

A black and white photograph of four young Black men standing in a row, wearing dark school uniforms with white shirts and ties. They are positioned in front of a large, classical-style building with a prominent spire, likely a public school. The men are looking towards the camera with various expressions, some smiling slightly. The background is slightly out of focus, emphasizing the subjects in the foreground.

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What does it take to turn someone's life round? A decade ago, these young black men were being sucked into London's deadly gang culture. Then, as part of a radical social experiment, they were plucked from the mean streets and sent to Rugby, one of Britain's top public schools. They tell *Sharon Hendry* what happened next

A photograph of four young Black men standing in front of a brick wall. They are dressed in formal attire, including dark blue suits and jackets. The man in the center is wearing a dark blue suit with a light blue and white striped tie. The man to his right is wearing a dark blue suit with a blue tie. The man on the far left is wearing a dark blue jacket over a grey sweater. The man on the far right is wearing a dark blue jacket over a white shirt and a dark tie. They are all smiling and looking towards the camera.

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BOYS TO MEN

Left, from left: David Ejim-McCubbin, George Kamau, Dotun Ogunkeyede and Marcus Kerr at Rugby school. Above: the young professionals today

Hanging proudly on the wall of an east London youth centre is a captivating black-and-white photograph of four teenage boys. Huddled together wearing formal dress and smiling tentatively, they are posing against the backdrop of one of Britain's most elite boarding schools.

Today, a decade after they began their new life at Rugby School, they are returning to the disadvantaged streets where they grew up to recreate the shot that was taken on the school's playing fields.

The image tells the extraordinary story of a unique experiment in social mobility. What happens when you take a group of black teenagers growing up in the shadow of gang culture and give them a scholarship to a top public school? Will they sink or swim?

The answers provided by David Ejim-McCubbin, George Kamau, Dotun Ogunkeyede, Marcus Kerr and Anthony Wright (the original photographer) offer a unique perspective on Britain's continuing class divide and insight into the brutal culture of violence on London's streets.

There have been more than 60 murders in the capital in 2018, with London's murder rate momentarily overtaking that of New York earlier this year. Four teenagers were stabbed to death in London on New Year's Eve alone, and 22 killed in March. The surge in violent crime has been driven by several factors, including rivalries between drug gangs.

David Ejim-McCubbin, 25, understands London's gang culture and could easily have ended up a part of it. Today, he has arrived promptly for the photo shoot on Station Road, Forest Gate, in the borough of Newham, a part of east London that has seen several shootings and stabbings in recent years — including the murder last month of Sami Sidhom, an 18-year-old who hoped to be lawyer, stabbed in the street by a gang.

Ejim-McCubbin also grew up in Newham, in the first-floor flat of a housing block in North Woolwich, with his mum and two younger sisters. He never knew his birth father and his mother later remarried.

He says that when he was at secondary school in Custom House, east London, he was “aware of children being involved in crime very early on. When I was in Year 10, a fight escalated between a friend and another boy, with one getting stabbed in the head with a comb.”

He is now private secretary to Anne Milton, the minister for skills and apprenticeships, and his journey from poverty to politics is still fresh in his mind as he proudly adjusts his dark-blue Burberry

raincoat. It's the same coat donated to him by the fashion company in 2009 to help him blend in at his new school — the birthplace of rugby football and the setting for Tom Brown's School Days, where boarding places cost £35,000 a year.

“This coat has been hanging in my wardrobe all these years,” he says. “It's a tangible symbol of the journey we've all been on. We felt like pretenders back then, just boys from east London doing what we'd been told to do. We hated it at first but we were all together in the struggle and that gave us a camaraderie in this very foreign place. When alone, it was harder to smile.”

The eloquent civil servant was one of a handful of directionless youths identified by schools in Newham and flagged up to Ray Lewis, a maverick prison service manager turned youth worker. Lewis had visited a US reform project in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and was inspired by the transformation of hardcore gang members into gentlemen through a combination of military drills, tough love and a proud teaching of black history.

Back in Newham, he set up the Eastside Young Leaders Academy (EYLA) and began to replicate the US model with impressive results. He formed a partnership with

Rugby's then-headmaster, the philanthropic Patrick Derham.

Ejim-McCubbin still recalls the physical shock of being dropped off at Rugby School on his first day in September 2009: “Marcus, Anthony and I turned up in a minibus. Our mums were working and we had no dads around so Eastside dropped us off. I remember seeing all the other pupils

getting out of nice cars, but what really struck me first was the presence of two parents with almost every child. It was unusual for me to see so many fathers taking an interest in their children's education.”

