

# ‘How I showed these lads there’s more to life than crime’

A desire to give everyone a second chance led Sadie Kaye, 32, from London, to embark on a very different adventure

**S**itting in Gatwick Airport two years ago, my body pulsing with fear and excitement, I waited to meet three young offenders I was taking sailing around the Caribbean.

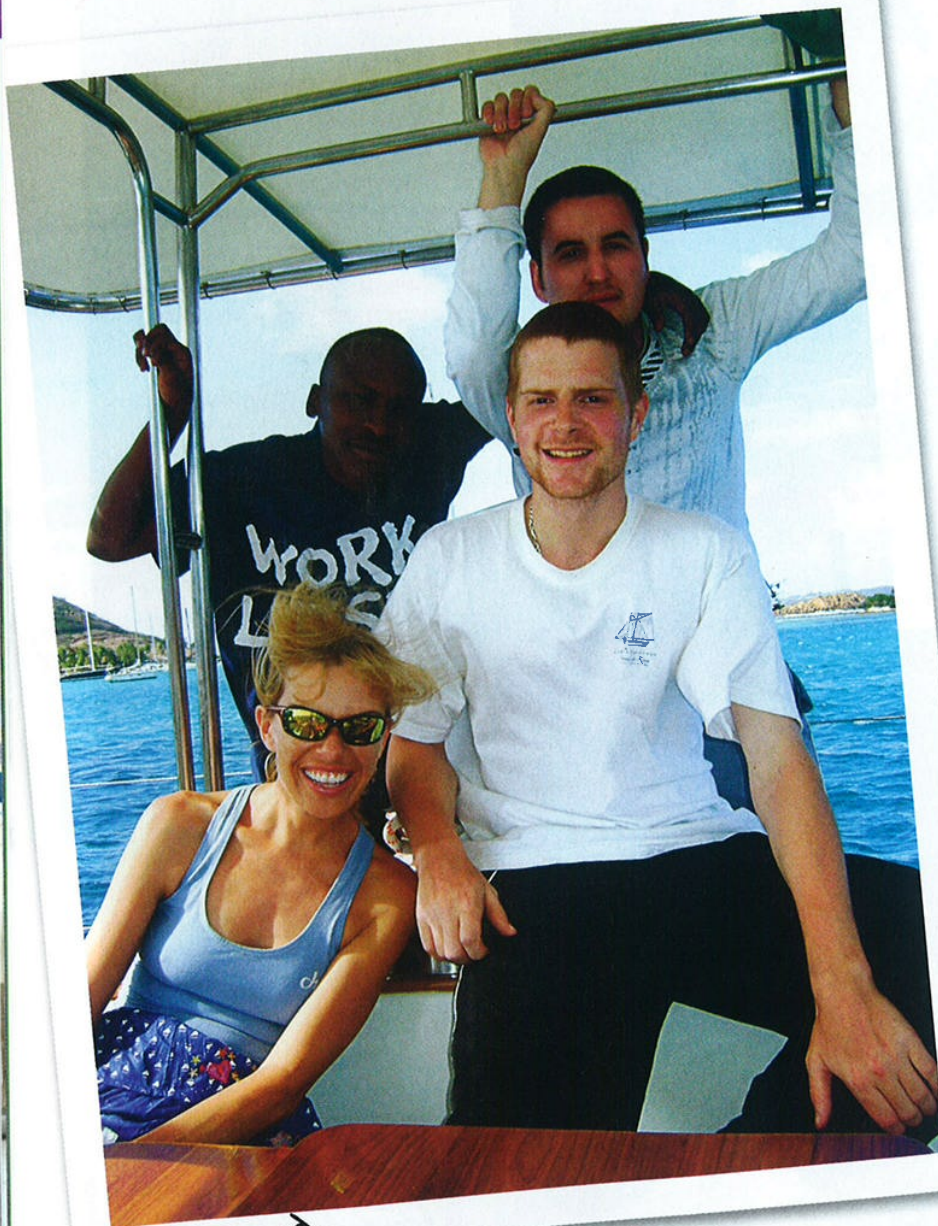
My friends and family thought I was mad to lead a trio of persistent criminals across the other side of the world for three weeks. Yet I felt passionately about showing these men, barely out of their teens, that there was more to life than crime. Surely it was possible to turn their lives around?

