

Slaughter of the innocents

Grief was etched on *EastEnders* actress Brooke Kinsella's face as she paid tribute to her little brother, Ben, slaughtered at 16 by mindless thugs.

Brutally stabbed in the early hours of Sunday 29 June, the straight-A student had been celebrating the end of his GCSEs at a pub in north London when he was chased and murdered.

As Ben's family begged youths to 'put down your weapons', 500 teenagers – all dressed in white – marched against knife crime in the capital.

One wore a T-shirt bearing the slogan '18?' – referring to the 17 youngsters who have been knifed to death in London alone so far this year, with 32 kids dying from stab wounds across Britain.

Vicky McGarrity knows how the Kinsellas feel, after losing her brother in a pointless attack. Here, Real People writer Stephanie Blott investigates the true impact of knife crime...

As Londoners mourn their 17th victim of knife crime this year, Vicky McGarrity reveals how she won't let her beloved Damian's death be in vain...

Driving to work, I noticed police tape cordoning off a one-way street. 'Wonder what happened?' I mused. My brother, Damian, 34, drank in a pub down there. I hoped he hadn't been out if there was trouble.

'What's happening in Inverkip Street?' I asked the newsagent by the hair salon where I worked.

'Someone's been stabbed,' he replied, sadly.

Later that morning, my boss, Bridie McVey, 62, said, 'Vicky, it's your dad on the phone.'

'Hi, Vicky,' my dad, John, 69, said, hesitantly. 'I've got the police here.'

'What's going on, Dad?' I asked, apprehensively.

'We don't know anything for sure yet, b-but... someone was stabbed to death last night, and the police have found Damian's wallet,' he stammered.

'No!' I gasped. 'Not Damian!' 'They can't be sure,' he said, his voice faltering. 'We have to go to the morgue. I'll pick you up in 20 minutes.'

Dropping the phone, blood rushed from my face, the room spun and I felt sick.

Everyone loved Damian. Who'd want to kill him? 'Any news?' I asked,

when Dad and my brother, Chris, 40, pulled up in an unmarked police car. Their faces were white with fear. We all stared straight ahead throughout the hour-long journey to Glasgow,

clinging on to the silent hope that it was all a mistake.

'I can't get hold of your mum,' Dad said quietly. 'She went shopping this morning...'

'How can this have happened?' I shuddered,

forcing myself to stay strong for Dad.

'No, we'll go,' he nodded, motioning to Chris.

As I stood in the sunshine, I thought about Damian...

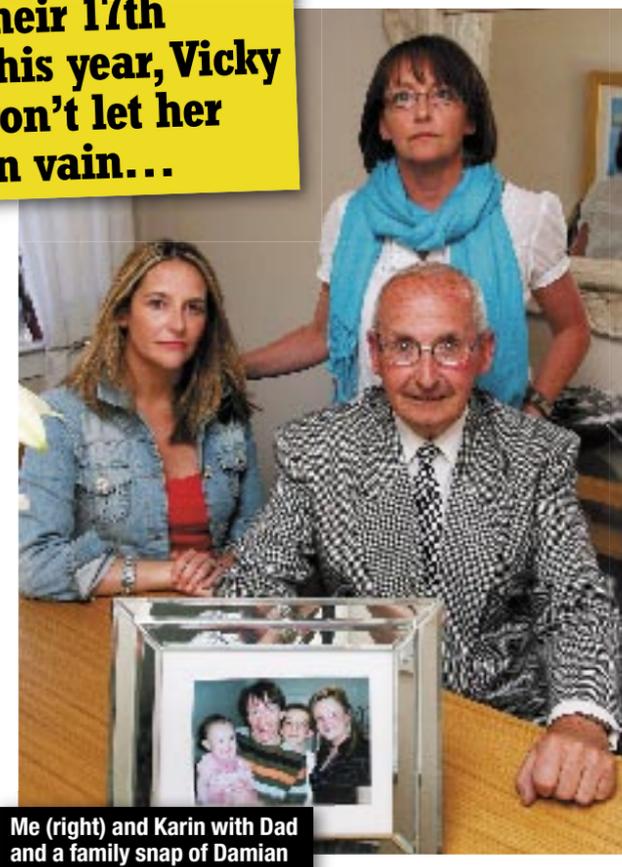
When we pulled up at the city morgue an hour later, we all felt sick with dread.

The whole world seemed to be carrying on as normal, but we were in a different dimension.

'I'll go in, Dad,' I whispered.

'No, we'll go,' he nodded, motioning to Chris.

As I stood in the sunshine, I thought about Damian...



Me (right) and Karin with Dad and a family snap of Damian

The fourth child of a family of five, me, Chris, Stephen, 37, and Karin, 33, had all doted on him. He'd never had an enemy.

He worked in IT, had loads of friends and had always been a hit with the ladies. He was a talented footballer, too – everyone in



Ben Kinsella, 16

As I stare up at my killer-to-be, he feels not the slightest measure of remorse at what he has just committed.

