**How did middle-class Sam, a loving twin who played in a church band, become a County Lines gang victim? His devastated family warn that teenagers from good homes are now being targeted - and NO ONE should be complacent**

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****How did middle-class Sam, a loving twin who played in a church band, become a County Lines gang victim? In an interview every parent should read, his devastated family warn that teenagers from good homes are being now targeted​

Sam was a happy little boy. Cheeky, very funny, handsome, with many school friends and always laughing with his twin brother Joe – and, later, their little brother Ethan.​

He played football, tennis, the drums in the local church band, was a member of the St John Ambulance team, adored his pet hamsters and supported his local football team Wycombe Wanderers.​

Home was an immaculately tidy house on a quiet street with lovely neighbours in Berkshire – his father Simon a paramedic, his mother Liz a dental nurse. Both worked hard.​

The family went on holidays to Cornwall and Devon – renting cottages by the sea or staying in caravan parks with brilliantly cheesy entertainers, which the boys adored.​

It was a happy, joyful, safe, middle-class childhood and the two seven-year-old boys in their Beavers uniforms, seen grinning out of a photo on Liz and Simon's coffee table, had no idea of the monsters to come.

How this lovely family would be smashed apart by drugs, violence and grooming.​

For almost as soon as the boys went to secondary school, things went downhill for Sam and, by the age of 14, he was regularly smoking cannabis. Soon, to pay for his habit, he started selling drugs – groomed and coerced by the gangs who sold to him.​

He was bunking off school, getting into fights, threatening teachers and becoming increasingly volatile. Strange men came to the house, banging on the door, asking for money.​ ​

Sam’s parents Liz and Simon are still haunted by guilt at the loss of their son to the shadowy world of county lines gangs ​

There were at least four police raids on the family home and appearances in the magistrates' courts. There was an emergency A&E visit after Sam was stabbed. And another six-week hospital stay after an overdose of Valium and heroin.​

Until, one day, Simon found Sam's lifeless body in a bedsit in Slough. He had been dead for at least two days.

'Going to tell Liz at her work was the hardest thing I've ever done. Our son was gone,' says Simon.​

Sam was a victim of the county lines drugs gangs that are tearing this country apart.​

Last week, 14-year-old Kelyan Bokassa was stabbed to death in broad daylight on a bus in Woolwich, south-east London. Just months earlier, in September, his friend Daejaun Campbell, 15, was stabbed to death nearby.​

Just like these boys, Sam was young, sparky and deeply loved.​

But while Kelyan had long struggled in care and was known to police, Sam was a well-educated boy from a stable, loving, church-going family in the Home Counties – a 'clean skin', with no police record, no social worker, nothing to link him to the murky underworld of drug dealing. Which is exactly why he was targeted. Along with many more like him.​

Across the country, but particularly in smaller, suburban communities, there has been an explosion in the number of active gangs since the pandemic.

According to the latest data from the National County Lines Co-ordination Centre, there are now more than 6,600gangs, many homing in on white children from middle-class families – the offspring of doctors, dentists, teachers, police, paramedics like Simon – to do their dirty work. Targeting 'clean skins', some as young as six years old, and befriending them, manipulating them, threatening and isolating them from friends and families.​

Which means that no parent can be complacent. No parent can assume it will not happen to their son or daughter –though it is mostly boys – however loving and secure their home life.​

And this is why Simon and Liz are speaking out. 'Not once did we ever think our child would get involved in drugs, let alone die as a result,' says Simon. Liz adds: 'We are not the sort of family this sort of thing happens to. We are really close. There was a lot of naivety. If only we'd been more aware. What to look out for. How it could happen.'​

Some children, like Sam, start by smoking cannabis, often given to them to try by dealers loitering outside their schools. They get a taste for it and are quickly drawn into 'doing favours' to help pay for their new habit.

