

STREET SWEEPS SOAP AWARDS

CORONATION Street got a clean sweep in all the soap categories at the TV Choice Awards. The show, hosted by Simon Mayo, saw the winners accept their awards online in a virtual ceremony. Corrie beat Hollyoaks, Emmerdale and EastEnders to bag Best Soap. It also took Best Soap Actor and Best Soap Actress for Jack P Shepherd as David Platt and Shelly King as Yasmeen Nazir. Ant and Dec also had a clean sweep, taking home Best Entertainment Show with their Saturday Night Takeaway and Best Reality Show for I'm A Celebrity Get Me Out Of Here. ITV's soon-to-end Doc



Winner . . . Shelly

Martin saw Martin Clunes win the title of Best Actor. The channel also took home awards for Best Daytime Show for This Morning, Best Factual Show for Bradley Walsh & Son: Breaking Dad, and Best Food Show for the second year with Gordon, Gino & Fred: American Road Trip. Jodie Comer won Best Actress for the second time. The BBC's Peaky Blinders won Best Drama Series, and Best Family Drama was Call The Midwife. Streaming giant Netflix won Best Comedy Show with Ricky Gervais's Afterlife.

Spidey's trumped

A YOUTUBER was caught trying to scale one of Donald Trump's hotels dressed as Spider-Man. The joker, known as Dope John Paul, claimed the US President was working with comic book villain Norman Osborn. In his online video, he said: "Once I make it to the top I can deal with Norman Osborn and Donald Trump myself." But cops grabbed him in Washington DC before he made it off the ground. **BRUM THE BUILDER** Brummies are most likely to shun DIY and hire a tradesman, analysis of web searches revealed.

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TOON IS 'DRUG CAPITAL' BUT CITY IS FIGHTING BACK



By **ANTONY LOEWENSTEIN**

LIVING in a rundown council block next to deserted shops, with a stench of human waste in the air, mum Despina somehow survives.

Here, in a deprived suburb of Newcastle, she lives with her daughter Natalie, a heroin user whom she recently found lying bloodied and with puncture marks on her neck.

Despina and Natalie – who has been using the drug for years – are among the forgotten people of a city where some areas are now plagued with drugs, gun-toting gangs and a lost generation of kids.

The home of reality TV show *Geordie Shore* and football's *Toon Army*, Newcastle is vibrant and beautiful, with stunning architecture, a bustling city centre and iconic industrial heritage.

As its official website proudly declares: "Newcastle is a great city, one that never stands still. A place of bright sparks and big ideas... of justice, fairness and deeply held values."

It was named one of the best places to live and work in 2018 for its green spaces, cultural services, healthcare and jobs. Its citizens are known far and wide as some of the most friendly, good-humoured Brits.

But the city also has a dark side. The North East is England and Wales' drugs-death capital, with the highest fatality rates. From 2007 to 2017 the count spiked by 90 per cent.

Now the situation is worse than ever – there were 903 deaths from 2016 to 2018, up 30 per cent on the three previous years, says the Office for National Statistics.

The culprits are cocaine, heroin, crack and spice – the synthetic cannabinoid reportedly turning users into "zombies".

'How I didn't kill myself I'll never, ever know'

Children as young as **NINE** have reportedly been taking drugs and "terrorising" locals in Newcastle's West Denton area. Some heroin-addicted women have turned to sex work to fund their habit and are often too desperate to say no when clients demand to not use protection.

One mum, Donna, who is not a sex worker, told me of her drug-taking: "The most I ever did in one session was £60 of heroin. How I never killed myself I'll never, ever know."

There have been major drugs busts – in July, local police found 100kg of illegal drugs, including coke and MDMA, as part of a UK-wide purge of organised crime.

Yet little changes on the ground for the likes of Despina and Natalie. *I visited Newcastle while investigating globally for my latest book, Pills, Powder And Smoke: Inside The Bloody War On Drugs.*

What I saw is that industry has largely died, while a decade of cuts to services has hit support for the vulnerable. Locals were friendly but many had little reason for cheer – jobless and struggling. Drug use was a way to escape monotony.

I met Despina at a council high-rise on the edge of town. As I rode the lift to the third floor, where she lived, I saw urine puddles in the corners. Back at ground level there had been barely any open shops. A restaurant had only empty tables.

Despina told a sad story of her beloved child Natalie, now 38, becoming a stranger to her over the years, consumed by drugs. The Greek mum had fallen into despair. At various times during our chat she broke down.

At another council estate, mum Donna had been forced because of her drug misuse to hand over her own child to social services.

