

DAY 1 for Donna

Local charity DAY 1 have just bid farewell to yet another group of successful graduates from their year long mentoring programme. DAY1 is a Highland based charity established two years ago to provide one-to-one mentoring between ordinary people in the community and young people who are at risk of dropping out of school with no qualifications, no training or no employment prospects. The mentoring relationship lasts one year, at the end of which the young person will have some clear personal direction, increased self esteem and confidence, and will be either in, or working towards full time employment. They aim to support around 25 young people each year.

Donna Dunn was one of these young people. A year ago, she was facing a fairly bleak future. In her own words - her life wasn't going anywhere. She had confidence issues, a negative self-image and a bit of an attitude problem. Being home with the family was difficult with a lot of arguments and tension. Rather than be there, she was often out late, getting drunk with her friends. Her boyfriend was unreliable and controlling, and yet she all she could think about was moving in with him and having his baby. She was looking at a future in which she knew, at heart, she would be unemployed, unemployable, stuck, unhappy and lost. She was just fifteen.

Now 16, Donna has just started work as a child-care worker at the Ankerville Nursery in Ainess. Not only is she in full-time employment in a job that she loves, she also has the opportunity to study for the vocational qualifications required to secure her future career. Home is sharing a flat with a good friend; a new, caring boyfriend is now on the scene and she is on much better terms with her family. Donna is positively brimming with warmth, energy and excitement. Just how did she manage to turn her life around so quickly and so dramatically?



'Through DAY 1 and with the help of Heather, my Mentor,' she says. 'I couldn't have done it without them. I got on the DAY 1 mentoring programme through my school – I was nominated by my teachers because they believed I had the potential and needed some help to get started. At first I thought it was silly, for stupid people and I didn't want to know. But over time, I realised I'd got it wrong and what it could mean for me. It has completely changed my life.'

Donna and Heather, her Day1 Mentor.

Her Mentor, chosen from a group of candidates already recruited and trained by the charity, was Heather Hatch, a Finance Manager in her fifties based in Inverness. Initially Heather had her doubts about being a Mentor. 'I didn't really believe I had anything to offer – I worried that I was so out of touch with what is 'in' for young people these days that I couldn't relate to them, but I decided to give it a go. Though Donna and I had a bit of a bumpy ride for the first few weeks, it soon changed the more we got to know each other and developed some trust. It also helped that I was so well supported and trained by such a professional team. It's one of the best decisions I made - I am so proud of Donna.'

And she has every reason to be proud. Almost halfway through the mentoring year, just as progress was beginning to be made, things became very difficult at home and Donna had to move out for a while. Ordinarily this would have been a hugely disruptive experience for anyone so young – but Heather was on hand with calm and grounding support for Donna to help her through these difficult weeks.

'Through Heather and DAY 1, I found a work experience placement as a childcare worker at the Anker-ville Nursery,' Donna told me. 'I always loved children and wanted my own. But Heather helped me realise that instead of rushing in to having a family so young, I could work with them as a career. Unfortunately, just as I started, we had to move into the refuge. It was miles away from the nursery, it wasn't easy to get public transport there and I don't drive. But Heather kept me on track, encouraging me not to give up, to stick at it – and I did. I made sure that I got to work.'

According to Carol MacRae, owner of Ankerville and two other nurseries in Tain, 'When I first met Donna, I could see she had something and so I decided to give her a chance. I wasn't disappointed; she applied herself fully and worked very hard. When a full-time vacancy came up I suggested she apply for it. She did, and came through the interview with flying colours. Donna has a lot of potential, she is great with the children, they adore her – I think she is absolutely fabulous.'



Donna with Carol, her new employer.

It can't have been easy for Heather or Donna at times. What was the turning point? Donna says, 'I can remember it well. It was early on in our relationship and we were due on a DAY 1 outdoor weekend, which are great fun. However, I had been out drinking as usual and was feeling very rough. I was a pain for Heather and I knew it. But she wouldn't budge. She insisted we go on the weekend, got me sorted out, and I began to realise - if she thinks I'm worth all this effort, perhaps I need to get a grip and take this more seriously. It was very hard breaking up with my then boyfriend; I was scared to be on my own. I even gave up smoking because I wanted the job so badly I didn't want anything to get in the way of my securing it.'

'But I'm so glad I did. I now have a way forward, plans and hopes that I have a chance of realising. I want my own nursery in the future and to run a business like Carols. I also can't wait until I have a few more years under my belt so I can be a Mentor to other young people like me.'



As for Donna and Heathers relationship, they remain very good friends, even after the mentoring programme has finished. Heather is out in Canada now, having only recently emigrated there with her husband. A big wrench for them both, but they keep in touch. 'Mentoring Donna changed my life too, not just hers. It has been a deeply rewarding experience and I am so proud to have played a part in her life.'

Donna receiving her Certificate of Achievement at the Day1 graduation.

Donna feels likewise, considering Heather to be one of her 'best' friends in the world. She plans to visit Heather in Canada next year. Donna wanted to tell her story hoping that it will help other people in a similar situation. What advice does she have for them, or for someone who is just about to start their DAY 1 programme and is worried and anxious about it? 'Don't give up. There is support out there, people want to help – let them.'

Day 1 exists with the support of Laidlaw Youth Trust, The Robertson Foundation, The Big Lottery Fund and The Lloyds TSB Foundation. To find out more about DAY1 visit their website at www.day1.uk.com. Or you can call any one of the team on 0845 367 0651. Whether you would like to become a Mentor, be a work experience provider or offer funding, they would be happy to have an initial informal chat. You can make a difference.

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