah, this is long, man." They didn't use those words, but I'm just using it because of today's phrases, yeah? They were like, "Oh, this long." They were like, "It's long, man, let's make some money." Yeah. So I'm like, "How?" They're like are, "Let's sell drugs."

Sheldon Thomas: 00:15:26

I wasn't really keen on it because I used to call it the White man's drug,

because I used to say that the White man wants you to be slow in your thinking. So I used to say to them like, "Let's not get involved." But they got involved. And basically what happened was the turning point for us as Black kids. The turning point was we then began to associate with the Jamaican criminals who were on the run from the DEA in America, because at that time, the crack cocaine market was controlled by the Jamaicans, not by the Mexican cartels as people like people to believe.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:16:12

The Mexicans and the Colombians were still fairly new, and they weren't dealing in crack cocaine. What they used to do is bring the drugs into America, but they didn't want to really distribute it. So they would get the locals, which were the Jamaicans or African-Americans.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:16:31

And so, what people don't realise is that the Jamaicans were controlling the crack cocaine in-land. And so the DEA didn't like the Jamaicans because the Jamaicans didn't do things like the mafia. The Jamaicans would spray like... So, for instance, say for instance, you hold that Jamaican gang money, so like the Shower Posse, and they came to the club looking for you. Now, unlike the mafia, they would kidnap you, drive you to some location, and you'd never be seen again. Jamaicans don't do that. We'd go into the club and we shoot everybody, so everyone gets shot. Do you understand? So that was causing mayhem in the early '80s between 1980 and '87 in America, because the Jamaicans would shoot everyone. They wouldn't just go in there and say, "Yeah, yo, bredran come."

Peter McCormack: 00:17:30

When you say we, you mean we as Jamaicans not-

Sheldon Thomas: 00:17:32

No, we, myself included. Not me personally because, like I said, I didn't get involved but my crew, yeah, my crew was involved in that. We'd shoot up dances all the time. Enough times. You see, the sophistication of the mafia is different to the sophistication of the Jamaicans. The word is everybody for dead. Do you understand?

Peter McCormack: 00:18:00

Uh-huh.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:18:01

How we look at it is everybody dead. We don't go in and say, "Yeah, let's wait for him to come out." There's nothing like that. And that's why I think the DEA didn't like the Jamaicans because the Jamaicans would shoot the whole neighborhood. For instance, if they knew you lived in this house, they'd shoot all of the houses. So the DEA wanted to get rid of the Jamaicans badly. What the Jamaicans found is that they were getting cornered. So they used the African-Americans against the Jamaicans because they wanted order. Let me just put it that way. The Americans wanted order.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:18:41

So when they went to the mafia, the mafia said, "We don't want nothing to do with it," because the mafia don't want to start up that shooting again. They did that 50 years previous. So they had to figure out a way, how are we going to get rid of these Jamaicans because they're killing everybody. And so, obviously, that's when... I don't know if you've heard the saying that the CIA and the FBI all brought the drugs into the African-American areas and that's how the Jamaicans decided to leave from America and come to England. When they came to England, they needed an army of people to work with them.

Peter McCormack: 00:19:21

Right. And so, when you're going started-

Sheldon Thomas: 00:19:23

Working with them.

Peter McCormack: 00:19:24

Working with them, get involved in the drugs, was there like a focus change?

Sheldon Thomas: 00:19:29

Yeah.

Peter McCormack: 00:19:30

Did it switch from being fuck the police and now let's make money?

Sheldon Thomas: 00:19:33

Yeah, it did, badly. I wanted to fight the police continuous. And I got arrested obviously quite a lot of times. But the rest of my crew, not all of them, they just didn't want to. But I knew it wasn't going to end well because being of Jamaican heritage, and the way we think can be, I was trying to explain to

them. I most probably didn't explain it right, was we're going to turn against ourselves. So we began to self-destruct.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:20:09

What started off as a partnership between the Jamaicans who were born in Jamaica and the Jamaicans born here in Britain, ended with the Black British born of Jamaican parents in Britain turning against the Jamaicans, because obviously, when we were young, we weren't making the money. It was the Jamaicans making the money and we wanted a piece of the action. But we weren't old enough. Like we're 14. We're 14. These guys were in their twenties.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:20:41

As we got older, we got more bolder. So we started to get guns. Once we started to get guns, we started shooting up places. Do you understand what I'm saying?

Peter McCormack: 00:20:50

Uh-huh.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:20:51

Where I come into it was I was seen as the enforcer. For those who don't know what an enforcer is, it's a-

Peter McCormack: 00:20:58

Like in ice hockey.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:21:02

An enforcer is somebody for hire. They hired you out to go and hurt somebody. You understand? That's what enforcer does.

Peter McCormack: 00:21:10

So you were a nasty bastard.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:21:12

Yeah, I was. I wasn't nice at all. And so, they would call me because my whole thing of life was violence. Remember, I'm an angry guy. I've been brutalised by the police, the National Front. So I had a lot of anger and rage already in me. I didn't need anymore. So when they people would say, "Yeah, that gang, man, I don't like the way they're coming in on our little territory, man. I need you to go and..." You know what I'm saying? So I'd go and get my baseball bat. And the

first gang that I beat up was the Peckham gang. Okay? I had a bad reputation by then, so I would...

Sheldon Thomas: 00:21:50

The guy who was leading them, I broke his knee caps with the bat, and then my friend took the gun butt and butted him in his head several times, just to make it known that we're not to be messed with. Most people didn't want to mess with us because we're from Brixton. And at that time, Brixton was seen as the capital of the Black community. It was seen as the most aggressive. It was seen as the drug end of the... This is it. This is the spot. It's like Harlem back in the days, Bronx or Brooklyn, or Kingston. It's known back then, not now. Back then it was known as, don't mess with guys from Brixton, and that's where we were from.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:22:35

Now all of this was mixed in with sound system. For those who don't know what a sound system is, is big speakers, a thousand watts each, pumping out heavy reggae bass in a dance club with about 3,000 people in it. The place is filled with ganja smoke and it's dark. And so, mixed in with this dancehall scene, which today they're called bashment, were gunmen, us. So there was a mixture of gunmen dancehall in these places every week. And every week, we would shoot up the place.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:23:23

So you would go to the dance, and because you're the rival gang to that gang, and you're trying to make money in their area, we'd go to the dance and shoot the whole dance up. Does that make sense? Now, for those people who don't understand what I'm trying to say is that in the early days, all the gang violence took place in the dancehalls. So in the music venues, because the rival gangs, we loved reggae music. So rival gangs will go to their favorite spot, and it was easy to find it. Does that make sense? It's not like today.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:24:03

Today is trap house. Yeah. There was no trap house back then. Well, there was, but it was women's houses. It weren't trap houses like it is today. So what you have is that mixed with each gang in each area is a sound system. That sound system would have a gang linked to it. So it's like Western Football Club is linked to the ICF, the InterCity Firm, which is they're football hooligans. The Arsenal are linked to the Gooners. Tottenham is linked to the Yids. Chelsea is linked to the Chelsea Headhunters. These are their hooligans that are linked to the football club.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:24:46

So it was the same with sound system in the Black community. Each sound system was linked to a gang, and each gang was linked to the Jamaicans. And each Jamaican was linked to the people that brought the drugs in, because this is where the misconception came. People thought the Jamaicans brought the drugs into England. They didn't, just like they didn't do it in America. The people who brought the drugs into America were the Colombians, Pablo Escobar, at that time, and the Mexicans. No Jamaicans brought drugs in. They sold it.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:25:21

The cartels will sell the drugs to the Jamaicans, and the Jamaicans distributed it. It's the same here. Here it was the White crime families that brought the drugs in, but they got the Jamaicans to sell it. But the newspapers wanted you or the rest of the world to believe the Jamaicans brought the drugs in, and that was never the case.

Peter McCormack: 00:25:44

How old were you at this point?

Sheldon Thomas: 00:25:45

14.

Peter McCormack: 00:25:47

Just 14, and you were kneecapping people at 14?

Sheldon Thomas: 00:25:50

I was doing it before that actually, to be honest. Yeah. I started using the baseball bat when I was about 12. I wouldn't say I was kneecapping at 12, but I was breaking jaws at 12 quite easily.

Peter McCormack: 00:26:04

What age were you when you left the gang scene?

Sheldon Thomas: 00:26:07

I would say I would be 21 when I left.

Peter McCormack: 00:26:10

All right, so young adult. What happened in the period from like 14 to 21?

Sheldon Thomas: 00:26:16

Nine of my friends were shot dead.