He felt overwhelmed by the sight of Rugby's imposing campus, with its endless, pristine sports fields made famous by pupil William Webb Ellis when he tore up the rules of football in 1823 and ran with a ball

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in his arms. “The school landscape looked and felt intimidating,” says Ejim-McCubbin. “All I had ever known back home was a concrete playground. I felt isolated and inferior. I was unclear about whether I would ever belong and unsure of whether I wanted to become what I saw.”

For the first time, he encountered the children of a privileged social elite whose birthright set them worlds apart from him and his peers. “I was immediately struck by the inherent confidence in these young boys and girls — speaking and walking with entitlement and tangible self assurance. It was like we were from different countries and I had to think deeply about how I communicated with them. These students spoke with a clarity I had never heard at my old school. I didn't hate them for their privilege but I was saddened by the huge disparity when comparing their lives with my old school friends. What made these students more deserving of a top-class education? Race of course came into the picture. At my old school, a large proportion of students were black. Here, all except a handful were white. I despised the reality of this for a couple of terms, before making my mind up to benefit from it.”

Rugby is one of nine public schools producing a large share of the country's most powerful people, with former pupils 94 times more likely to reach the top of their professions than anyone else.

Ejim-McCubbin benefited from small class sizes and state-of-the-art sport and music provision. He learnt to play tennis and bass guitar while captaining the 3rd XI football team.

School holidays meant a harsh return to the reality of the East End, but Ejim-McCubbin says the welcome was warm: “My friends never accused me of changing because I made sure I didn't. My accent stayed

the same and so did my demeanour. It was my way of making sure my friends knew we'd always be friends. It was tough balancing two different worlds, but I am thankful to Rugby for paving the way to my current job, which allows me to give something back to the people I grew up with.”

Inspiring his charges to give back to their depleted communities is central to Ray Lewis's strategy for social change. He is still transforming the lives of disadvantaged boys and, more recently, girls. He has arranged more than 126 boarding school scholarships since 2007. Rugby School, Eton College, Sherborne School for Girls and Wellington College are among EYLA's close partners.

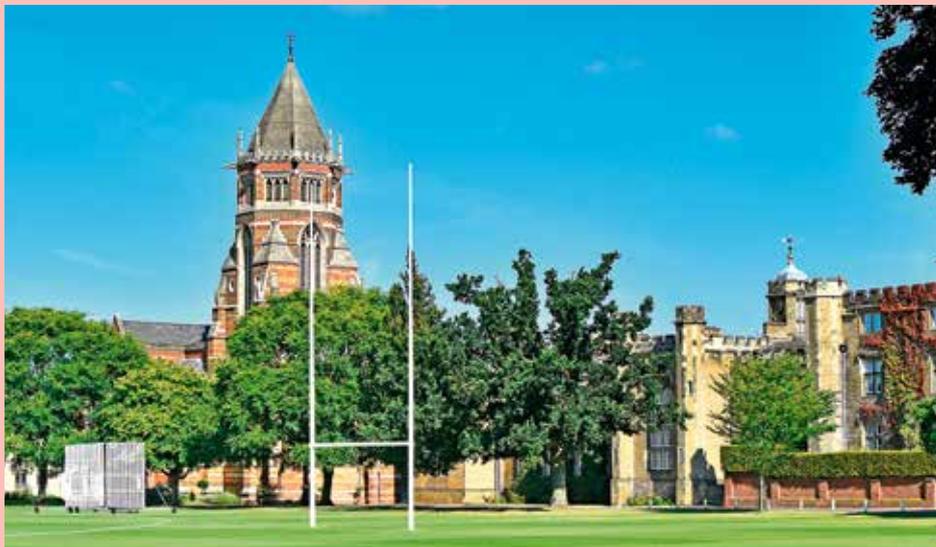
Lewis says: “Boarding schools work well for our young people because they



DAVID EJIM-McCUBBIN, 25
Civil servant. Has a degree in law with business and a masters in legal and political theory



MARCUS KERR, 24
Web developer. Degree in computer science from De Montfort University. Sits on the board of trustees at EYLA



BACKDROP GOAL The field at Rugby School where the boys were originally photographed

understand and build upon our concept of leadership. Kids living in hell rarely behave like angels — they are the products of their dysfunctional environment. Boarding school gives them the consistency and structure they desperately need in order to learn.”

Ejim-McCubbin, who is of Nigerian descent, was first introduced to Lewis aged 12. “I was in danger of drifting in focus and became a candidate for Eastside’s leadership programme and joined Rugby’s sixth form in 2009,” he says. After emerging from Rugby with an impressive set of A-levels, he studied law with business at Brighton University and then a masters in legal and political theory at University College London, before working as a policy assistant at the General Council of the Bar. In December last year, he took up his role at the Department for Education, working on the provision of technical education.

