Getting the learning bug is the key to recovery

Two years ago, Wesley Brown was at rock bottom. Living on the streets, he resorted to begging to get the cash for his next fix. He was a drug abuser of the serious kind. Heroin and crack cocaine were among the substances to which he was addicted. “You name it, I took it,” he says.

Today, his outlook could hardly be more different. He has been offered a place at the University of Portsmouth to study psychology, which he has deferred while he volunteers as a drugs support worker.

And he has been clean for more than a year. “I have been completely abstinent from everything. I don’t even drink or smoke cigarettes, which is astonishing for me,” he says.

His transformation came about after he embarked on a learning journey with Highbury College in Portsmouth, Hampshire, which is working in partnership with the rehabilitation centre treating his addiction.

“Education played a massive part in my recovery,” Wesley says. “It has given me a feeling of self-worth. I got seriously involved in drugs when I was 19 and my life went skew-whiff for about eight years, but now I have the learning bug.

“I have passed my European Computer Driving Licence and am studying a web design course at level 3 [A-level equivalent]. I am also looking to do a course in health and social care. It has been a huge boost to my self-confidence to complete something.”

The 29-year-old is one of dozens of drug addicts the college has helped in their journey to recovery since being invited to run education programmes by the Alcohol and Narcotics Addiction (ANA) treatment centres two years ago.

Ric Burch, a community outreach instructor employed by the college, teaches...
information technology and photography at ANA. “This group is by far the most challenging I teach,” he says, “but the satisfaction is incredible when you get it right.

“There are times when I think, I can’t do this any more, but there are other occasions when I feel elated because of the progress the group has made.”

ANA was founded by Libby and Christopher Reid in 1998 and offers a range of abstinence-based treatment programmes for addiction. It aims to help its clients rebuild their lives and “to really believe that they can live a healthy, responsible and productive life, free of addictive substances”.

Teresa Cole, acting head of the community college at Highbury, says, “We work closely with ANA’s two treatment centres for drug and alcohol abusers, where the majority of clients have just come out of prison.

“They first attend a treatment centre in the north of the city where they do a really intensive 12-week programme. It is residential and they are not allowed to leave the centre. It is a very tough regime.

“We go in to do training there and it has been a huge success. There are several reports saying we have made a huge difference. Here we teach them IT skills where they do digital photography and creative things on the computer.

“Those that come through the programme move on to a second treatment centre in the south of the city, where the regime is less tough and they are allowed to leave. We put on personal money management courses and others designed to get them ready for employment. They learn job search skills and how to write a CV.

“Wesley was one who continued studying with the college when he finished his time at the second treatment centre. He has done a lot of courses and has just gone from strength to strength.”

Wesley is now a vice-chairman of Push, which supports people who have left treatment and are in recovery. After completing his degree, he plans to become a social worker, so that he can help others. “I am gaining work experience now and when I have my university qualification, it will be a good road to go down,” he says.

Paul Baker, who manages one of the ANA centres, says there are many examples of clients going through the programme and on to college or university courses. “Lots have gone into social work training,” he says.

“This is a very difficult client group and it is important that we have a low expectation of what the tutors can achieve, but in my experience they have all been excellent. It is important that they enjoy what they do and can be very flexible in how they deliver.

“We are there to try to help people come to accept that addiction is a disease that is not curable, but can be kept in remission through certain disciplines. It doesn’t work for everyone.”

Romeo John, 45, says he spent most of his life in and out prison as a result of his drug addiction until he completed the ANA programme three years ago. “I was expelled from school and went to prison 15 times,” he says.

“This group is by far the most challenging I teach, but the satisfaction is incredible when you get it right. There are times when I think, I can’t do this any more, but there are other occasions when I feel elated because of the progress the group has made.”

Ric Burch, community outreach instructor, Highbury College
CASE STUDY

Community engagement

“Now I have qualifications in sports fitness and counselling skills and I am studying for a level 3 qualification in health and social care. I take life one day at a time, but I am hopeful that I will never go back to the way I was.”

The partnership with ANA is just one of many social inclusion projects in which Highbury College is involved. It has also teamed up with Portsmouth Football Club on a number of community projects.

It runs a family learning project at the club’s Pompey Study Centre, based at its Fratton Park stadium, where parents and children learn together. The project attracts the unemployed, low income families and single parents.

Teresa Cole explains. “Some of the adults have never used a computer before, but we organise fun activities such as producing a match day programme. They interview players, write the features and produce the programme, using desktop publishing skills.

“We have 100 per cent attendance and we reward them with match day tickets. We also sponsored coaches to four away matches this season.

“For many of the parents, it is the only way they can manage to take their children to a football match because of the cost.

“Some of those adults have gone on to do other courses with us. We are always looking at new ways to attract hard-to-reach learners. The football club is such a central part of the community. They do some fantastic work and we have got involved with their projects.”

The college is also involved with the football club in a ‘Knot Violence’ project, a six-week violence prevention programme that culminates in young people painting replica knotted gun statues.

Launched by Portsmouth and England goalkeeper David James, it begins by undertaking an assessment of attitudes towards violence and gun or knife crime and then focusing on an awareness of alternatives to violence.

It also offers practical guidance to young people by signposting them towards a range of creative and vocational courses being offered by Highbury College.

“Our community learning programmes are innovative, flexible and accessible, and can be adapted to respond to the needs of individuals so that every member of the community has an equal opportunity to learn, to develop their skills, progress to work or further study.

“Highbury College Portsmouth, like all 157 Group colleges, promotes social justice and community cohesion as part of the wider mission of further education and as an inextricable part of our community leadership role.”

Stella Mbubaegbu, the college’s principal, says, “Our values base drives our passionate commitment to educational and social inclusion for all. This permeates our work and reflects our ambition for the diverse communities we serve. We have forged strong and enduring partnerships with a range of organisations to ensure that the educational needs of all sections of our local community are met.

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Stella Mbubaegbu CBE, principal, Highbury College
As a membership organisation, the 157 Group brings together large, successful, high-quality, innovative further education colleges and the individuals that lead them, providing a powerful voice for the FE and skills sector and related policy.

The group was established in March 2006 in response to Sir Andrew Foster’s review* on the future of FE colleges and named after paragraph 157 of the report, which advocated that principals of large successful colleges should play a stronger role in the sector:

“... a greater involvement of principals in national representation, in particular those from larger, successful colleges where management capacity and capability exists to release them for this work. There is a strong need for articulate FE college principals to be explaining the services they give to society and how colleges can make a significant contribution to the economy and to developing fulfilled citizens.”

The 157 Group has established itself as an influential and challenging force that offers a thoughtful and creative voice for large, complex, successful and high quality colleges that have received a range of external validation and acknowledgments.

157 Group members are committed to using their expertise to influence policy formation and the future of further education; developing innovative and effective programmes; enhancing the reputation of further education; continually improving their own standards; and contributing to the development and improvement of the sector as a whole.

Member colleges usually have an annual turnover of at least £35 million and the largest has a budget of £175 million. They take seriously their college and sector-wide leadership roles and the importance of raising the sector’s reputation. Between them, they turn over nearly £1 billion a year and deliver provision for half a million students. Member colleges work closely together, sharing ideas, resources and effective practice to meet employer and government priorities in the most effective way possible.

As well as working proactively with partners in the government, local communities and the sector to influence policy formulation and futures thinking, the 157 Group takes practical steps to implement policy in order to achieve and sustain excellence for learners and employers.

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