Donna had spent all her life on the same estate. Aged 31, she had seen enough horror to last ten lives. She said: "I stabbed a man in the face under the influence of alcohol, Valium

and (psychoactive drug) benzos." He survived and, soon after her release from prison in 2014, Donna fell pregnant. But she had started using drugs at a young age after suffering a sexual assault on the estate. Heroin was her way to soften the trauma.

Though she stayed off drugs for most of her pregnancy – the "best time" of her life – she ended up taking Valium at eight months. She said: "I started getting in with the wrong crowd. This other girl was six months' pregnant and taking heroin, and I ended up taking some Valium again, and benzos."

I visited Donna with counsellors. They had wanted her to be given temporary housing away from the estate – for a change, which could help. But it never came. What they told me – and I felt during my time with friendly but distracted Donna –

903

drug deaths in the North East from 2016-2018, up 30%

9 yrs

Kids as young as nine take drugs on the streets

100kg

haul of MDMA and coke seized by North East cops in July

GEORDIE SCORE



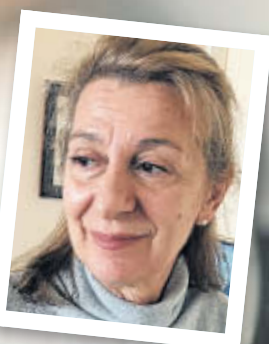
LIVELY . . . Newcastle is known for its vibrant city centre shopping area



GLITZY . . . girls glam up for a night at the Bigg Market, away from drug-hit areas of the city

‘It's the area I live in, I know all the families. It breaks my heart’

— YOUTH WORKER MARK TUNNEY



DESPERATE . . . Despina, whose daughter turned to drugs

was that she did not matter to the authorities. In their eyes, she was just another drug-addicted woman who did not deserve a chance.

I also talked to female sex workers whose lack of money and heroin additions forced them to perform unsafe sex with men.

The women, whom I met in a pub near Newcastle with the help of Durham Police, put on brave faces but it was clear they disliked their all-consuming addictions.

So who is behind Newcastle's drug trade? Gangs are increasingly taking over – and also running "county line" operations using kids to ferry drugs to rural areas.

Mark Tunney, co-founder of the Jigsaw Recovery Project, helping young people transition out of foster care, told me locals were now scared of the gangs. He said

youths with guns worked for local crime families, adding: "It does my f***ing head in. It's the area I live in, I know all the families, I used to sell drugs to their families. Now it's the kids. It breaks my heart."

Mark, who grew up in a poor part of town, now works for the local drug and alcohol service and plans to open a rehab centre.

'Covid has made support services work together'

He recently told me how during the pandemic the drug use in Newcastle has only increased, with many clients reporting spikes in cocaine and spice.

But he said local drug services had "stepped up and were providing a good interim service". He added: "Covid has made

services work together." While Newcastle was once a major industrial centre, today the North East has the UK's highest unemployment rate – 6.2 per cent at the end of November last year.

To me, it felt like a region that in some places was falling apart – and Covid has landed a further blow, with many businesses unable to adapt.

Newcastle Council insist they are doing "everything we can". Their Drug And Alcohol Delivery Plan aims to reduce inequalities and harm caused by drink and drugs.

It is increasing access to recovery communities, monitoring substance-related offending and supporting children with addicted parents.

Cllr John-Paul Stephenson added: "Disrupting criminal activity is key to improving lives trapped in the

cycle of addiction and Northumbria Police has been significant in helping many on the first step to recovery. If you or someone you know needs help, look at the services on the council's website."

But what does the future hold? A report by the Institute of Chartered Accountants for England and Wales, and Oxford Economics, says the North East faces challenges moving away from "high dependency on both manufacturing and the public sector".

This could see even more drug deaths, gang violence and women turning to dangerous sex work.

But the picture is not entirely bleak. Police in County Durham have slashed reoffending rates by not prosecuting people for low-level drug possession, and instead offering rehabilitation. People such

as Mark – whose past 15 years have been drug-free – are working tirelessly to provide vital support for those who are struggling.

Still, the war on drugs has failed. Drugs continue to destroy lives across the globe, with users now able to buy lethal substances including dubious "ethically sourced" cocaine, dubbed "woke coke", in seconds via the dark web.

As I argue in my book, it is time for a radical rethink. Is it time to consider legalising and regulating all drugs?

As things stand, many more will suffer and, as Despina, Natalie and Donna know, the consequences can be life-changing – or life-ending.

●Antony Loewenstein is an independent journalist, film-maker and author of *Pills, Powder And Smoke: Inside The Bloody War On Drugs*.