This summer, Ejim-McCubbin will be the first Eastside alumnus to get married and he’ll be inviting former Rugby pupils to his wedding. He met fellow civil servant Deborah at his local church and describes her as having a similar background to his. The pair have recently moved out of Newham and set up home in Kent.

Dotun Ogunkeyede and Marcus Kerr, both 24, concur with most of Ejim-McCubbin’s reflections on Rugby. But the transition felt more brutal for them because they were the first to arrive from Newham in 2007, joining in Year 9 aged 13.

Kerr, who now sits on EYLA’s board of trustees and works as a web developer, says: “It was a completely different environment from what I was used to and I felt like an experiment. It was like the sort of thing you might see on an exam paper: ‘What will happen if you take a young, black kid from a working-class family and thrust him into a completely different socio-economic environment?’

“To begin with, I was shocked by the lack of people who looked like me. I could feel

that many of my new peers were initially cautious of me. I don’t know if it was because of the colour of my skin or because of my background, but I knew it was due to fear of the unknown.

“Other students made assumptions about me before they got to know me. For instance, many people assumed I was good at sports before they witnessed me play. I was, but that is beside the point. Someone once flippantly asked me if I’d got so fast by running from the police.

“I once caught some of my housemates mocking my nose and lips whilst we were brushing our teeth and on one occasion I was referred to as ‘token’. These occurrences upset me and made me doubt whether or not I belonged. I quickly deduced that I wasn’t there to be accepted but to make the most of the opportunity and pave the way for others.”

Kerr found transitions between home and school hard to process. “During the first few months, going home felt like a relief but that quickly changed. Each time, my friendship group had dwindled. Some had lost their lives, some had gone to jail and I grew distant from others due to different interests. It saddened me and I felt guilty that I’d gone to Rugby and left everyone else behind.”

Kerr grew up in Newham with his mum and three sisters. He recalls: “Some of my

“Of course there were drugs at some Rugby school parties — but the rich were the ones buying it, not selling it”

earliest memories are of mum making clothes and jewellery to sell. She did everything she could to support us.”

He struggled to settle in school and was sent to Lewis by teachers when he was just eight. “Let’s just say I had potential but was using it in the wrong way by contributing to class riots. I was a lot to handle in school,” he confesses.

Under EYLA’s guidance, Kerr went from the fringes of gang culture to a candidate for a private-school scholarship. He excelled in both academic and sporting arenas, making his mark in the 1st XI football team and breaking the school relay and long jump records. He achieved 10 GCSEs and four A-levels before studying computer science at Leicester’s De Montfort University.

Ogunkeyede is happy to be back at Kerr’s side today. He was devastated when they were split up on their first day at Rugby.

“I assumed Marcus and I would be together but we were put in different houses,” he explains. “I thought, ‘I’m on my own now. This is real.’ I didn’t get the other pupils at first. We were different people, different colours and we liked different things. They went to prep school and loved rugby and skiing. I came from a school where 80% of the pupils were black and we played

football. It was a real feeling of difference, not just about being black and poor. But now some of them are my best mates.”

Ogunkeyede describes a gradual process of assimilation, which resulted in him inviting Rugby friends to his terraced home in East London. “They were shocked,” he confesses. “Genuinely shocked.” When he visited their homes he discovered a world of country tennis courts and underground swimming pools.

He excelled on Rugby’s famous sports pitches, playing on the wing for the prestigious First XV rugby team as well as breaking school records in relay

and high jump.

After achieving 12 GCSEs and three A-levels, Ogunkeyede read linguistics at Newcastle University and now works in communications for a utility firm in Suffolk.

Reflecting on the London borough he has left behind and its current problems, he says: “My generation was all about knives. Now it’s escalated to guns and violence has become normalised. The people I was with at Rugby are the ones who go on to become politicians but there is no way they would be able to understand people who live outside of their world. I think the solution is more people like Ray Lewis and Patrick Derham, people who treat fellow human beings as just that. They have more than their own interests at heart and are helping to rebuild communities by creating real >>>



DOTUN OGUNKEYEDE, 24
Suffolk-based public relations consultant. Linguistics degree from Newcastle University

opportunities and good role models.”

George Kamau, 21, still lives in the heart of Newham, where he returned in March after studying liberal arts at Essex University. He was selected by EYLA for entry to Rugby School in 2010 and went on to attain 10 GCSEs and three A-levels.

Currently writing a screenplay about his home environment called *Street's Disciple*, Kamau thinks his experiences of living on both sides of a class divide have given him a unique perspective on the current spate of gang violence.

Kamau says: “If I’m in a position to choose, I’ll send my children to private school because a good education teaches you how to think more so than what to think.