Peter McCormack: 00:26:18

Nine were shot dead.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:26:19

Yeah. The last one was shot 57 times. I have been shot at, I'd say, about 20 times in that time period of 10 years, because I was in the gang for 10 years, 1976 to 1986. Shot at quite a few times during that time period by my own people. Not by the National Front, not by police officers, by my own people.

Peter McCormack: 00:26:41

Were you ever ended up in jail?

Sheldon Thomas: 00:26:46

No. I was on remand quite a lot of times.

Peter McCormack: 00:26:48

Okay. Okay. So towards the end, you're like 19. 20 years old, what's going on with the gang then?

Sheldon Thomas: 00:26:56

No, I'm leaving because... Let me tell you what happened to me. Basically, the rival gang came looking for me in a nightclub in East London. There's about 3,000 people in the dance, again, another dancehall, what you call bashment today. Four of them came in ski mask, walked over to where I was, started shooting. For some strange reason, four of them missed and blew the guy's head off next to me. And it was at that turning point that I decided I don't want no part of this. It was then I said, "Enough's enough, I'm heading out."

Sheldon Thomas: 00:27:41

When that incident happened, I don't think I was too much in it then, but I had a reputation, do you know what I'm saying? When you have a reputation, you always have people that would want to test your reputation. And so, when that guy got his head blown off, I took that as an opportunity to kind of really step out from it because I signed up to fight police officers. I signed up to fight the National Front. I signed up to fight injustice, and I didn't mind if I went to jail for any of that. But then I thought, "I'm not going to go to jail for killing a Black man. That doesn't make no sense to me."

Sheldon Thomas: 00:28:20

At the time, I enjoyed beating up Black man, at the time, because the anger and frustration, and I enjoyed violence. But then when the shooting start, and we were all part of it, especially when my boys went down and shot up a club, I was like, "I don't know if we..." I used to say to them, "I don't think this is what we're about. We're not supposed to be killing ourselves." You know what I'm saying? Why are we killing ourselves? What's happening? I got confused. Do you know what I'm saying?

Peter McCormack: 00:28:53

Yeah.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:28:53

So, for me, I had already got confused when we started shooting bullets. When we started shooting bullets, I got confused back then. But, how can I put it? I loved the reputation. I think that was what... It kept me in. I loved the reputation.

Peter McCormack: 00:29:18

Because it gave you identity?

Sheldon Thomas: 00:29:19

Yeah, I loved the reputation of hurting people. I loved the reputation of people kind of respected me, because I didn't have no respect to home. I loved the reputation of having people around because I didn't have no one around at home. Even though I had five brothers, we were just not close. And so, for me, it was really important that I stayed in, even though during the 10 years, nine of my friends were shot dead.

Peter McCormack: 00:29:49

So, yeah, we're a good 30 years on from then, and we have a very recent, seems to be escalating gang and crime problem in London, across the UK. I mean, it's London, it's the UK, it's different parts of the country. And there's a lot to unpack and discuss about it. And, obviously, you're very much involved now in trying to make things better. But how similar or different is it now from back in the '80s? What are the main differences now?

Sheldon Thomas: 00:30:21

The main differences now is that I would say young kids involved. I'm going to speak, one, from London, then outside of London. In London, young Black kids

don't hear the word Golliwog, Coon, Sambo, nigger from the police. They don't hear that.

Peter McCormack: 00:30:38

We've moved on from that.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:30:38

They've moved on from that. The police don't do that. The difference is there is no difference because what we created in the '70s and '80s, which was rivalry, has got worse. The difference between back in our days, we sold our own drugs. We didn't ask a 10-year old to sell drugs for us. We didn't groom children. We didn't exploit girls, because back then there was a code. The code was if you was known for raping women, you wouldn't see out the week because the crime families did not like anyone that abused kids or girls. They didn't like that. So you knew, if you went to jail, and they found that you exploited some girl, you'd be lucky if you saw the week out.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:31:29

So many of us had a moral code in the '70s and '80s. And I know people listening to that will say, "How does a gang member have moral code?" Well, it's quite straightforward. Most of us in London who were Black kids involved at that time were from a Christian household, and we believed you didn't commit a crime on a Sunday because God will strike you down. We believed that you didn't rape women because you'll get killed. We didn't believe in grooming children. Those things just didn't enter our brain. Everything we'd done, we did it ourselves.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:32:08

When somebody said to me, "I need you to hurt that guy down there." I didn't go and get some 12-year-old to go and do that. I did it myself. You know what I'm saying? So I think the difference is age group. I think the difference is they're not impacted outwardly by racism. They're impacted inwardly, which is systematic. So it's a different form of racism. I think the difference as well is that guns and knives are easy to access, whereas it was difficult for me to get a gun, very difficult, because many of the older gang members didn't want to give a 14-year-old a gun. You understand?

Sheldon Thomas: 00:32:46

So it took a long time for us to get our guns with 15, 16, that kind of age group. And not all of us wanted guns, you know what I mean? Like, for instance, in my gang, I only had the gun to show off, not to particularly say, "I'm going to shoot

somebody." You understand? So it wasn't even my gun. I grabbed one of them lots just to create an image. So, for me, what's different today is the access is so easy for young kids to get guns. Knives, obviously is easy to get. The age group is younger. The older guys getting young kids to do their dirty work for them. They don't do that. These older kids don't do that. We did that. You understand? We did our own, you understand?

Sheldon Thomas: 00:33:37

When my boys went to jail, they went to jail for something they did, you know what I'm saying? They didn't get some 14-year old to go jail on their behalf. I think that's what's changed. There's no morals. There's no respect. They disrespect girls completely. They are completely different to us. And I think, I would say, they're more angry than we were.

Peter McCormack: 00:34:02

I guess one of the... or a couple of the key similarities is that these gangs now and then were bred from an underclass and also the lack of love and attention and parental attention is a consistent problem.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:34:17

100%. I think when you look at gangs as a whole today, in the early days, I would say poverty played a significant part, no doubt. But I would say today when you look at gangs, apart from maybe London and Birmingham, where it's mainly Black kids and Asians, across the whole of UK, it's all White. And when you look at the kids that are involved, every kid, whether they be rich or poor, Black or White, you will know it's one thing. They are not loved at home. You will notice that.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:34:54

When you sit down and ask about their relationship with their moms, with their dads, most of them tell you, "I don't even know where my dad is," or, "The last time I saw my dad, I was three." He's now 13. Do you understand? That's what it's like. What's more alarming is that when you hear them talk, some of them would even say, "I don't even know if my mom loves me."

Sheldon Thomas: 00:35:19

Now, 50 years ago that was unheard of. Most kids will tell you, "My mom loves me." Today, it's not like that. And that's what I think is the difference. The differences is, I could honestly put my hand and say now, my mom and dad had a reasonable excuse as to why they were in their situation. Reasonable in the sense of, grew up in colonialism. They weren't loved. They don't know how

to give love. You can get the picture. Obviously, but when you're a child, you don't know that, because it's not like your mom sits you down and says, "This is it."

Sheldon Thomas: 00:35:56

Today I think we have allowed the world to take over our lives to the point where we disregard our children. And I think that is the downfall of why we're in this mess today. I know some people will disagree because they're going to say, "Oh, but if you don't live in a nice area, it won't make a difference, because you can live in a hole, but here we are." But if you love your children and you make your children know that you love them, your children wouldn't want to hurt you. But when you grow up like me, or like many of the kids who don't feel loved, who didn't feel loved, you don't care whether you hurt your mom or dad.

Peter McCormack: 00:36:45

Well, so yeah, during my research, I was reading and listening to interviews where people explaining not only are some of these kids in a home without a father, they are violent and disrespectful to their mother. And the mothers have no control, and some of the mothers want them out.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:37:01

100%, and those are the things that have changed dramatically in the society because we're not looking at what's important. I learned a long time ago, through my own children, that if I'm not going to change, they're gone. End of story. My daughter didn't mince so much. She didn't mince anything. You either fix up that or you're gone. I think that needs to happen. I really do. I think that parents need a shakeup, that I think parents need a wake-up call because we are the ones that are put... If your child goes out and stabs somebody, how do you blame that on the government? It ain't the government's fault. There is something that's fundamentally wrong in your house that has caused your boy to go and stab somebody.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:37:52

Now, is he being bullied at school? Most probably. If he is, does he feel like he's getting support from mom and dad? Most probably not. So that's why he's taken the law into his own hand. But if he's getting support from mom and dad, and he gets the right support from the school, that doesn't make him feel he's the problem. He won't take the knife.

Peter McCormack: 00:38:13

It seems to be a problem that's escalated quite rapidly over the last few years. So trying to remember back it's hard, but the last... Well, not the last. The first one of these kind of murders that I really remember that stood out was Steven Lawrence. Now, that was a White gang on a Black guy. That was just a racist murder.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:38:32

That was racist murder.

