

Survival guide

It once aimed to show girls how to help build up the empire. Now rebranded, Girlguiding UK has shed its suburban image and is training leaders to deal with inner-city issues

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November 13th 2002
[The Guardian](#)

Teenagers, clearly dealing in drugs, loiter outside a church hall as Gill Oliver anxiously walks past to open a weekly Girl Guide meeting. "When the dark nights draw in, I stay in my car with the doors locked until an assistant arrives," she says. "A car often parks behind mine and 14 people may get in and out in the space of a quarter of an hour."

Oliver, a 32-year-old nanny, runs a Guide unit in Stepney, east London, for nine Brownies, aged seven to 10, and five Guides, aged 10-14. In the past, youths have thrown fireworks into the hall. Last year, burglars stole all her equipment.

This seems at odds with the stereotypical image of the Guides: young women in leafy suburbs, divorced from the harsher side of life. But Oliver's experience is not exceptional. The hall where Janet Robertson used to run her Guide unit, on the Barton estate in Oxford, was once set ablaze. Twenty-eight girls were inside when youths set fire to the roof and smashed windows. "Blocks of flaming wood fell through the windows," recalls Robertson, 56, a former GP practice manager. "We rushed to the fire exit, but the boys leaned against the doors. Parents who arrived to collect their children dialled 999." Another leader says a Guide turned to her for advice after being raped. "I explained to her that it was not her fault. She decided to go to the police and an officer contacted me to ask if she was reliable. I said: 'Look, I've known this girl for several years. She's told me about previous sexual relationships. She isn't making this up.'"

Guide leaders in disadvantaged areas face crime, drugs, poverty, poor nutrition and literacy, financial problems and the manifold consequences of family breakdown. But many feel ill-equipped to handle these challenges, according to feedback to the national organisation, Girlguiding UK, which is now launching a working group to help local leaders tackle the problems.

A forum specifically for inner-city volunteers was held last month in Birmingham; a second takes place next weekend in Newcastle upon Tyne. The aim is to establish what support the leaders need, with workshops on personal safety, drugs, crime, bullying, self-esteem, money and grants. Denise King, Girlguiding UK chief executive, acknowledges: "We need to support volunteers who deal with abuse, neglect, criminal damage and drug and alcohol problems. We need

to work more closely with the police and to look at new ideas. Perhaps we should have our own minders."

Denise Ramsden, a 40-year-old part-time IT assistant, who runs a unit in Armley, Leeds, says this represents a major challenge for the movement at national level. A Guide leader for 10 years, she says: "We need practical advice about smoking, mental health issues, drugs and sexual health. There's a lot of insecurity among the children. One social worker recommended us to a girl living with her grandma. She needed to make friends. Her mother was dying and her dad couldn't hack it and left. Other children have called at least four men 'dad'. Some of the kids see thieves or drug dealers as successful because they have the biggest cars. I point out there are other ways of getting on in life."

Ramsden admits she has "always felt a minority within the movement, a bit of a troublemaker". Since she came across literacy difficulties among her Guides - "there's a lot of undiagnosed dyslexia" - she has sometimes allowed girls to bring their homework to the meeting. "Their parents are more interested in television or going out," she says. "Some view us as a cheap babysitting service. One was absolutely furious when I closed the unit because a colleague was sick - the parent had arranged to go clubbing."

Just as Ramsden has difficulty collecting the £1 weekly subscriptions and the annual census fee (about £14 a head, paid to headquarters), so Elizabeth Barwell identifies her biggest problem as gathering the 50p sub at her unit on the Braunstone estate in Leicester. A 42-year-old, full-time degree student, Barwell runs a unit for 18 girls (two Rainbows, eight Brownies and eight Guides). "Parents either can't afford it or they assume they've done their bit for society by buying a lottery ticket," she says. "I'm doing things on the cheap, for example, by offering second-hand uniforms; although last year I was able to get a £500 grant locally."

She feels the organisation could provide development officers for the inner cities, set up an emergency fund for units that are struggling financially and supply more information about grants. "I'm talking utopia here, but perhaps the wealthier units could pay a higher subscription or annual census," Barwell says.

She takes a flexible approach, deviating from some traditional activities. "I don't organise church parades because a lot of kids from single-parent families see their dads that day," she says. "Some of the children don't know how to eat their meals at a table, let alone lay one. I bypass that, although I do cover healthy eating." Barwell adds: "I'm glad the organisation is acknowledging there are not these perfect units everywhere. But I wonder if people at headquarters realise what they're taking on."

