

By Deborah Colcutt

KATE Silverton is sitting in a prison cell, opposite a young man who, if the knife he had thrust into his victim had penetrated a few inches higher, would now be a convicted murderer facing decades inside.

Instead Rhys considers himself to be “lucky” that the man survived and that instead he is nearly halfway through a two-year stretch.

It is an incongruous sight seeing the journalist viewers know from presenting the BBC news and waltzing around the Strictly Come Dancing floor inside a former borstal, Scotland’s largest, surrounded by some of the country’s most dangerous young offenders.

She has travelled north of the border to report on the multi-agency approach Scotland is taking to drive down violent crime for Panorama, which airs tonight.

Police, social services, youth services, probation officers, the NHS and voluntary organisations all work together to get young people back on track. And it is working.

It is a far cry from the sequins and sashaying of Strictly although Silverton is quick to dispel any notion that she needed to re-establish her hard news credentials post dance-off.

“No, no. I am always driven by where I am at that moment,” says Silverton, 49. “My reason for doing Strictly was actually more to do with raising awareness of children’s mental health which is where I am qualified now and that’s going to be my life’s work.”

Although Silverton doesn’t like to dwell on it in detail, she has retrained as a child psychotherapist. By the end of the year she will be qualified as a counsellor to work in schools, and then she plans to study for a post-graduate diploma in psychotherapy. Although she is keen to stress that she is not giving up her BBC career.

“Far from it, I loved doing Panorama and I hope to do more of the same, but my children are my first focus,” she says. “If I can combine journalism and projects that interest me personally then I will.”

Watching Silverton in the documentary dancing with children at a primary school in Glasgow, flashing her trademark megawatt smile, it is obvious she feels a real calling to help, particularly at the moment, given what she sees as the negative impact of lockdown on the young.

SHE studied psychology at Durham University before going into broadcasting, and began training as a child psychotherapist in 2018. During lockdown, she says that she didn’t manage more than two hours a day of lessons while Clemency, 8, and Wilbur, five, were home with former Royal Marine husband Mike Heron, who runs a security firm.

“Lockdown has been busy. Home-schooling, as any parent with children under ten will tell you, has been all consuming. I wrote an article recently to say home working and homeschooling really have not worked,” she says.

“But my husband and I have also had more time to spend quality time with the kids, he has not travelled at all (his business involves international travel) which has meant we have done things like camp out under the stars on hot nights in our garden and watch the kids climb trees in the park and picnic together.

“We have tried to make as many good memories of this period for them as we can despite the obvious challenges and difficulties that we know lie ahead.

“These are the things our children will remember of this period. The quality time,

BBC NEWSREADER ON A MISSION TO CUT KNIFE CRIME

Callum spent his 16th, 18th and 21st birthday in prison; there was a ‘lethal absence of hope’ in his life



NEW START: Rhys tells Kate Silverton about his future on tonight’s Panorama film

As she visits young offenders for a hard-hitting documentary, Strictly star says children’s mental health is now her ‘life’s work’

without phones, without being hurried, just ‘being’ and laughing.”

It was as part of Silverton’s psychotherapy training that she went to Scotland in the first place.

“It started two years ago when I attended a conference in a personal capacity, well journalistically really. It was a compelling conference learning how a multi-agency approach is reducing violent crime.”

It spurred Silverton on to make the

Panorama documentary which explores whether the rest of the UK could learn from Scotland’s successful methods of dealing with violent repeat offenders.

“It’s about tackling violent crime as a public health issue,” says Silverton. “It’s about having a joined up approach and that’s why it took so long to make the documentary because I had to get access, to go into hospitals, into prisons and watch the police operate.”

In the documentary, so-called Navigators like Tam Begbie, who is ex-forces and served in Afghanistan, go into hospital Accident and Emergency departments and talk to victims and perpetrators of violent crime.

Wearing one of the Navigators’ distinctive pink T-shirts, the former Black Watch soldier attempts to steer patients away from a life of drugs and violence by chatting to them and putting them in touch with agencies who can help. The Scottish Government has pledged



MOTHERHOOD: right, Silverton with husband, Mike Heron, and children, Clemency, 8, and Wilbur, five; below, on *Strictly Come Dancing* with dance partner, Aljaž Skorjanec



£70,000 to expand the flagship project, which started at Glasgow Royal Infirmary and has turned around the lives of many young men such as Callum, who now visits Polmont Young Offenders Institution just outside Edinburgh, where Rhys is serving his sentence.

"I heard Callum speak to young offenders," says Silverton. "He spent his 16th, 18th, and 21st birthdays in prison and he told me that there was a lethal absence of hope in his life.

"That was, until walking home one night, he was stabbed nine times. He said that night a guy in a pink T-shirt kneeled down beside his hospital bed and he said, 'How you doing, mate?'"

"Callum said that question changed his life. You could have heard a pin drop in the room.

"As a mother and a journalist, to see young people like Callum in the documentary talk about his traumatic childhood and how he was drinking alcoholically at 12 years old to, as he put it "numb the pain" of what he was experiencing at

home, was really shocking."

Silverton is also aware of the importance of getting children in the most deprived areas on the right track early on so that they don't get sucked into gangs and crime.

"As a mother to two young children, and living in London, I am horrified when we see the deaths and injuries from knife crime and so from both

'If we don't give these kids something on the other side they'll get released and be straight back in'



RIGHT TRACK: Tam helps young offenders

perspectives I understand what Scotland is doing in that regard," says Silverton. "They told me that hurt people hurt others and you can't punish people into good behaviour."

What of the criticism that these approaches amount to soft justice for hardened criminals?

"That was the question I was asking again and again and I was told that many people have had traumatic experiences they've overcome but there would always have been a significant other who was there for that person as a child and that is where collectively, in society, it's all our responsibility to help," she says.

"Rhys told me he was brought up in care, his mother is in prison – she visited him at Polmont from her prison – that puts it into context. He hasn't had anyone

who supported him.

"If we don't give these kids something on the other side they will be released, they'll go through the gates but they will come straight back in.

"This period has been incredibly tough for so many people. I finished filming the Panorama before lockdown and have remained in touch with prison officers at Polmont since to hear how the young men I had interviewed are doing.

"Lockdowns in cells of 23 hours have not been uncommon and I know from other families living in way more challenging circumstances than my own that the pressures have been immense."

Silverton who trained with the BBC, working on Look North, clearly misses being out on the road.

"I do!" she says, "I started out in the north east, they were the best days and I earned my stripes as a young reporter and they are the most cherished memories for me.

"It's why I got into journalism because I am curious no matter where I am, in Afghanistan or wherever, I always wanted to be on the ground reporting. But as a mum, I have had quite a lot of time out with children coming late for me as they did.

"All credit to Panorama, post *Strictly* I went to the conference in Scotland and it piqued my journalistic curiosity. It was good old fashioned journalism."

● *BBC Panorama: How Scotland Cut Violent Crime*, BBC One, Monday 13th July, 19:30.