

A Positive Outcome to a Tragic Event

This morning I would like to tell you about Stephen Lawrence. In April 1993, soon after his 18th birthday, Stephen was waiting at a bus stop in south London with his friend when he was attacked by a gang of youths. It is not known why he was assaulted although witnesses standing near by heard shouting that suggested it was a racist attack. Stephen was a black boy; his assailants were white.

Stephen was in no position to defend himself against the five gang members who were carrying knives. The attack did not last very long but long enough for Stephen to have been stabbed on both sides of his body as well as in the chest and arm. The stabs wounds were deep and severed a number of arteries. Although he tried to escape, Stephen collapsed and bled to death after running 100 metres. The gang left his friend unharmed and walked away.

At the time of his death Stephen Lawrence was studying English, Design Technology and Physics at school and was hoping to go to university to study architecture. Stephen had long dreamed of becoming an architect but those dreams were dashed in a couple of minutes on that street in London.

It did not take long for the police to arrest a number of white boys and charge two of them with murder. However, the case was mismanaged by the police and the two youths, aged 16 and 17, were acquitted on all charges. Understandably, Stephen's family reacted angrily at the release of the two boys and launched a campaign to ensure that justice prevailed. Their crusade was taken up by newspapers and television stations who guaranteed that everyone knew about Stephen's case. In the words of Mrs. Lawrence "I focused on how we could get justice and how to get people to be angry about what happened to Stephen".

Yet as the months and then years passed, Stephen's parents came to see the tragic death of their son in a new light. In the words of Mrs. Lawrence "as time goes by you realise there is so much more. Stephen wasn't just a name, he was a person". It was at this point that the Lawrence's decided that they wanted to help and support other young people in some positive way.

Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence established the Stephen Lawrence Trust with the objective of helping young people pursue a career in architecture and urban

design which was the dream of their son. The Trust collected donations from members of the public as well as from the newspapers and some well-known personalities. In the years since his death, the Stephen Lawrence Trust has provided financial support to over 100 young people to study at university. During this time eight have qualified as architects.

This positive work did not stop with the parents. The Royal Institute of British Architects established an annual architectural award in his memory called the Stephen Lawrence Prize. Furthermore, a well-known author wrote a play about Stephen's life with the work turned into a film by the BBC.

The story of Stephen Lawrence has been reported in British newspapers over the past week because it has been 18 years since his death. To mark this anniversary Stephen's remarkable parents have launched a new campaign called the "1818 Fund", the name being derived from the fact that it is 18 years since the 18 year old was murdered.

The "1818 Fund" aims to raise millions of pounds over the next 12 months to help disadvantaged young people achieve their dreams. However, this new initiative moves beyond those looking to architecture and design. The "1818 Fund" will build on the original model by giving support to those wanting to get employment in other competitive areas. Speaking at a gala dinner to launch the campaign, Mrs Lawrence said: "we want to see how we can support disadvantaged young people to get into other professions such as law, finance, and the media, and in order to do that we need to raise as much money as possible." The "1818 Fund" has already received financial support from a number of celebrities and prominent politicians.

Mrs. Lawrence says that she still finds it incredible that her son's death has had such a positive impact on the lives of others. In her words: "I would like Stephen to be remembered as a young man who had a future. He was well loved, and had he been given the chance to survive maybe he would have been the one to bridge the gap between black and white because he didn't distinguish between black and white. He saw people as people."

In the case of Stephen Lawrence something positive came out of a tragic incident. Anger and despair were replaced by acceptance and hope. In the case of Stephen's parents, they took hold of a terrible event and turned it into something positive and good.

After the passage of 18 years new forensic techniques have led to the arrest of two of the youths at the scene of Stephen's death. Now 36 and 34 years of age, the two men will stand trial next month charged with murder. They will plead not guilty.

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