My life couldn't have been more different from theirs. I grew up in a loving, stable home in Hong Kong and later London with my parents, had a good education and then went to Cambridge to study for my history degree. I had every opportunity in life, but after hearing about the work of ChildLine as a teenager, I'd become inspired to help other children.

I volunteered with a variety of children's charities, helping with fundraising and talking to kids, but I was keen to do more to help the older teenagers whom society had turned their backs on. I wanted to get involved with young offenders and really make a difference to their lives. So, in 2003, as I was trying to kick-start my career in TV production, I became a volunteer mentor, working with young offenders in prisons such as Feltham, in London, and Aylesbury.

On my first visit, I was anxious about appearing nervous. But Feltham felt more like an unruly school than a prison and I didn't feel threatened, even when I passed a boy waving his private parts at me through the bars. I just laughed. I knew I couldn't let them think they'd upset me, and in fact most of the time the boys were very polite.

The time flew by and I loved every minute, although hearing about the horrific lives some



↖ The crew set sail:  
Sadie, Geoff, Sam & Chris

of these kids had led was soul-destroying. Tales of neglect, poverty and violence were all too common. I met 16-year-olds who had virtually brought themselves up because their parents were never around or were so high on drugs they didn't know or care where their children were. I saw bright kids who had slipped through the school system and ended up running with gangs, believing the most they could hope for was a life spent in and out of prison, or turning to violence.

What really shocked me was how smart and intuitive they were and how much they wanted to learn, despite having not bothered with school. A lot of the boys were inside because of peer pressure to join gangs. The gang leaders are usually the brightest and most powerful in prison, so if I experienced positive results with them, I knew that would trickle down to the rest of the gang.

These were the teenagers written off by the tabloid newspapers as evil yobs, but I felt there was still hope for them. Slowly, I saw a change in the kids I was helping. Many couldn't read or write, and as we worked together on their literacy and numeracy skills, I'd get to know their hopes, dreams and fears for the future. None wanted to be in prison, and they all longed to do something purposeful with their lives – they just didn't know how.

These kids made a real impact on me, and I was determined to take volunteering to the next level. I was a keen sailor and had spent many summers on the paradise island of Bequia in the Caribbean, where I'd made some good friends. What if I could take some young offenders out onto the open water, so they could experience the amazing sense of freedom and try a new way of living?

Using my savings and calling in favours from friends on the island, I could self-fund the project. I felt it would make an interesting fly-on-the wall film that could be shown to other volunteers and charities so they could learn from the results, good or bad.

I approached the Prince's Trust, who agreed it was a wonderful idea. They offered to find three young ex-offenders that I'd never worked with before. I'd be meeting them for the first time at the airport before we jetted off to the Caribbean. I knew it was a big risk, so I was quite nervous. From then on everything slotted into place very quickly, and in April 2008 Christopher Tahaney, Sam Todd and Geoffrey Ngana met me in the departures lounge of Gatwick.

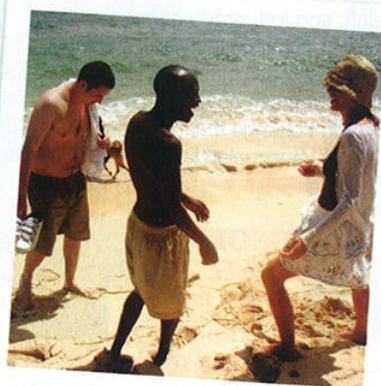
As I studied them, I could see these boys really needed this trip to work. They looked scared and confused, but each had resolved to really make a go of this. Christopher was a stocky Scot whose tough exterior concealed a soft side; Sam was tall and wiry



*Enjoying a beach party*



*Captain Sadie!*



*Relaxed island life*

and behaved as though he didn't care about anything; and Geoffrey appeared confident and gentlemanly.