Peter McCormack: 00:38:32

We know who it was. Then the next one that really stood out where, I think it was 20 years this year, is the Damilola Taylor case. And again, that really, at the time... Now, I'm sure there were murders before and after, but that one really stood out. I think that was one of the ones where the country kind of stopped. But I still didn't have a picture of UK having a gang problem like you would see in the media in the US, the gang problems that you see from the US.

Peter McCormack: 00:38:59

Then suddenly it feels like we do have that problem now. It's here, exists. There are dangerous, very, very dangerous gangs in London. I mean, you can go on YouTube and just see horrendous footage of attacks, gun attacks, knife attacks. We're suddenly here where we actually have this on our doorstep. What do you feel has happened over the last... And it feels like the last five, maybe 10 years, that have caused things to really escalate?

Sheldon Thomas: 00:39:26

We've always had a gangs problem. For the last hundred years, we've had gangs in this country, 120 years. One of the leading gangs was the Peaky Blinders, and we had gangs in Manchester at the same time. The biggest gang at that time was in Sheffield. Sheffield had one of the biggest gangs. And at one point, Sheffield was known as the gang capital of the world. People need to understand, we've always had the gangs problem. The reason why it wasn't prominent is because the media wasn't prominent back then.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:39:59

Media was a middle class system. It's not there to report about the poor White working class who were the main gang members a hundred years ago. So you've got to look at how a media works. A hundred years ago, the media's only interested in middle class Whites. It's not interested in working class Whites or poor Whites. Okay? Look at the media today. They center their

attention on Blacks making everybody believe that all the gangs in the UK are Black.

Peter McCormack: 00:40:33

But that's a London problem, Black gangs.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:40:36

Yeah. But everyone believes that. When you go to Liverpool, some of the places I've been into in Liverpool, they think all the gangs are Black and they go, "Oh, you've got more gangs than us." No, we don't. Do you understand, because that's a misconception by the press. And the press always discriminate against people they can find easy to discriminate against. So, for me, the reason why gangs in Sheffield a hundred years ago weren't seen or heard as prominent as they are today, was all media. It's everything to do with media.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:41:07

So, again, let me give you an example of that. In 1929, we had Saint Valentine's Day massacre, which was done by Al Capone. Yeah, that went around the world. Okay. At the same time period, Sheffield had more gangs than America. But everyone believed that America had more gangs than everyone else because every second there was some media output about shootings and all of that kind of stuff. Whereas in England, the media wasn't interested in Sheffield, or Glasgow, or Liverpool, or Manchester, or... They weren't interested because they were poor areas.

Peter McCormack: 00:41:48

Well, so right now, the media portrayal is that we have a massive gang problem in London and a problem also in Birmingham. And maybe you hear about the odd thing in Manchester or Liverpool, or maybe Nottingham. That's the representation. Doing my research, I obviously found out that you had gangs in places like Ipswich, in all different communities. I was seeing about four lads who, they were making music and they ended up in Ipswich killing a young man, stabbed him 15 times. And I'm thinking, Ipswich?

Sheldon Thomas: 00:42:19

Oh no, there's gangs everywhere. We've got gangs in Gloucestershire.

Peter McCormack: 00:42:21

Yeah. What is a fair explanation of the spread of gangs and is London different from everywhere else? What are the differences?

Sheldon Thomas: 00:42:31

London is different. 79 maybe 80% of the gangs are Black. Okay. A lot of people don't like to hear the truth because they like the blame culture. I'm not interested in blame culture. That's it in a nutshell. Now, let me tell you about London. It's always been like that. The difference was, in my days, you had the National Front. Now, they could be seen as a gang, but they weren't drug dealing. They were taking drugs but not drug dealing. Then you had the football hooligans who were also White, and again they were taking drugs but not drug dealers. Then you had the Black gangs who were drug dealers and took drugs at the same time and carried weapons. There's a stark difference.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:43:17

Now, the football hooligans and the National Front were not seen as a gang. One was called hooligans and the other was like part of an organisation. So what people need to understand is that the difference is, in London, you can say honestly that the gangs are predominantly Black, and any White kid that's in a gang is in a gang that's predominantly Black. There are no White gangs.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:43:47

So you don't have a White gangs like you do in Liverpool who actually sells, manufacturers drugs like they do in Liverpool. You have White gangs that do that. But in London, there were no White gangs. The White gangs are in the Black gangs, and it's the Black gangs that control. So when you look at the cities that control the county lines today, four cities control the county lines.

Peter McCormack: 00:44:09

You should probably explain county lines, because that was a new term to me recently.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:44:13

Okay. So county lines, it started with the London gangs, started. Some people would argue and say Birmingham started it, but let's not go into that. Basically what happened was they realised there was too many gangs in London and it was saturated. And it means you can't really make money, and also the killings were getting really ridiculous. Every week during a five-year period in the '80s, every week a young Black kid would be shot dead. Every single week. That never even made press.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:44:45

So what people, gang members, began to realise, look, we're killing each other here and we're not really making any money. So let's go out into where

the White people are because you make more money. And what they've realised is the biggest users of cocaine were White middle class. So what they realised was like, "We might as well start selling to them," because, one, if you're selling to White middle class, you don't need to carry a weapon, because they're not going to rob you. You understand?

Sheldon Thomas: 00:45:14

Some guy in a nice Mercedes, he's not going to rob you of your... He just wants to cocaine. So that in itself made them want to sell drugs more to the White middle class. Secondly-

Peter McCormack: 00:45:24

Good business.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:45:25

Yeah. And secondly, you get a constant flow of money. So from one person alone, you could make easy, well over a thousand pounds because they got a thousand pounds to burn. Whereas in London, they don't have a thousand pounds to burn. So it was mathematics. It's quite simple. Let's go out of London, sell to the rich White folks and make money. Now county lines, had been doing that. They've been doing that since I was young, but that obviously didn't come kindly. And Birmingham gangs were doing it as well. I know of the gangs in Birmingham that were doing it. Those were the only two gangs at that time, London and Birmingham, before Manchester got involved. Manchester was still selling within Manchester.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:46:06

So, today, what you have, so a county line is the older gang member aged anywhere between 19 and 30 would go into an area. Now what they normally do is they normally do it through a girl. So what happens, they started going to clubs where White girls go. Yeah?

Peter McCormack: 00:46:27

Uh-huh

Sheldon Thomas: 00:46:29

Because these guys had money because they're drug dealers and expensive cars, the White girls liked them, you understand? And plus a lot of the White girls at that time liked that kind of bad boy image, Black guy sort of thing. And music was changing because more and more White people was listening to more and more Black music. So hip hop, bashment, all this music began to

change the way White kids... So the National Front began to lose membership, began to lose because more and more White kids were like, "I love this music because it's rebellious. I love being a part of this."

Sheldon Thomas: 00:47:13

And so, more and more White kids began to listen to more hip hop, listen to more... And because hip hop was generally made by mostly Black people, it changed the way White people or White girls thought about Black guys. And so, these guys were smart. They went to these clubs, groomed these girls, then got the girls to tell them where they could sell the drugs up where they live. So if they girl lived in Wiltshire, or the girl lived in Gloucestershire, then from there they will find a house. So that's how the whole thing started.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:47:49

A lot of people don't understand that you can't stop the trap houses unless you stop people taking drugs. You can't. Who is going to go to the middle class Whites and tell them, "Stop buying drugs." That's the problem we have in the UK. The UK market is driven by middle class Whites. It isn't driven by a bunch of Black kids, because a bunch of Black kids don't have a thousand pounds to spend on drugs every single week without fail.

Peter McCormack: 00:48:20

Okay. If we look back at London then, and let's just try and give the whole picture. So there's gangs all over the country. The perception that the majority gangs are Black is a misconception, but it is primarily-

Sheldon Thomas: 00:48:33

In London.

Peter McCormack: 00:48:34

In London, but you have White guys in these gangs, but they're White guys in Black gangs. But what that says to me is there's no real identity around race within the gang. Like, I mean, will the gangs ever say, "No, you can't be in this because you're a White guy?"