At the Birmingham forum, about 60 women sit in groups and discuss the challenges they face. The self-esteem workshop is popular, as is the one on

bullying. In the drugs workshop, the participants have to match different substances with clues such as: "I'm sometimes smoked, but many people inject me."

"That's heroin isn't it, or is it crack cocaine?" an older Guide leader asks her team mate. "I make people see things in unusual ways," reads another clue. "Magic mushrooms, LSD?" asks the bemused leader.

In the personal safety workshop, a representative from charity Crimestoppers asks leaders to consider running awareness campaigns. Her idea of using a singer to promote a positive lifestyle goes down well. But when she discusses the merits of children reporting crime, Robertson, from Oxford, is mortified. "It might be appropriate for other units. But that could put my children at risk," she says, pointing out that the assumption is typically middle-class.

None the less, Robertson is pleased with the forum. "When I attend training days, the usual reaction is: 'Why are you running a unit there?'" she says. "Thank heavens the association is finally recognising problems exist." Pleased, too, is Ramsden, from Leeds. "I was fully prepared for the forum to be a complete waste of time," she admits. "Some of the workshops told us about problems we already know about, but I do feel the organisation is listening to us now. It was a relief to meet others in the same position."

At Ramsden's weekly Guide meeting, five Brownies and three young leaders, in their late teens, giggle and chatter as they alternate between a session on nail painting and a talk on fire safety. "Our role is one of friendship," explains Ramsden. "We're not teachers and we're not parents. We provide a listening ear and some fun."

Danielle Hargreaves, who wants to become a midwife, is a confident 17-year-old who joined the organisation at 10. Now a young leader, she admits: "I used to feel ashamed of being in the Guides because I knew the boys at school would pick on me.

"But now I don't care. I get bored just staying at home. I have a laugh with my friends. We go ice skating, have girly sleep-overs and we've been on barge trips and camping. It gets me out of the house and means I'm not causing any mischief on the streets."

Ramsden says: "If anything, it's the girls in deprived areas that need Guides the most." Barwell, from Leicester, is more cautious: "It's very easy to paint a picture of Dickensian children whose visit to Guides gives them a bright light in their eyes," she says. "That's not how it is." However, she points out: "Girls do have the opportunity to try new things such as canoeing, climbing, archery and camping, in a safe environment without the distractions of boys. It helps them develop self-confidence."

Catherine Holgate, a 28-year-old teacher, admits: "When I tell people I'm in the Guides, I still get the usual 'Gin gan goolie' comments. It's a historical thing, the image. But it's nothing like that now. It's about opportunities and friendship. I've been abroad and learned Russian. I used to be really shy. It's boosted my confidence."

Oliver agrees that her girls enjoy having fun and getting individual attention. But she says units like hers need extra support if they are to overcome the daily challenges. "The organisation can't perform miracles and chase the drug dealers away from my doorstep," Oliver says. "But having someone to turn to and say, 'I've called the police 18 times and they've still not turned up', would be a start."

Rebranded earlier this year as Girlguiding UK, the movement founded by Lord Baden-Powell in 1910 as the sister organisation to the Boy Scouts was previously known as the Guide Association and, before that, as the Girl Guides. Membership is over 600,000 and rising, following a dip in the 1990s.

In Britain, the Guide movement is the largest mass organisation for girls and young women. At its peak, it had a membership of more than 750,000. About 50% of women are said to have belonged to the movement at some stage in their lives. Global membership, covering 148 countries, is about 10m.

Like other uniformed youth groups, the movement is anxious to update its image. Activities for which Guides can now gain badges include: personal safety (personal security awareness); circus skills (juggling, spinning plates, stilt-walking); confectioner (sweet-making); movie appreciation; and team player (ability to work in a team). By contrast, badges listed in the 1910 handbook - entitled *How Girls Can Help to Build up the Empire* - included: dairy maid, laundress, needlework, and sick nurse.

Age categories for members remain unchanged (Rainbows 4-7; Brownies 7-10; Guides 10-14, Seniors 14-26), but uniforms have been redesigned, and the Guide's Promise was made more inclusive in 1993 when the words "I will do my best to love my God" replaced the original pledge's "do my best to do my duty to God". Loyalty to queen and country are still part of the wording, however.