On the plane I found out more. I learnt that Sam, 22, was slightly autistic, dyslexic and struggled at school. He got into trouble, smashing up classrooms because he was frustrated – with the school and with himself. He'd bunk off and go joyriding. He fell into heroin addiction after he saw his best friend get run over and die. But one day he decided to go cold turkey and just stopped using heroin. I've worked with a lot of addicts, so I had great respect for Sam for sorting himself out without help. It showed willpower and strength of character.

Christopher was from Glasgow and had been a member of the city's Valley gang. At 20, he was covered in scars, after being stabbed and attacked with a machete by a rival gang. He'd been in and out of prison for GBH, breaking and entering, and theft. If he returned to Glasgow, he'd have no choice but to get involved with gangs again; this was his opportunity to change.

Finally, there was Geoffrey, a 20-year-old from London whose story is heartbreaking. After his mother died when he was 11, he ran away and brought himself up. Unsurprisingly, he fell in with a bad crowd, ending up inside for assault, theft and possession with intent to supply drugs. But rather than being afraid in prison, he'd enjoyed it, saying it was like being a child again, as there was always someone watching over him. He even liked it when the guards handcuffed him, as it was the closest thing he'd had to affection in a long time. Now he was ready to find real affection, and he knew he had to turn his life

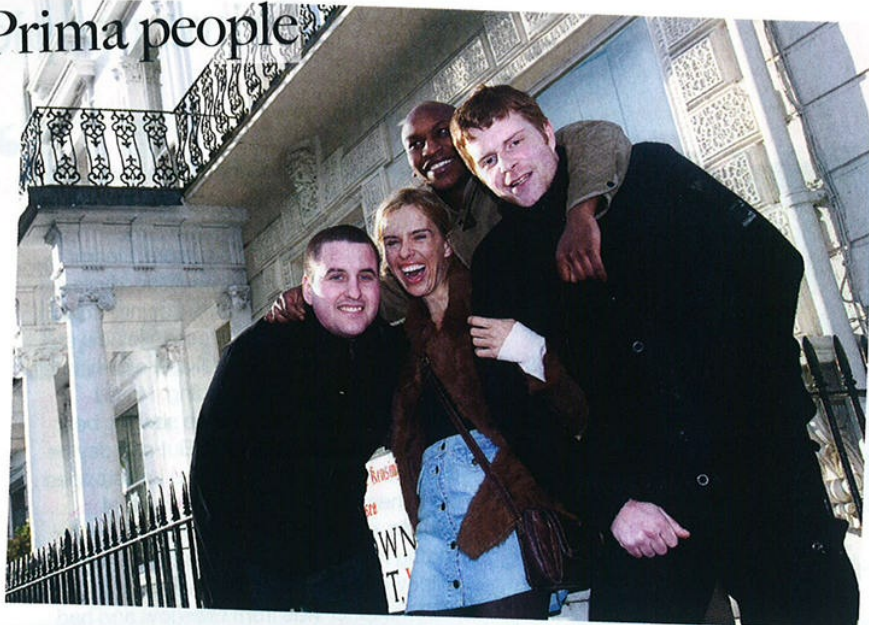
“ The boys looked scared. I could see they really needed this trip to work ”

around. I was so moved when he told me this and knew more than ever I wanted to show these boys another way in life.

That plane journey really bonded us. This was the furthest away from home any of them had been before, and I could see that beneath the bravado there was a hint of fear in their eyes. In Bequia, I'd arranged for us to stay with my old sailing buddy Brian. He's a man with a kind heart – something he proved when we arrived. I'd assumed he had a spare room for the lads to use, but when he told us he'd had to build their room out of wood, I was speechless at his generosity. It was clear other people wanted this trip to be successful as much as I did.

The boys began well, picking up sailing skills quickly, but we'd only been in Bequia

# Prima people



*Reunited in London this year*

a few days when I was told they'd spent the money I'd given them for food on marijuana. I was livid because I'd naively thought the boys respected me too much to break my trust. I read them the riot act, and as they hung their heads in shame I hoped that was the end of it.