Sheldon Thomas: 00:48:48

Never. Never. Let me tell you, it's about-

Peter McCormack: 00:48:49

So it's more about social class then and it's just because-

Sheldon Thomas: 00:48:53

No, it's more about money. These Black gangs have realised it's all about making money. So if that Asian girl can sell drugs in the college, they would take her. Let me tell you about-

Peter McCormack: 00:49:08

What I'm referring to is how the people end up in the gangs is to do with social class where they are, the neighbourhoods. So if there's a White guy in the same neighbourhood that's predominantly Black, he can be in the gang. There's no kind of issue around race.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:49:20

No, there's no issue around race. Like I said, but it is to do with money because these kids don't care about colour. Like I said to you, like my days-

Peter McCormack: 00:49:30

But you did. You did, yeah.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:49:31

In my days, we would never have a White guy in our gang. Ever. That would never happen. But today or last 15 years, Black kids don't care as long as you can sell them drugs. So, for instance, I was trying to explain to the government when I did my training, because I train a lot of government staff. And I was trying to explain to them, White kids today don't see colour. They couldn't get that out of their head. I'm saying the people who see color are over 50. These kids who are 14, they don't care if you're Black. They view themselves as Black, let alone you telling them...

Sheldon Thomas: 00:50:15

For instance, I know of a young kid. He told his mom, "Oh, my friends are coming over. Is it okay?" She said, 'Yeah, no problem.' When they knocked at the door, she opened the door. She nearly had a heart failure. They were all Black. Now, in his head, he didn't say to his mom, "My Black friends are coming. She said, "My friends," because in his head he's like, "Well, I don't know what's..." In his head, colour doesn't matter. So what people need to understand is that how gangs operate from London, the Black gangs, particularly, or from Birmingham, is they don't care what colour you are, whether you're rich or poor, whether you're fat or skinny, they're the best employees. They are the only employees that don't discriminate.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:51:02

In every arena, whether it be the BBC, ITV, whether it be some retail company, they all discriminate. Whereas gangs, street gangs, don't discriminate. They don't care what colour you are. If you can sell drugs or you can do fraud, you're in their crew.

Peter McCormack: 00:51:25

Just before we dive into the detail on this, over all the gangs, criminal gangs selling drugs, or any of them, just gangs which are, like you were originally just a group of people who live in an estate or a certain area who were just hanging out together. And actually is it wrong to even then class them as a gang? Is it just a group of people hanging out?

Sheldon Thomas: 00:51:42

There's a difference. If you are committing an offense, it's a gang. We were committing offense. I'm not going to sit here and pretend. We attacked police officers. We wanted to, and we wanted to hurt them. So it's a criminal offense. We can't say it any other way. And what I try to get gangs to understand is if there's more than three of you committing acts of crime together, you are a gang. It doesn't matter whether you say you're a gang or not. If the three of you are committing fraud, or the three of you are doing a robbery, or the three of you are selling drugs, that means you are a gang because it's more than one. Do you understand?

Peter McCormack: 00:52:19

Well, the reason I ask is because in a number of the interviews that I've seen, there are people who are saying they're not really in a gang but they're carrying a weapon for protection because they are concerned that if they don't have a weapon on them-

Sheldon Thomas: 00:52:32

That's 100% correct. That's 100% correct. Most of the guys or young people, should I say, because girls carry knives sometimes, who are not in a gang, they are correct. Now, let me tell you where this has come from. The reason why they're carrying a knife is because most of them don't have any father figure or don't have anybody who can protect them, so they have to protect themselves. That is 100% correct. But they're protecting themselves from the gangs because they don't want to be in the gang.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:53:07

For instance, at the moment, there's a thing called G-check where the gang

members will roll up to you at a bus stop, tell you to empty your pockets. And if you do, then they're going to take advantage of you. Now what people need to understand is that you don't have to be in a gang to be stabbed. You don't have to be in a gang to be attacked. That's the reason why many young people carry weapons because they feel there's no protection for them. No one can help them. So at the end of the day, they have to protect themselves. That's the reason why. So I would agree with that. That is a total truth that most young people who carry knives, not necessarily in the gang, but they're carrying it in the fear of the gangs.

Peter McCormack: 00:53:49

How much of a misconception is it that this is all kids, this is a problem in London, say, effecting all kids? Is everyone at risk?

Sheldon Thomas: 00:53:59

Everyone is at risk right now.

Peter McCormack: 00:54:01

And that they're at risk from being attacked or being-

Sheldon Thomas: 00:54:03

Both.

Peter McCormack: 00:54:03

Okay.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:54:04

Both.

Peter McCormack: 00:54:04

Okay.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:54:05

Every child in the UK from the age of nine is at risk of either getting caught up in it in terms of selling drugs on behalf of the older gang members, or being attacked by gang members even if they're not in a gang. Everyone's at risk, Black, White, rich or poor, Asian, it doesn't matter. What we have got to understand is, from my days, gangs have changed. We targeted the people we were going to hurt because we knew if you was walking the street with your mom, we're not going to attack you while you're with your mom. Today, they

will. If you walk streets with your mom today, and the gang, the rival gang, that's after you, they will stab you and stab your mom.

Peter McCormack: 00:54:53

But also, even if you're not in a gang like... I was watching an interview with the moped thieves.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:54:59

Yeah, I remember about them.

Peter McCormack: 00:54:59

And, I mean, a couple of things really stood out to me. One of the questions asked to them was what do you think of the person you're attacking, you're stealing, say, the phone from? The lad was like, "Oh, I don't care. I've got no heart. I'm heartless. I don't care. I've got to make the money. It's it the p's. Got to make my p's." So there was that. But also, the other thing that really stood out to me was that... How do I best explain this? They seem to have an attitude, which I didn't actually believe. It felt like a front. It felt like, "Oh, are they playing up to the camera or the playing up to the guy next to me?" I found it very hard to believe that person really didn't care.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:55:46

Most of them play up to the camera. We all play that... Look, the whole point of being in a gang is that you're hiding who you really are, which are, in most cases, hurting young boys. Okay? Guys who just want a hug, guys who are so angry that dad's not around, but they can't express it. You've got to remember, guys are not good at expressing themselves because their father's not good at expressing themselves. It's a generational thing that we can't get out of at the moment.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:56:13

It's all about testosterone. It's all about ego. It's all about pride. And so, most men hide behind it because we don't know how to express it. So like me, as an example, I didn't know how to express that my mom didn't love me at nine. I'm nine years old. How would I know that? I knew something was wrong when her answer came back and said, "What did you do to hurt the police?" But I didn't know why I didn't get a hug. I didn't know because I'm just a young child.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:56:39

It's the same principle today. Most of the kids that are involved in this lifestyle, I

would say 90% of them, are scared, unloved, emotionally traumatised, desensitised to violence.

Peter McCormack: 00:57:00

Yeah. Well, that's in my list. The desensitisation to violence is unbelievable.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:57:04

Yeah. That is a fact.

Peter McCormack: 00:57:08

Also, this complete lack of care for the implications on other people. I mean, I saw about the scoring system. There's this complete lack of care. And the ability that someone can so easily just attack someone and stick a knife into somebody, without seeming to understand the consequences, makes me want to ask another question. And I don't know if you've spoken to anyone who has been a perpetrator of, say, a stabbing, maybe has killed someone, or maimed them, are they go to bed at night with the vision in them? Can they just forget about it?

Sheldon Thomas: 00:57:40

No, they're not forgetting. Every person that I hurt, I didn't forget when I was young. I pretended to. I'd come and, "Wagwan, bedrin, nothing." But it's a lie. Listen, let me tell you about men. We lie. We can't even tell the truth when we're hurting. I've only started learning to tell the truth. I've started to learn to tell the truth because I realise you don't get nowhere by hiding it, because what happens is it builds up in you. And then that can either hit you in a way where you become depressed, stressed out, or you commit suicide because the pain that's inside of you.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:58:19

I've learned that men... I know a lot of people, they're not going to like this because they're going to be like, "You're generalising." No, I'm not. I don't know of any man that sits and talk about the emotional pain. Most men refuse point blank. You go to a guy that's been depressed all weekend and then see him on a Monday. He'd be like, "No, everything's all right, brother. I'm all right. You know what I'm saying? And that time he's been laid up in bed for two days because he's depressed. Why? Because men put on a front just like children.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:58:52

These gang members, believe me, I know when I speak to them, they haven't slept. On their head, it's ticking over, "I stabbed that guy. Brother, I wonder if

he's dead blood." Do you know how much times when I broke a man's jaw bone with a baseball bat, I sit there thinking. But then, when my bredrens come, I'll be like, "Oh, wagwan, bedren. It's nothin man I'll do it again, bro." You know what I'm saying? I'm just speaking their language. I never used to speak like that.

Peter McCormack: 00:59:19

But there's also this thing now, that you add into that, that throws kind of fuel on the fire, which is social media. The recording. I've seen people videoing other people, videoing them attacking people. So the social media seems to have kind of thrown fuel onto the flames with this.