“But there are sacrifices I’ve had to make. While I was at Rugby I knew there were some childhood friends I would naturally part ways with.

“I remember coming home for a weekend and going to a house party. I realised it was a ‘trap house’ and there were a bunch of drug rocks on the kitchen table. Of course there were drugs at some Rugby school parties but the difference was the rich were the ones buying it not selling it. What is worse, supply or demand? As I was leaving that party, I thought, on Monday morning I will be back in the Rugby School chapel with boys who will never see people in that position. It was a strange double life.

“Once, one of my boarding house mates asked me which of the London postcode ‘zones’ I lived in. I told him I thought it was three or four. He replied, ‘I never leave zone two’. I got it and told him, ‘I don’t blame you’, but the point is, my friends and I don’t have a choice, we don’t have the economic freedom to leave our zone.

“Recently, I heard that one of the boys who was at that weekend trap-house party was killed in West Ham. The people dying are people I have lived and laughed with. They are just as, if not more talented than me. I used to look at the Rugby boys and think, “How many of *your* friends have died?”

“Rugby was nice but I was scared when it ended.”

He returned home to rising levels of street violence. “Mercy is less forthcoming, motivations are skewed and crime is glamorised. Now the perpetrators are putting themselves on YouTube talking about their crimes. What we are seeing is the total collapse of community.

“My peers are being murdered in the drug wars but none of them own the boats or planes that bring it to the UK. Money still equals opportunity, whether good or bad.

“Living between Newham and Rugby, I learnt that white people don’t worry about



GAME CHANGER Ray Lewis, the youth worker who arranged the boys’ scholarships

money in the same way as black people where I live. They don’t see their mum fighting off bailiffs or their siblings being fed from food banks.

“What is happening right now on the streets is deep. In boarding school you have houses and house matches. When you are from a tough part of London, your boarding house is the estate; the prize is the money and respect — not the house trophy. It’s about finding a better way of survival.”

Finally, Anthony Wright shyly joins the group, clearly more comfortable behind the lens than in front of it. Back in 2010, when he captured the original image, he was struggling to compete with his wealthy peers on a suitable topic for his A-level photography project.

He recalls: “We were discussing our final project at Rugby and where it might be shot. One student talked about photographing the Alps during their annual ski trip, another said she would shoot the desert during an exotic foreign holiday. Everyone seemed to have an opportunity to do something cool except me. I had no choice but to work with the only material I had — London and my friends. In the end it worked out OK.”

“The people dying are people I have lived and laughed with. They are just as, if not more talented than me”

Indeed, Wright’s project won him an A* alongside high A-level grades in business studies, politics and English literature.

Now he is reaping the rewards of his elite education. After studying Economics at Kent University and volunteering in New York at a children’s charity, he has been offered a master’s degree apprenticeship in surveying at London property firm.

“I don’t regret the Rugby experience, but there is much to reflect on. My first impression was that the school had made a huge mistake in letting boys from east London apply, let alone admitting them. My family had no notable achievements that I could draw on or brag about like my new school friends and I certainly couldn’t compete with their wealth. Many a conversation about money was halted when I entered the room. I was perceived as the poor kid with little experience of the ‘real world’, ie, the rich world.”

Wright found striking differences *and* similarities between Rugby’s rich world and the poor one he left behind.

He says: “I thought some of the students’ accents were comical and forced but after the first week I realised it wasn’t a joke and that was how they really spoke all the time. But some of their behaviour was similar to

what I had witnessed in gang culture. There was a lot of hazing (group bullying) taking place and a hierarchy being enforced that meant older students ran the school. But to me, this was no different to how my area worked back in London.

“Private school showed me there is not a one-size-fits-all for bad or delinquent behaviours. Rather, the common denominator in those groups where I’ve seen those behaviours is usually a feeling of being above the reproach of carers, teachers and parents. At Rugby, some of the most privileged students believed their lives would be just as sweet after school, no matter how they behaved.

“So many of my childhood memories are of my single mum worried sick about bills, or learning that my friends had died or been sent to jail. I always thought money was the route to happiness but at Rugby I questioned that. I couldn’t believe how many people lived with such riches and yet so many of them were still not happy.

“In the end, the experience gave me hope and choice. I understood once I left Rugby what I wanted my life to look like when I get older, possibly with a family of my own.” ■

To find out more about EYLA’s work and to donate, visit eyla.org.uk. For information on boarding school scholarships for disadvantaged children, visit royalspringboard.org.uk



GEORGE KAMAU, 21
Writer, working on his own screenplay. Degree in liberal arts from Essex University. Returned to live in Newham



ANTHONY WRIGHT, 25
Studying for master’s apprenticeship in surveying. Read Economics at Kent