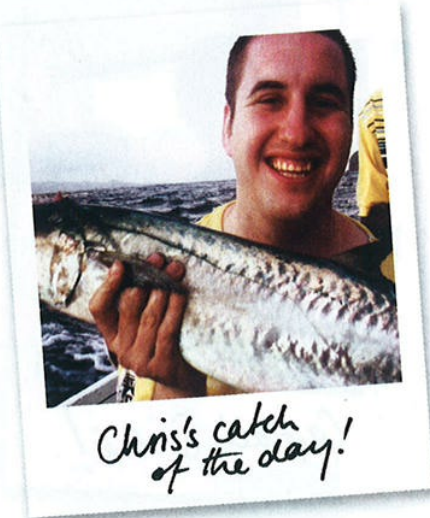
Over the next few days I was delighted to see a return to good behaviour. They loved taking it in turns to go fishing with me to catch dinner in all weathers, while the other two made a fire on the beach to cook the fish for our supper.

Five days later, we headed off on-board a three-bedroom, 62ft yacht bound for Venezuela. I got such pleasure from watching them all become competent sailors and started to think of the boys as friends. We'd gone out for drinks and meals together and had a laugh. We had things

**“ I was terrified. All I could do was hope we made it out in one piece ”**

in common, such as our taste in films and music, so it was a shock when Geoffrey was caught stealing the owner's gloves. I felt so stupid and questions raced through my mind. Had I been mad to embark on this scheme? Was I about to realise something my friends and family had tried to tell me over the years – that it's impossible to reform persistent offenders?

With a heavy heart, I spoke to Geoffrey. He didn't deny stealing the gloves, but apologised and returned them. Nervously shuffling from foot to foot, he said he didn't have an excuse – it was a case of old habits being hard to break. I took comfort from the fact that Sam and Chris seemed more disappointed in him than I was. I didn't want the incident to jeopardise the rest of the trip,



though, and fortunately after a couple of days we were able to put it behind us.

I had a surprise planned that I hoped would really show these boys what would happen if they didn't change their ways – a visit to the infamous Venezuelan jail El Rodeo, outside

Caracas, to meet some of its inmates. Known as the most dangerous prison in the world, its inmates live in overcrowded, filthy cells. The boys might have spent time in prison, but El Rodeo was nothing like Feltham. As we arrived, prisoners were waving guns around the exercise yard and the prison exterior was marked with bullet holes, giving us an idea of what was to be found inside.

I was terrified, but the boys were doing their best to show they weren't bothered. All I could do was hope we made it out in one piece. The prisoners shocked us all to the core. Inside a dingy room, we met a convict whose face was covered in scars – he could even take his eyeball out. He explained that inside El Rodeo it was the culture to show aggression. You might only be convicted of a misdemeanour, but you would become a violent criminal in weeks.

We also met a rapist and killer who had disliked his last cell mate so much that he'd decapitated him. As we left, I could see these meetings had taken a toll on the boys. Throughout the trip they'd acted tough, but I noticed Chris was actually shaking.

On the flight home the following day, it was clear the trip had made an impression. They continued to talk about change – but the big question was would they do it?

Wonderfully, they did. I'm delighted to say that they've all turned their lives around. Geoffrey is an actor with the National Youth Theatre, Sam got the sailing bug and is passing his new skills onto disabled children, and Chris has moved to London and has just finished training to be a photographer.

As for my film, it premiered in London last year, and the response was overwhelming. Best of all, I've become firm friends with the boys, and they've all signed up to help with my next project – building an orphanage in Mexico. I'm a firm believer in giving everyone a second chance, and I'm so pleased with how far the boys have come.'

● **Watch Sailing Miss Sadie on Sky 539, Virgin TV 233 and Freeview 87 on 1 May at 9pm. For more information on Sadie's projects, visit [www.sadie kaye.tv](http://www.sadie kaye.tv).**



**GEOFF SAYS:** 'It was a life-changing experience and really opened my eyes to what else is out there in the world.'



**CHRIS SAYS:** 'It was the best time of my life – I loved being on a boat. Now I'm learning Spanish and plan to travel more.'



**SAM SAYS:** 'The trip was exhilarating – it changed me and made me determined to stay out of trouble. I feel good about the future.'