Sheldon Thomas: 00:59:34

100%. I think social media has made it worse, and the way we use social media has made it worse. I think for us is we've got to understand where we're at right now. And where we're at right now, we're dealing with a bunch of guys who have grown up in a certain way because of whatever the circumstances, who have now taken on this kind of exterior where, I don't want the world to know that I'm in emotional pain. So what I need to do is to hang out with that man there, don't give no one the impression that I'm... And let them know I'm about it. You know what I'm saying? And if anything happens, I'm just going to join in.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:00:17

So they film and they're like, "Yeah, go and give him a kick and go and do this." People don't realise. I think a lot of people are like, "Oh, we need to help our young people." What they need to do is teach boys how to be more emotional, and you will find gang violence stop. Why? Because gang members feed on your weaknesses. Gang members feed on that emotional pain. They know what kid is neglected. Do you know, people don't realise these guys may not have a psychology degree, but they have got psychology mindset. These guys can look at a guy and look at a girl and say, "Yeah, let's go and target them."

Peter McCormack: 01:00:57

How real and how good a representation of this kind of life is Top Boy. How good a job did that do?

Sheldon Thomas: 01:01:05

I think Top Boy has done a very good job in a sense, and Blue Story. I think they've done a very good job in the sense of day of they have... Obviously, there's more to come because they could do a lot more with the emotional

stuff, but I put that down to the fact that they don't know how to write that in yet. They're not ready. They are ready for the easy stuff, which is to show the violence.

Peter McCormack: 01:01:25

Well, I was referring to, say, the manipulation. The story that stood out in the most recent season was the young lad living in poverty. His mom lost her job because she was an immigrant. Yeah, they've got no fucking money.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:01:41

That was true. That's all-

Peter McCormack: 01:01:42

The gang, here you go. You could do this. You can earn 10, 20, 50 quid.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:01:45

100%.

Peter McCormack: 01:01:46

And he's put food on the table for his mom.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:01:48

But you see, what that showed as well was that his mom was unhappy about that. But what it didn't show was that most moms would be happy about that. See, a lot of moms take the money. They take the money because they realise, I'm not working. I can't keep a roof over my head. If my boy can make it. That's cool.

Peter McCormack: 01:02:09

How desperate is the state of poverty for some people? Explain how bad it is today in 2020.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:02:16

I would say poverty is really bad because, as a society, we've run away with ourselves through capitalism. We don't care about our neighbors, number one. Some of us don't even know the name of our neighbors. We care more about how we look than how our neighbors are doing. So the problem in this society around poverty is very bad because we've always had a North and South divide, the South being downwards where London, Birmingham is, and North being up where Liverpool is.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:02:54

If you look at the poverty levels between up North and South, up North is 50 times worse than down South. Why? Because from slavery days, the money was coming into South apart from once when the money went to Bristol and Liverpool due to the slavery because the slave trade, the docks, the ships would land at Bristol or Liverpool, and that's when they were making money. But then it switched and London started to make the money.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:03:21

What people need to understand is that when we talk about poverty, the poverty level in Britain is unacceptable considering we're supposed to be a first world country, which we're not. We're supposed to be, we're not. I think we're just a little bit above the third world. I think we're second. So I don't think we're a first world country. I think we're a second world country just above the third world, which is the Caribbean and Africa considered a third world country.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:03:48

So what people need to understand is that poverty does play a part, and I'm not going to pretend it don't. But I think the biggest problem we have is lack of love in this country for each other. We don't care about anyone but ourselves. And so, that is reflected in gang members. It's reflected in the way you heard what that birth... I don't care. I don't care. I can stab him. I don't care. And it's reflected because adults behave that way. Adults behave in a very selfish manner. So kids pick it up and they follow it.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:04:24

And for me, when people ask me about poverty, is that until we as a society realise that capitalism can benefit everyone and it shouldn't just benefit the guy that works in the bank who's on 16 million pounds a year, then we're going to continue to have what we have today, which is violence, which is criminal activity, fraud, bank robberies, all kinds of stuff because people feel done by. I felt done by. I felt we were manipulated to come here. I felt we were unjustly brutalised when we got here. I felt that at no point did anyone in the White community even want to consider, hang on a minute, let's hear them out.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:05:12

I burnt Brixton down to the ground. And do you know what William Whitelaw said? We were a bunch of criminals. He not once thought in his head, why would people burn their neighborhood down? What? Do you think children go around burning places down for the sake of burning places down? Not once

did William Whitelaw even think about answering that question. Why? Because, in his head, he's done nothing wrong. He has done nothing wrong. He's perfect. But really what he has done is divided the country, because when that happened, three years after that, the miners came in and realised we were telling the truth.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:05:57

Look how the miners were treated, shut the mines down. Let's shut that down. Let's shut this down. And when the miners realised, that was when Arthur Scargill came and met with us and said, "You guys were right." Arthur Scargill, he was the head of the miners. He met with us, not just me. Us as in the Black community, and he admitted that this government, which was a conservative party at the time, were deliberately dividing the country using money.

Peter McCormack: 01:06:31

So when you look now, you speak to the people in the gangs, you visit the trap houses, you talk to people. Do you have a belief that most majority of the people are just scared kids and they want to get out? And also, what is the different attitudes between, say, that you've got... It seems to be it's almost like you've got different groups. You've got the very young ones, 10 to 12. Then you've got the young teenagers who are like, say, 13 to 16 who appear to be the most violent, if you ask me. Maybe that goes up to about 18. And then it seems to be like over 18, maybe 18 to maybe mid-twenties, they seem to be almost like the bosses of these young'uns. Then it's like, I don't know what goes above there.

Peter McCormack: 01:07:18

I struggle to find any interviews or work with people who seem to be older than, say, 25. What's the different ages and what are their attitudes?

Sheldon Thomas: 01:07:29

Well, the ones who are between the ages of 14 to 17 are the most violent because they want to make a reputation. Remember, street gangs is about money, drugs, and girls, or money, respect, and girls, whichever way you want to look at it.

Peter McCormack: 01:07:52

Sounds almost like what Scarface said.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:07:54

Yeah, and that's what it's about for them. So when you say who is the most

violent, you're victim now. When you talk about, you're struggling to find somebody above 25 to do interviews with, because the people above 25 are the ones that brings the drugs to them.

Peter McCormack: 01:08:12

Is it also that some of them have realised, this is bullshit, I want to get out, as well?

Sheldon Thomas: 01:08:17

A lot of them do. A lot of the older ones obviously do. The problem is if you're in it for over 10 years, it's going to be hard for you to come out.

Peter McCormack: 01:08:29

Right. Okay.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:08:31

Remember, I was in it for 10 years and I had to get my mind out. But after the guy got shot, I didn't just leave like that. It takes time because you've got to get your mind out of it. That's where mental health comes into it. So these guys who are over 25 will struggle to come out because they've been in it for so long. The guys who are aged nine going up to 12, you can still turn them around. The problem is once they're in the presence of the guys that are slightly older, which is the 14, 15, 16, they then play up to them.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:09:18

So when I go to the trap houses and I see that the average age of the guys that I go to is about 13, 14. But when I have gone into a trap house and I've seen like a 10-year-old, a young kid that looks very young, he play ups to the guy that he's with who's most probably two or three years older.

Peter McCormack: 01:09:40

I mean, even at 10, they're a little kid.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:09:43

Not anymore. I know a lot of people don't like to hear that, but that's not the case. I don't know why we think that. We're in a world that is dominated by social media. We're in a world that are telling children, "Carry a weapon." We're in a world that tells children to rape girls. We're in a world that social media doesn't say, "If you are 10 years old, please turn off." Doesn't happen. And so, we are not waking up to what our children are listening to.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:10:12

When you ask most parents, do you know the password of your children's social media site, the answer is no. Do you know what your child is doing on social media? No. Do you know if your child is bullying somebody or somebody bullying him or her? No. That's why when I say 10 year olds are not innocent, I mean what I say. As long as they've got a mobile phone, they cannot be innocent unless you're sitting there watching what they're doing, which most parents don't.

Peter McCormack: 01:10:42

But also, isn't there a level of fear? Because I can't remember the last time I had a fight of any kind, but I know I'm careful not to get myself as an adult, even just having a drink in the pub, into any kind of situation. When I'm walking the streets, yeah, Bedford, I'm fine. But I imagine if I go into London now, there's certain places I'm going to be... If I had to go for work or some reason, I'm going to have to think about it because I don't want to get into any kind of trouble. These people who are carrying weapons seem to be happy to go into a fight where they might get stabbed and killed.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:11:12

Yeah. Because not only are there desensitised violence... I've got a picture of a phone of a gang member that I worked with in Liverpool. He's 11 years old. He had a nine-millimeter gun. He was from Croxteth. And he said to me, "I don't care if I live or die, but in the meantime, if anybody tries to rob my drugs, I'm shooting them." He was 11. So people need to understand. I know we want to believe that young children are innocent young children, but the social media has corrupted children, have corrupted everyone to the point where people go on social media and just promote anything. And these kids watch it and a lot of the kids believe it. So when people talk about what are the age groups, who are more likely to be affected, is this a UK problem, answer's quite simple. It's a UK problem and everyone is affected.

