
New school crime-busters

Ask most teenagers about school assemblies and you're likely to get a groan about how "boo...ring" it always is.

This is unlikely to be the reaction of a students in schools in East Sussex and London's Forest Gate later this week, when they hear speakers address the issue of teen on teen violence in our cities and schools.

The star turn at this week's assemblies, organised by an American group, Breaking the Cycle (BTC), will undoubtedly be 29-year-old Sergio Argueta, former gang leader in New York turned

community organiser and speaker.

Argueta, who is flying over specially to attend the assemblies, was a gang leader from the age of 13 to 19. "I loved gangs. I loved the support, the caring, the protection. I thought I was part of a brotherhood. I only realised I had to change my life after the death of two close friends and the incarceration of a third, who went to prison for 12 years because of something I was involved in."

Argueta, who now has a master's in social work, will be joined by local police officers from Sussex and south-east London, keen to address the growing violence inside – and outside – our schools, and by leading representatives of BTC, which launches officially in the UK this week.

Started in the wake of the Columbine school massacre, BTC has run dozens of similar events in schools in the US over the past 10 years. According to writer and US founder of BTC, Christoph Arnold, "the assemblies themselves are electrifying. Children come in noisy and excited. Once the speakers have started, you can hear a pin drop. The questions are incredible. And afterwards we are swamped with emails."

BTC has links to the Church Communities Foundation, but says the assemblies have no specific religious content or aim, beyond emphasising forgiveness and non-retaliation. Joe Hine, founder

of UK BTC, says, "We put it to young people: you can choose revenge or you can step back and say, I'm not doing that."

What will be Argueta's key message to UK students? "It's your community and if you can't take care of it who will? We live in a culture that still glamorises gang culture and young people are dying at unprecedented levels. If you want to live, and to enjoy life, violence is not the way."

Melissa Benn