According to Ben's friends, he was killed after a fight

broke out following a row in Shillibeers pub in Islington, where he was celebrating the end of his GCSE exams.

After allegedly stepping in to defend his mates, Ben was



Killer Barry Gavin was sentenced to a minimum of 15 years

Greenock knew him...

'It's Damian. There's no doubt,' Chris whispered, as he came out of the morgue. Dad's shoulders shook, as great raw tears poured down his face.

I'd never seen my dad cry. The pain winded me as I held him tighter. *Why was this happening?*

Within hours, the spot where Damian was killed was covered with flowers, football shirts, teddies, lanterns, candles, cards and lovely messages.

If there is a heaven, I'm sure Damian hasn't made it through

chased through the streets by his killers. He made one desperate phone call to his friend, David Dugdale, 17, begging for help, but then the phone clicked off...

Minutes later, witnesses heard him cry, 'I've been stabbed!' His best mate, Louis Robson, 16 – son of *Birds Of A Feather* actress

Linda Robson – cradled him in his arms, desperately trying to plug the stab wounds, as he died.

Flanked by her distraught sisters, Jade, 22, and Georgia, 14, and parents, George, 48, and Deborah, 46, after Ben's death, Brooke described him as 'one of the kindest and gentlest boys God created'.

Begging people to put their weapons down, she said, 'Now it truly is the time to stand up and put an end to this.'

'We always knew that Ben would make

a special mark in this world. Although it's in the worst possible circumstances, hopefully he will be the one to put an end to this.'

'Please, boys and girls, put down your knives and weapons and think about the pain and suffering they will cause.'

'Please can we waste no more time and come together, as a



My brother, Damian

the gates yet as he's too busy chatting up the angels and flashing his smile. That's what I will always remember – his smile, one tribute read.

My mum, May, and Dad were inundated with messages of sympathy. Mum's eyes glistened as she read the kind letters.

'Vicky, what am I going to do?' she gasped, heartbroken.

'I don't know, Mum,' I sobbed.

A week after Damian died, police charged Barry Gavin, 21, with his murder. Horrified, we discovered that he'd been bailed

twice in the months before the killing for two separate assaults. Furious, I wanted to know why this monster was free.

In court, I looked at the skinny man in the dock – Damian's killer – and felt absolutely nothing. Even my anger was wasted on him.

We heard that Damian had been out with the lads from his football team the night he died.

Leaving at about midnight after a few beers, he'd hailed a cab in pouring rain but gave it to a woman who was also waiting, and started to walk instead.

KNIFE CRIME: THE FACTS

● Around a third of all murders are committed using a blade.

● In 2007, 6,000 people were treated for stab or slash wounds – that's 16 people per day. Violent crimes last year hit over 1 million – more than double the figure in 2006.

● One in three shops still sells knives to kids without restriction.

● Last year, Gordon Brown increased the maximum penalty for carrying a knife to four years. But the average sentence is just three months.

Moments later, he'd passed Gavin – who was in a foul temper. He and his girlfriend had been drinking at home. She'd gone out for cigarettes, and called him to say she wasn't coming home – asking him to look after their baby. Furious, he'd left the baby, taken a kitchen knife and gone looking for her.

When Damian passed, Gavin asked if he had the time. Damian said he didn't have a watch on and Gavin lunged at him, brandishing the knife. Defenceless, Damian tried to flee, but Gavin caught him, plunging the knife into his pelvis, where the tip snapped off.

Damian managed to run, but the first stab wound slowed him down. Gavin caught up, pushed him to the ground and held his face in the mud, while he stabbed him seven more times in the back. The last blow went through

So, early this year, we started a website, www.damianslaw.com, and invited people to sign our petition online.

In June, Dad presented over 18,000 signatures to Scotland's Convenor of the Public Petitions Committee, Frank McAveety, who said publicly that measures would be taken in the next parliamentary session.

We're keeping the petition open – we have absolutely no intention of going away.

My heart goes out to Brooke Kinsella and her family. Just like Damian, Ben was unarmed and running away.

They weren't in the wrong place at the wrong time. There is no 'right' place for knife carriers. They should not be tolerated at all. Things have to change.

Vicky McGarrity, 43, Inverkip, Renfrewshire

Teenagers marching in London to protest against knife crime



As *Real People* went to press, two 16-year-old boys had been arrested and bailed in connection with Ben's stabbing. Four further teenage youths had been arrested on suspicion of murder. Of these, one had been released on bail and three were still in custody.

Damian's heart. Twenty minutes later, two passers-by found him and called an ambulance. It was too late...

Gavin pleaded guilty to murder in November 2007. In December, he was sentenced to life, with a minimum term of 15 years, at Edinburgh High Court.

We were devastated. Fifteen years meant he'd be out in time to build a new life, while Damian's had been taken. With his violent past, Gavin should never be free.

'Things have to change,' Karin said. 'Let's start a petition and campaign for tougher laws and an automatic jail sentence for anyone caught carrying a knife.'

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