Peter McCormack: 01:12:14

So everyone should give a fuck.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:12:15

And everyone should really care about what's going to happen in the next 10 years, because-

Peter McCormack: 01:12:21

Excuse my language, by the way.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:12:23

I mean, for me, it's like I made a documentary in 1991 and I said in that documentary that if we don't deal with this problem now, '91, before labor got in, we're going to have 12-year-olds selling drugs. That was a documentary I made, came out on BBC too. No one listened. '91. I know what was going to happen. I've been in gangs long enough. I've gone round the world... Well, not around the world, but I've gone to America and the Caribbean to know and seen with my own eyes that if the UK doesn't address the problem, we're going to end up like America, which we have.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:13:05

We have a murder every week, every single week without fail, for the last two years. The kids have got younger, which is what I said was going to happen. The county lines have got worse, which is what I said was going to happen. Everything has magnified. Why? Because, one, government doesn't want to spend the right amount of money. You're looking at 50 million pounds a year over the next five years. It's quite simple, because in order for us to fight this problem, you have to have sustainable amount of money so that you can do sustainable amount of work.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:13:45

Secondly, you have to change the way community think. At the moment, when you go to Oldham and you go into these poor White neighborhoods, most of them believe that ethnic minorities have taken their jobs, which is not true. And that comes because of the message of certain political organisations. So you've got to change the way poor White think. Secondly, a lot of poor Whites, when you speak to them, when I spoke to the gang members from these neighborhoods, the first thing they say to you is, "What else can we do?"

Sheldon Thomas: 01:14:24

That guy that had that nine-millimeter gun, he told me that every time his older brother applied for a job, they didn't even answer. In the end, they found out that Croxteth, there's a postcode ban on Croxteth. So in other words, if you apply for a job and they know you're from Croxteth, they won't even answer your letter.

Peter McCormack: 01:14:50

Isn't Croxteth the state... Is that the one where the young lad was shot in his bike?

Sheldon Thomas: 01:14:53

That's right.

Peter McCormack: 01:14:53

Yeah.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:14:53

100%.

Peter McCormack: 01:14:54

Up in Liverpool.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:14:55

Yeah. Yeah. And so, there's discrimination against poor Whites by middle class Whites. So people need to understand the deepness of this stuff. This is why I keep saying to everybody, "You're sitting there trying to pick out who you're going to help." He need to help every child because right now we've got kids growing up thinking certain things. You've got Blacks thinking they're discriminated against. You've got poor Whites who believe they're discriminated against. Then you've got the poor Whites who believe that Blacks have taken their jobs. Then you've got the poor Whites who live off the welfare and have done for 50 years. In other words, granddad lived off the welfare, uncle lived off the welfare. So, we as a society have kind of just turned a blind eye to that and don't realise it will come back and it bites us.

Peter McCormack: 01:15:48

I know you have ideas for solving the problems. Did you put together a proposal for the government as well?

Sheldon Thomas: 01:15:54

Yeah.

Peter McCormack: 01:15:54

Yeah. It's obviously a very complicated problem to solve. I've looked at some of the work they've done up in Scotland and it seems to be a multi-agency approach. And also, I think the approach there was to focus it as a health issue. For you, though, and I know there's going to be a lot to this. It's probably going to be a long answer, but what is it you're actually trying to fix here? I know that sounds like an obvious question, but what is it you're actually trying to... What's the goal here?

Sheldon Thomas: 01:16:21

Societal change.

Peter McCormack: 01:16:22

Societal change, which will lead to less pressure for people to join gangs, less gang membership, less violence, happier kids.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:16:31

Happier kids, more family cohesion. And I'm not saying that the women and the men have to stay together. I'm not saying that. I'm saying that once you've decided to split, what you should be doing is saying, "Right. How are we going to make sure our children are not affected by this decision that we have made?" Because the biggest problem we have is that the minute that that disagreement happens, the man's the one that normally walks away. I know women do it as well, but normally it's the man that does the walking away. So my thing is this. Intervention can't fix this. You can't fix lack of love with an intervention.

Peter McCormack: 01:17:10

You can't make someone be a better dad.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:17:12

No, you can't. So in order to do it, this is what I proposed. I proposed back then when I went to Jack straw, and I'm going to mention him by name. I said, "Let me into all the primary schools and secondary schools so that I can educate the children, one, about the gangs, but, two, about relationship," Because what I'm trying to get him to understand, if a guy meets a girl and has sex with her, then has a baby, what tends to happen is when the girl phones the guy to say, "You know what? I'm pregnant." He puts the phone down and says, "Well, what are you telling me for?"

Sheldon Thomas: 01:17:51

So what happens is that child then grows up in an angry way because mom said, "Your dad's a dirty old..." dah, dah, dah, dah. And he grows up, repeats the cycle. So what I've tried to explain to Jack Straw is that in order to break the cycle, you've got to educate them from young so that... I'm not saying men will become suddenly great. I'm just saying that, for me, you cannot parachute in with an intervention that is actually a societal problem. Intervention can't fix that. You cannot fix.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:18:28

You can't say to Sheldon, "Oh, you must love your daughter." You've got to show Sheldon how to do that at a very young age so that you grow into that. You can't say to a 16 year old now, right, "I need to spend more time with you." You've got to do that when they're young so that that way it's a natural part of the family environment. Okay, you're going down this weekend to see your dad. No problem. He knows. She knows. I'm going to see my dad. I'm going to spend the weekend. Not, where's dad? I thought you said that was coming? Where's dad? I thought you said Dad... Do you understand the point?

Peter McCormack: 01:19:07

Yeah. Yeah. But this is the thing that I understand. This talked about education of the very young. You're trying to catch them before-

Sheldon Thomas: 01:19:15

Year five.

Peter McCormack: 01:19:15

Yeah, before they get a chance to hit the gangs, which is obviously, very interesting. Yeah, that's something that will deliver results few years down the line. What about the current problem now? How do you reduce, let's not say eliminate because it's almost an unreasonable goal. You want the numbers to go down. That's a starting point. How do you reduce gang membership, knife crime now? Is this a problem that the police should play a bigger role in?

Sheldon Thomas: 01:19:43

No.

Peter McCormack: 01:19:43

It's not a-

Sheldon Thomas: 01:19:44

I think they should do what Bedfordshire is doing, which is bring somebody in like me and start looking at different ways. At the moment, we're looking to target parents. They've listened because they know that parents are the biggest problem. So you bring somebody in like me who knows what they're talking about. If you want, not immediate results because I don't think you can get immediate results. But if you want to go in a different direction to what we're going, you've got to bring someone like me because statutory organisations can't think out of the box.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:20:17

They're not trained to, because statutory follows that kind of examination route. Like, "Okay, I want to be a social worker." So this is what you've got to do. You've got to pass this exam, and in this exam, it's got certain ways of doing things. It's like their policy of doing things. Whereas somebody like me who is outside of statutory, outside of the police, who has been a gang member for 10 years, who is running an organisation that engages gang members, you have got to think, "Well, he must know more than us because he's a part of all of it and he's now doing this."

Sheldon Thomas: 01:20:55

So for me it's about every area needs to have a guy like me or a female like me in their multi-agency approach and taking on board what we're saying and not looking at the financial cost of it. Because what happens is people like us come up with a model that does cost because we're looking at a long-term strategy. So we've got short-term, medium, and long-term plan. Short-term plan is, right, get me to start talking to the gang members. That's short term. That's easy stuff, right? Then from there, get me to go into all the primary and secondary schools, so that that way I'm hitting, even if you're not in a gang, I'm still hitting you. You understand?