Others agree to sell vapes for a bit of extra cash. But soon the vapes start to contain drugs such as cannabis and spice, escalating to cocaine and heroin.​

A few are targeted through their love of drill rap and contacted online. And some boys are honey-trapped on social media – duped into sending personal photos to what they think is a girl they've met online – and then blackmailed.​

But the modus operandi is always the same – identify, groom, threaten and isolate – until the children are reliant on drugs, terrified and trapped.​

According to Evan Jones, director of criminal exploitation development at St Giles Trust, it is not the shy, quiet, more obviously vulnerable kids who are targeted, but the bright ones, like Sam.​

'People have this misconception it's the wasters, the kids who don't have any drive or any academic prospects who get sucked in, but the opposite is true,' he says. 'It's precisely these kids who see an opportunity and take it, they're driven, they're ambitious – and they're oblivious to the risks.'​

Ironically, before secondary school, Sam's brother Joe had been the worry. He'd been bullied at their primary school and Sam, the outgoing popular twin, had always been his protector – often wading into trouble on his brother's behalf.

But when they moved together to a school in Maidenhead, away from the bullies, it was Joe who found his people and very dyslexic Sam who struggled, discovering himself in the bottom sets with little support.​

'He wasn't happy. He sort of faded,' says his mum. 'He'd phone me from the school loos in tears.'​

So, the following year and on the school's advice, they moved him to an all-boys school with an emphasis on sport.​

'He loved it. Suddenly there were friends at school. Then he made a new set of friends at the skate park – I was just pleased he was out and about… I was very naive,' says Liz.​

Suddenly, Sam became anxious and jumpy. He started needing chunks of money for odd emergencies. Penalty fines arrived through the post – he'd been jumping the barrier on the train.​

Then the headmaster called to say that he and another boy had been taking drugs. Flabbergasted, Liz and Simon searched his room and found a cannabis grinder.​

Sam's lifeless body was found in a bedsit in Slough by his father Simon in March 2018 ​

Sam, left, his twin Joe, right, get a hug from their young brother Ethan.​

 'We didn't even know what it was!' says Liz. 'We had no idea.'

So when Sam assured them that it was a one-off, they believed him. Instead, it was the beginning of a seven-year nightmare during which they barely slept, were constantly on edge and didn't know where to turn for help as their happy family life crumbled around them.​

There was a blizzard of complaints from the school, until eventually Sam was excluded. When Liz and Simon called social services in despair, two women came round and ticked them off for calling their son a drug addict. 'They told me he didn't like being called that! We felt like terrible parents,' she says.​

And Sam's drugs worker, when he finally got one, pretty much laughed in Liz's face when she suggested he might need rehab. 'He said it was just weed, but our family was already at breaking point.'​

Sadly, things were to get a lot worse. Seated in their sitting room, speaking quietly and calmly with extraordinary strength and dignity – and often still referring to Sam in the present tense – Liz talks me through the many, many lows. The night raids by the police – Liz, sobbing, begging them not to wake up little Ethan as they searched the house for drugs.​

The drug dealing in daytime from their garage. The times at court they secretly hoped he'd be sent to prison – where perhaps he'd be safer.

The fracturing relationship of the twins, who still shared their childhood bedroom but were heading off on very different trajectories – Joe on an apprenticeship aged 16 and Sam on to the streets.​

'Joe hated seeing what Sam was doing to himself and to us,' says Liz. 'We were all always dreading the next thing, but he was trapped. He was a victim.'​

Some days he was aggressive and angry. Others, he'd sob in his mother's arms pleading for help, saying how he'd messed up, he wanted to get better, how much he loved them.​

'He was definitely coming under pressure from someone else. Someone was influencing him. He was terrified –sometimes, he seemed really desperate, but we didn't know how to help him.'​

The impotence was agony while they watched, helpless, as Sam's paranoia, fear and reliance on drugs stopped him accepting help.​

But his old life was already long gone. As Lisa, the chief executive of charity Escapeline, puts it: 'Once these children are sucked into these operations, it's almost impossible to get them out – they either end up in prison or dead, sadly all too often taking their own lives.'​

Then, one day, when Sam was about 17, Liz was selling a few bits and bobs from the garage at a car boot sale and discovered dozens of bags of pills and powders in an old chest of drawers.

