

SUCKER PUNCH

When former UK boxing champion James Oyebola was gunned down last year, his brother's world turned upside down. Here, Kelly Oyebola describes the unbelievable reaction to his death, and his own decision to work with youngsters

I'm really the one that should be where my brother is. I'm the one that would have got up there and told them to

stop smoking (and I wouldn't have been so nice about the words I used). James was six foot nine and always aware of his height, his size and his ability, and it made him very humble. Not in the ring, but that is to be expected.

I don't know what really happened, but from what I've seen reported, there was an argument between people who were smoking and the security staff. The shooting started after my brother got involved and asked them to "please stop".

The owner of the club was a friend, someone James respected. I'm pretty certain had he been in any other club, he wouldn't have even blinked an eye about the smoking.

The first I heard about it was at 2.45am. I was in bed and got a phone call from James' partner which changed my life. She said, "You won't believe this, James has been shot." I said, "What? Where? How?"

I dashed down to Charing Cross hospital with my brother's coach, who is like a father to us. He's known us since we were kids. When the doctors finally came, they gave us the news that James was probably going to be 95 per cent brain dead.

Then the hospital started to fill up – by 4pm you couldn't move on the sixth floor. People who didn't even know him were coming into the hospital, saying, "We just want to pray for him, give the family some support." It was amazing. The hospital's patience was tested but the staff were absolutely fantastic.

The truth is, I didn't spend too much time at his bedside. I was still in denial, so I didn't get to see him

properly until the Wednesday, two days later. It was 10pm and I was just leaving when the doctor said: "Your brother just moved, you might want to go and say a few words to him." I will never forget it as long as I live. I went in and kissed him on his forehead, and I whispered in his ear, "I love you".

If you saw the way his body moved – his arms went up and his right leg went up. I couldn't believe it. I tried to calm him, I said, "It's okay, it's okay, just try to relax, just get well." That was the first time I actually had a glimmer of hope.

But the way I look at it, James just waited for me to come and say something, to hear my voice. Because he died the next day.

The doctors said: "Look, he's never going to make a recovery, and he's got to a point where he really is only breathing because of the machine."

Now, when you have between 40 and 60 people in the corridors and you have to go back and tell them that this is the end – I just didn't know how to do that. So I gathered a few close people together, family and tight friends. People started getting angry, saying no, the doctors could do better.

I like to be realistic in life. Very few doctors would lie, especially if they saw that James' story was in the papers every day. I promised the doctor that no one would lynch him and arranged for him to talk to everyone at once. Finally we agreed that there was just no point in keeping him alive.

They gave us an extra day, because they realised the kind of family we were. It seemed as if about

150,000 people were there – everybody wanted to stand with him for a few minutes and say their prayers. Then the next day, his very close family were at his bedside. I wasn't there. I couldn't take that to be honest, so I bottled out. Just after midday they pronounced him dead.

The first time I met my brother I was five years old. I was fostered to an Irish lady called Mrs Thorn, in Wiltshire, while my brother was in Nigeria with my grandmother. Eventually he was brought over, and he was speaking this foreign language. My foster mother kept saying, "He's your brother!" and all

the other kids were laughing. I was like, "No he's not, no way!"

But he actually turned out to be the big brother for everybody. He was the one that never gave up. He was the one that was always committed.

From then on we were very close. Don't get me wrong, he knocked me out once, but we spent a lot of time together. We spoke three or four times a day. We were in each other's pockets all the time.

His boxing career took off and I became a probation officer, working with murderers, sex offenders and arsonists. The cream of the cream of offending. And I was very good, because I had empathy.

Do you know how difficult it is to stab someone? Very difficult. But it's easy when you don't give a shit. If you've got nothing to lose, you lose nothing. A lot of my teenage years were based on "I don't give a shit", so I can understand.

I set up my mentoring business to intervene with young people at risk of ending up inside. I could

easily have gone and worked with the elderly but I believe that if I do that then James' death will have been in vain. I love my brother too much for that to happen.

Kids are taking the piss, they are running riot, but they mirror what they see. We aren't respecting each other, acting like a community, being good role models, so how can we expect them to be any different?

Young people don't read newspapers. You think they are watching the news and thinking, "Oops, the government are cracking down on knife crime, we'd better not stab." Of course they aren't.

The government aren't talking to the right people: the youth workers and probation officers who have been working on the ground for years. Not one person has asked my opinion in all this time.

After my brother died I wrote to David Cameron and Boris Johnson asking to discuss the issue with them. I didn't receive a response from Boris, and Cameron's letter said that he was too busy.

If they had spoken to me, I would have told them to pass a law where, if you get caught using a gun or knife you do full time, not the half sentences that people do now. Then we need to rehabilitate people in prison – compulsory courses. Believe me, people would start thinking twice before they put a knife or gun in their pocket.

Unfortunately, it took for my brother to be killed before I was given the privilege to be asked my opinion.

For me now, my willpower is stronger. There's never been more commitment to do my job because I love what I do and I don't want to stop.

As told to Daisy Greenwell
Kelly Oyebola runs Potential Mentoring services. For more information go to www.potentialmentoring.org.uk

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