Sheldon Thomas: 01:21:38

Thirdly, parents. These are the things that we've got to start looking at. How do we get parents? Well, do it on the Parents Evening. Parents Evening, for the first hour, you need to come into this session here where we're going to teach you about how your child could be groomed, how your child could be exploited, how your child could be the one exploiting others, so that we can teach them. That's what you do. You don't allow parents to walk scott free from this.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:22:05

You say, "Right, how can we find..." And that's what you do. You say, "All right. We've got Parents Evening coming up. Parents Evening starts at 5:00, but we're going to start the session at 6:00. When they come at 5:00, we give them an hour to walk around. And in the session from 6:00 till 7:00, we're going to talk about stuff that are affecting children today." That's what you do. Now, will that eliminate the problem? No. Would that reduce it? Tiny bit. That's the start.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:22:34

What we'll then look at are the long-term objectives, which is, okay, train

school teachers. Who's going to be the trainer? It's got to be somebody that's lived it. It can't be some ex police officer. What's a ex police officer going to say? "Yes, well, the stat says this and the stat says that." An ex gang member won't be telling you, "The stat says this and the stat says that." He will say, or she will say, "I've seen this. This is what actually happens." And so, there's a big difference.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:23:03

The staff who engages children, so it's primary school teachers, cooks, the handyman in the school, all should go on a gangs training so that they all can identify when things are going wrong, and it ain't left to the teacher to take the burden on her or his self. So that's what needs to happen. That's going to cost.

Peter McCormack: 01:23:30

Just a bit of a left field question as well that's come to my mind. If somebody's listened to this and they're also a casual user of drugs, are they part of the problem?

Sheldon Thomas: 01:23:39

Yes. Casual users, we're all to blame. If we're smoking drugs, we're all to blame. In fact, if we're smoking cigarettes, we're all to blame. We've got to understand the biggest killer in the world at the moment, in the world, is still cigarettes. Some people will argue and say alcohol, but it's still cigarettes, okay? Drugs is not the biggest killer in the world. That's a fact. So, for some people's argument, and I have to agree, why are we making that argument about drugs when actually the biggest killer is cigarettes? So that means we should be arguing against both. So-

Peter McCormack: 01:24:19

But there is government campaigns to try and reduce smoking. They're working on that. I'm thinking more specifically for the gangs. If I was taking cocaine or smoking weed and the path of that drug to reach me come through these gangs-

Sheldon Thomas: 01:24:36

Yeah. It's 100%, that's what I'm saying. I do agree that anybody who buys drugs is a part of the problem. There's no doubt about that. What I am trying to say is the economic side of it. We're forgetting about the economics. Everything is about money. Look, the reason why I mentioned cigarettes is that if the biggest killer in the world is cigarettes but we still sell it, it tells you a lot about the

governments of the world, that they're only interested in the money they make off the cigarettes, the tax. So it's the same principle.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:25:10

Drugs, because it's not known as a killer, they're still oohing and aahing whether, what to do with it. So let's take cocaine out of it. Let's talk about ganja or skunk as they call it today. You've got some people saying, "Let's reduce it to class B." But the skunk that is smoked today is not the same as the ganja that was smoked in my days.

Peter McCormack: 01:25:31

No. It's infinitely more powerful and strong now.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:25:35

And the reason why is because it's manufactured. It's not grown like ganja in Jamaica. So the THC level in skunk is actually more deadly than cocaine. You get hooked on cocaine quite easily, but the damage that skunk does is far more severe than what cocaine can do.

Peter McCormack: 01:25:56

The psychological damage.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:25:57

Yes.

Peter McCormack: 01:25:57

Yeah.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:25:58

And so, when you look at your brain cells, skunk, the THC in the skunk damages your brain cells, which are unrepairable.

Peter McCormack: 01:26:06

See, where I was going with this, is that, do we need more radical ideas to solve this? So, for example, I know people who run legal marijuana businesses now out in the US. I know, particularly, in Boulder in California, and Colorado. And I've been out there, and since the legalisation in some States, decriminalisation in others, the world has not collapsed. And actually it's now just become like this normal business. You can go along. They've got the marijuana available as a joint. You can buy the weed to make your own joints.

You can buy edibles. You can buy drinks. It's a professional business. The people who are selling it are trying to sell a quality product.

Peter McCormack: 01:26:45

Market economics has actually made it a viable business, and that has essentially removed a part of crime from society. Now, some of the criminals who may have been involved in marijuana may move to something else. But do we need a more radical approach in the UK? Is there a more radical approach to consider the decriminalisation or even legalisation of some drugs to take that away from the criminals as a business? Because what it seems to me is that these gangs are businesses. That's what they are. They're actually enterprises. It's like the hydro. You chop the head off a snake, another one's going to play. So the only way to really get rid of it is actually to destroy their industry.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:27:28

The problem I have with that is this. In America, as an example, I'm offended by what America has done because it meant exactly what I was telling the University of the West Indies, is that all the West wanted to do from day one was not to outlaw ganja, or to outlaw it. And when they realised they couldn't, they say, "All right. What we'll do is do what we did in slavery and we'll take over." And all that's happened is for 50 years they were going on about weed, ganja, and now they decided to decriminalise it. Who do you think's making the money from it? It ain't the people in Jamaica. It ain't the people in Trinidad who grows the best ganja. It's the very corporations.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:28:12

And so, for me, I think if you're going to legalise it, and the people who indigenously grew it or not make him from it, it tells me that you manipulated the whole of the... Not you personally, the West manipulated all of this for the advantage of money again. Because when you look at the economics, I saw a program where they showed all these big factories in America all run by White corporate people, not run by no Black person.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:28:45

So it tells me, for years you're saying drugs was bad. Now that you've decriminalised it, you're the one making the money from it. And the people in the Caribbean who grew the stuff and you told them for years to burn those fields down, to stop them bringing the drugs in, and now have got no money, nothing to show for it, but you make all the money. So it tells me about the Western law, that everything they do has an agenda and it's all built on lies.

Peter McCormack: 01:29:17

Yeah. See, that's a tough one for me too to deal with because I almost think there's two separate issues. You're talking here about... You've referred to lots of history of White on Black, history of abuse. You've talked about slavery when we were in the car on the way in. I'm not denying any of this happened. What I'm trying to separate from this is, whether there's some big grand master White plan, or if there is actually an opportunity here, if we can separate ourselves on that and actually say, "Is there an opportunity for reducing gangs and violence by legalising or decriminalising drugs? Are we able to separate and have that discussion without referring to whether this is just putting more money in-

Sheldon Thomas: 01:30:02

You can't.

Peter McCormack: 01:30:02

You can't?

Sheldon Thomas: 01:30:03

Because when you're talking about decriminalising, who's going to be in charge?

Peter McCormack: 01:30:10

Well, so what I think I'm getting at is, are you against it as a concept, and therefore making the assumption that the ganja will have come from the indigenous grower, say, from Jamaica. Let's make that assumption that happens. Are you against the principle though of legalising and decriminalising drugs as a way of reducing gangs and gang violence?

Sheldon Thomas: 01:30:32

I'm not against the principle of it because, obviously, if you legalise it and there is a reduction in violence, you can't deny that. But I would say this. For any gang that feels that you've taken the money from them, they will just find something else to do in terms of criminality. What I'm against, and I feel that the West are the biggest manipulators, is they lie. Everything they do is about lying. And so that, that way, when they do decide to decriminalise it, they make sure they make the money.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:31:11

So, to me, I'm offended because you've lied for these years. You've got what you've wanted. You've decriminalised it, but you're making sure the indigenous

population who actually grew it do not make any money from the legalisation of it. So basically what you've done is manipulated the world into saying, "That's really bad." You've got what you've wanted. You've changed the story. So like after 20 years, you've decided now, you know what, let's legalise it. Let's get the criminal element out. Let's get the violence out of it.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:31:44

Well, now that you've got what you've wanted, but who's making the money from it. Look, the best way I can describe it is this. England had 9% of the banana market in the Caribbean. It was kind of like their way of saying, "We can't give you money back for slavery or colonialism, but we'll make sure we buy the banana from you, yeah?"

Sheldon Thomas: 01:32:10

America caught wind of that and threatened England, threatened England, that if you don't stop this deal, it's called unfair trading. They took England to the World Trade Organisation. You heard of them.

Peter McCormack: 01:32:25

Yeah. The WTO. Yeah.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:32:26

Right, the committee, to get them to stop buying the bananas from the Caribbean. We have America already owning 36% of the market. So America took England to court on the grounds that they were buying 9% from the Caribbean. That's what I'm talking about. The greed of the West, everything they do is built on a lie... When they took England to court, it's because they wanted all of the market for themselves. They crushed the Caribbean market to the point of mass unemployment, for 9% more of the market when they already had 36%. So it's the same with the ganja, and it's the same with the legalisation.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:33:14

I'm wary of when the West talks, what lies behind what they're saying. And everything they do when they talk about decriminalise it. You've got all these famous people standing up and saying, "Oh, if you decriminalise the drugs, oh, there'd be no violence a bit." What is beyond what you're saying? Because really America is proving the point that they're the ones making the money from the ganja now and Jamaica's not making one pence.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:33:41

It's not like they're saying, "Right, we're going to give 50% of our shares back to the Caribbean." No, they've managed to subject the Caribbean to stop doing drugs, and America now, in their big factories, I've seen 10 factories in America on TV, all these massive ganja plants growing now in America. So, for me, I'm not against decriminalising in a sense of stopping the violence, but I'm against the ones who make the money, which is always the West. And it's the same with the banana. They come in, force you, and now...