'I shoved them under the car seat in a panic,' she says, and her mobile started ringing and ringing with a hysterical Sam crying: 'They'll kill me. I'm dead. You have to give them back. They'll kill me.' And so she did.​

'We really didn't know what else to do. I felt so helpless, I was so ashamed,' says Liz. 'But I couldn't see any option.'​

Because Sam was terrified. There had been threatening visits to the family home, a classic grooming technique – 'we know where you live'.​

And he was stabbed in the buttock and rushed to A&E for stitches – not enough to kill him, but a warning.​

'It was modern-day slave labour. He never had anything to show for it. He looked like a tramp. He had no money and was always in fear,' says Simon.​

Meanwhile, the whole family became increasingly isolated.​

'It's not something you tell people about. People didn't know. We felt so ashamed – we felt anger, guilt, frustration and were completely out of our depth.'​

But somehow, throughout it all, flashes of the old lovely Sam were still there.​

His brilliant sense of humour. His music. His old friends. His deep love for his family – presumably, he thought he was keeping them safe by telling them nothing. His joy for Ethan when he got into the local grammar school.

'He was so, so proud. He made him a card and everything,' says Liz.​

Then, one morning, when he was 18, Simon and Liz found their son unconscious on the sofa.​

He spent six days in a coma, six weeks in hospital and toxicology reports showed a combination of Valium and heroin. When he came home, they paid off his debts, redecorated his room, found a place in rehab for him and prayed for a fresh start. But he refused to go.​

'We were told he wasn't ready. He had to want to get better, so we were advised to ask him to leave so that he could hit rock-bottom.'​

It was a monstrous decision and one that still haunts them daily, but their home life was spiralling. They needed to protect Ethan, Joe and themselves.​

So they did the hardest thing any parent could do and told him to pack a bag.​

'It was terrible. But he was unbearable to live with, ripping the family apart,' says Simon.​

He sofa-surfed for a bit, but then he got himself on to a painting and decorating course, a bedsit in Slough – Liz visited every few days with food and washing and they paid his phone bill.​

Until one day, in March 2018, he didn't answer his phone.​

And that was that.

Joe had lost a twin. Ethan his big brother. And their family would never feel complete again.​

More than 350 mourners attended Sam's funeral, including a team of nurses from the ICU in the local hospital where he'd been in a coma a year or so before.​

There were staff from his painting course. Family. Neighbours. And hundreds and hundreds of friends.​

'He was so deeply loved. I hope he knew,' says Liz.​

After the funeral, Ethan said to his parents: 'Can we just go back to normal now?'​

Sadly they never will.​

In the hard years since, Liz, Simon, Joe (who runs his own hair salon) and Ethan – now at university studying law – have had to fight hard to rebuild their lives.​

Their strength and dignity is extraordinary. They have attended bereavement groups, counselling, spoken to the various charities and support groups that have started popping up, joined the dots and realised that so many other families have been going through what they've been going through, but like them were too ashamed to speak out.​

Every night they still light a candle for Sam. When they go on holiday, they do the same – 'so he's with us'. At Christmas, they still hang a stocking for him.​

They will always be haunted by guilt. 'All these years, I've struggled with immense, immense guilt. We made him leave. We failed him. I let him down as a mother,' says Liz quietly.​

But finally they are able to talk about him. To laugh at his silly memories before the darkness took over. To be thankful for the Sam they knew, beaming out of that photo with his twin brother in his Beavers outfit, long before his life was derailed.​

And most of all, to do their utmost to make sure that what happened to their lovely Sam does not happen to anyone else.