Sheldon Thomas: 01:34:22

Look how small the Caribbean is, and you're telling me you wanted to take that 9% market from them because you wanted your bananas to go. So, in other words, basically I'm against anything the West says about drugs because it's built on a lie.

Peter McCormack: 01:34:39

Okay. Yeah. I didn't research that. That's a complicated issue to go to-

Sheldon Thomas: 01:34:43

Very complicated.

Peter McCormack: 01:34:44

And that's taken us on a tangent, but I will definitely look into that more. Something we should discuss further. What about other more radical ideas of engaging with the gangs? So, for example, in El Salvador, I think it was back in 2012, the government negotiated a truce between MS-13-

Sheldon Thomas: 01:35:01

That's right.

Peter McCormack: 01:35:01

... and 18th Street, I think it is. I mean, it collapsed eventually. But is there any way to engage with the gangs to organise some kind of truce, some kind of more radical idea to get the gangs together? I think they did that in Scotland as well.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:35:16

No, no, there is. That, to me, is sound. I think that there is. I think mediation, which is what I do, is important. But you have to have the respect of the gangs. They're not going to listen to you if you're some do-gooder. So I think mediation's important. That definitely, 100%, can work. But I think with

mediation, you can't just say to the two rival gangs, "Stop shooting each other, or stabbing." You've got to come up with something that's going to make them feel that you're offering them something.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:35:50

Now, some people listening just be like, "Why should we offer?" Well, if you're telling them to stop something, what are you telling them to replace it with? So if I'm going to stop you from killing each other, I've got to have something that's going to tell them, what are you going to replace your time with, because remember, these guys have got time in their hands. And so, if we're going to take away that time on their hands, in other words, from killing each other, then we've got to replace it with something for them to do that will occupy their mind.

Peter McCormack: 01:36:19

What kinds of things?

Sheldon Thomas: 01:36:20

Entrepreneurial, because most street gangs want to make money. So I believe that we should be developing these gang members to become legalised businesses on their own, in their own right, and help them to become businessmen, or businesswomen, or entrepreneurs, because these guys want to make money. They don't want to work for no one else. They want to make money. We've got to acknowledge that. We've got to stop trying to get kids to go to school... Not go to school, but we've got to stop getting kids to think, when you go to school, you've got to go to college, from college to university. We've got to stop that because not every child wants to do that.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:37:04

We've got to look at these kids and say, "Okay, some of these kids don't want to go university. What are we going to do with them? How are we going to avoid those kids who don't want to go university, getting involved in the gangs? We've got to find out what makes them tick. When you speak to young people, most of them say the same thing, "I want to make money." Well, if that is the case, we've got enough entrepreneurs in the world that could engage these young people on a week-by-week basis, not every single day, to give them the skills, the necessary tools to develop themselves into entrepreneurs.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:37:38

So, for me, if I'm going to mediate with a gang, I have to come with an offer of something that's going to replace it. Because if you're sitting there and you

said, "Right, I'm not going to stab you tomorrow." Then the next day comes on and the next day comes on. Sooner or later you're going to get bored and like, "You know what? I'm not on this thing no more." But if you're occupied doing something that you love doing, the last thing on your mind is violence because you're doing something that you love doing, which is making money. So, for me, is I think mediation can work, but I think you've got to come with something.

Peter McCormack: 01:38:17

Okay. We should probably have a little talk about Gangsline because that's the work you're doing. Tell people about Gangsline, what it is you do in the program, as in also, you obviously want support and help in certain ways. Talk about that.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:38:33

Well, at Gangsline, we do quite a lot of... Well, not a lot of stuff. We'll go to trap houses. We do mediation. We do mentoring, and gangs prevention workshops in schools, primary schools, secondary schools and colleges. We also train government staff, non-government staff, faith groups, on understanding gang mentality. So we train a lot of those services around the country. We do a lot of training.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:39:03

I do a lot of lectures in university, so I'm a guest lecturer at a lot of universities. They pay me to come in and lecture their students. So it's their criminology students, sociology, psychology students. I do a lot of those lectures across the country on understanding gang mentality. So, for us, it's a struggle because we've got two organisations. One is a charity and the other one is a limited company. The charity, what we're looking to do now is to get a philanthropist or somebody who's got a lot of money because a lot of philanthropists now want to give to charities and put their names to it. And what we would like is a philanthropist to put their names to the work we're doing, because with a philanthropist, he or she is more likely to give a couple of million because they've got it spare, there's no real restrictions.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:40:04

Plus they're not like the government that says, "Right, I want you to work with this young person." They most probably will say something like, "Here's a couple of million. What we need you to do is to show us how you're spending the money every six months, have a meet and tell us what you're doing." They're more likely to have the kind of less pressurise, less "You've got to do

paperwork." They're more likely to say, "Get out there, do what you've got to do."

Sheldon Thomas: 01:40:29

Some people would ask, why do you want... That is the reason why philanthropists because they are more likely to give, to have millions to spare. They're more likely to keep the money flowing for at least a good few years. They are not interested in numbers. They're interested in you just continuing to do your work. So for me, what I'm hoping to do, is get my message out there, of societal change, get my message out there of who we need to help us and support us in terms of the work. I would like to do more talking because I do a lot of speaking engagements. But I want to do it a lot more around the world now, like I did in New York and I did it in the Caribbean.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:41:20

I want to do a lot more because there's gangs everywhere. It's not just in England and America, it's everywhere. I want to do a lot more speaking engagements across the world globally because of my kind of knowledge around gangs. So, for me, that's what Gangsline do, right? It's what we're doing at the moment. We've only got seven staff. We haven't got a lot. I can't afford to employ anybody else anyway because I ain't got money. I wouldn't say that we've got the ultimate answer. I wouldn't say that. I would say that if you listen to what I've got to say, I think you will come to the same conclusion that this cannot be done by intervention.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:42:03

I think people would conclude, this is a societal problem because everybody can be affected. It's not like, "Oh no, I can't be affected because I live in..." Sorry, everybody can be affected. And so, I think it's everyone's duty, parents, non-parents, adult children, young children, to all take up the baton and fight for our next generation of children. That's what I think needs to happen. But I also believe multi-agency approach can work, but not led by enforcement. Has to be led by the community. So I do think multi-agency can work a bit like what Bedfordshire is doing in terms of getting everyone around the table.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:42:51

I think that definitely can work, but I think it can only work if the people in statutory listen to the people from community who know more than you. They may not say in the nice words and the pretty words, but they know more than statutory. And I think statutory should pay more respect to those community

organisations or to those organisations. And you most probably will see things beginning to slightly change.

Peter McCormack: 01:43:18

Okay. And if anyone's listening to this, they want to follow your work, they want to get in touch with you, how do they find you?

Sheldon Thomas: 01:43:25

Oh, www.gangslines.com. It's [gangslines.com](http://www.gangslines.com). You can go on my website, go into Twitter, go into Facebook, we're on there. Or you can email me, sheldon.thomas@gangslines.com. You can email me. But the most important thing is to realise that gang violence, decriminalising drugs, everyone has an agenda. And when people talk about decriminalising the drugs, be wary of them because what tends to happen is what's happening now. America's making all the money while the Caribbean ain't got no money.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:44:09

It's not like the Americans have turned to the Caribbean and says, "Right, you can now import the drugs." None of that. So basically, we have to be wary of the message of the West, when they say to us or say to anyone, "Let's decriminalise." Well, what do you mean by that? Do you mean that in a few years' time, when it becomes legal, you're going to make the money? What does that actually look like?

Sheldon Thomas: 01:44:30

Now, a lot of people were disturbed because they'd be like, "Why do you want to make money off the drugs?" Well, the same way you're making money off cigarettes, the same exact, exact way. So, at the end of the day, I'm not a supporter of any of it, but I'm saying, if you're going to decriminalise it, then give back to the very people you were stopping in the first place and help them to set it up properly. You could have gone into the Caribbean, put up workshops there. You could have done all of that and allowed them to make some money too. But no, you didn't want that to happen. And to me that says a lot about the world we're in.

Peter McCormack: 01:45:03

All right, man. Well, this was great, Sheldon. Really appreciate you coming here. Really appreciate you doing this. I don't think it'll be the last time we're going to talk. Anything I can ever do for you, you've got my details now and you reached out to me.

Sheldon Thomas: 01:45:15

Yeah. Most definitely.