

This story was filmed and recorded during early February 2006 for 'Hear all about it!'

This campaign is a wonderful selection of inspiring adult learning stories told by the learners themselves. The highlights from Neil's interview can be watched and read; this is the transcript of the whole interview. The on-line learning champions would be delighted if his stories were used to promote learning in your organisation, college or charity. You can link your webpage to the West Midlands Learning Directory – Hear all about it! page

www.wmld.org/pages/hear_all_about_it/



Neil's story -

Currently I'm waiting to go into the voluntary sector, one in the Lighthouse project in relation to mentoring, and next week I have an interview to work for the CAB in Birmingham (Citizens Advice Bureau). I left school with 6 o-levels, maths, English etc. Then went immediately into local authority work for Birmingham City Council. Whilst at Birmingham City Council I studied for the usual national certificates, association of accounting technicians and generally moved through the ranks within Birmingham City Council, this was all in the finance side of things. In 1989 I moved to Warwickshire County Council, again as a financial services manager this time, in 1993 I completed a degree in Government at the University of Central England. That's basically my education summed up. From there, effectively speaking I had a nose dive in my career two or three years ago where I was convicted of misappropriation of funds and duly dismissed and sent for a custodial sentence which I went through in January to April two years ago then I spent four months on licence after that. From there I left, I had no employment at the time and went to A for E which is a computer hardware and software training course. I stayed there for about 8 months, learning the ins and out of software operating systems. I would have to say that that part of learning was not so much the qualification part that was important, it was getting back in to an environment with dealing with people, being with people and the job search element of that to try and get me into employment. That finished around June this year and I've tried unsuccessfully to get employment. I had a couple of jobs offered but they were either commission-based selling or working as a deputy in a grocery shop which didn't really suit my way of thinking really. September this year I changed tack and decided to move into the voluntary sector, and that's now just coming to fruition. I'm taking on two projects in the volunteer sector, mentoring for the Lighthouse project, advising at the citizen's advice bureau. That will include various qualifications that I hope to take, NVQ levels 2-5, I do want to get to level 5, in some sort of environment within the mentoring and counselling service. And also I do wish to do, and will undertake, a sign language course for the deaf, that's where I'm going now.

I've always wanted to work with people. As a finance manager I tended to work with managers and a little bit of public service. I've always wanted a hands on, helping, public service role. Never really got the opportunity, while you're taking pay-cheques home you don't tend to change career, especially into a service which probably doesn't pay quite as much as what I was being paid before. Now my situation has completely changed I can now do pretty much what I want, and I've now got the opportunity to do what I've always wanted to do and that's help people. The Lighthouse project and the CAB are

different projects but both have the same customer focus and bring out the same sort of help to people who have been through similar things to what I have and possibly may be worse off than I am, I mean I'm not the worst off person in the world. I've had my ups and downs but generally speaking, it will improve people's lives and to show them that if I can do it, then other people can do it. And to say that from your experience it's a case of moving on, changing your tack and achieving more again.

The A for E set-up came from the probation side of things, I didn't get a great massive amount of help as my background situation etc. didn't qualify me for certain aspects of it but at least they found the A for E as a potential way for me to get back into education. I went to the usual ones where you've got the fork lift driving courses and stuff, but A for E was more complex than those and offered more of an academic qualification-based set-up which is probably more what I'm into, I'm not very hands-on with things. It gave me an opportunity to go back into learning, go back into studying cause I'd always enjoyed studying. Really it was a vehicle to bring that to fruition. Where I was going from there I didn't know at the time and I would have to say that things changed as I was on the course. I was never going to become a qualified helpdesk person; I'm better at using a computer than seeing the insides of one. But it did provide the focus for me to move on and to start re-thinking about what I wanted to do in the future. In the past you've lost everything, you've got nothing to look forward to, I had no scope and focus, going in A for E gave me that focus, gave me something to latch onto and gave me the energy to start thinking "well, what do I really want to do?" Once the job situation became difficult to get, quite rightly too, I had to think what other ways of getting into employment were there? These opportunities have arose and it looks like they're going to go to full fruition now.

The Lighthouse Project focuses on Andrews's estate, which is a deprived estate, one of the most deprived estates in Great Britain. The Lighthouse Project is a charitable organisation set up by a woman who had a vision of what help was needed for that community, which wasn't being provided, like Mums meeting in playgrounds etc. She changed the emphasis of the project to start helping people, on an estate who, effectively speaking, didn't probably trust the established people to speak to, were wary about the law and everything. It was her focus in trying to make people discuss thing and help. Through that and through the college there was a vast number of courses that are now undertaken and the main objective is, 1 to be a friend to people; 2 to be non-judgemental, but 3 to see if you can get people to change. People who don't think necessarily that they can change to say, "Well you can, and you've got a chance to change". The Lighthouse Project is effectively that. The mentoring side is, well, we don't always have somebody around when we need them, the mentoring side is to say, "Whatever you're doing, we'll support, whatever you're trying, we'll support, you can do it and we want you to do it. It will change your own life by changing yourself." In terms of the sign language course which I'm hoping to take through the Lighthouse project, the history is, my mother went deaf and I've always intended over the years to take up a sign language course as a reaction in some ways to that, but there must be people out there who have got problems just because they can't

communicate. It's another language and it's something I've always wanted to do.

I've got to admit that I'm more excited today than I have been for a long, long time, and that includes my working life. I was not happy at work, I was disgruntled at work, you know what a dog eat dog world it can be. Now I've got an opportunity to do what I want, to give my skills to other people and to do it in an environment that is there to care about people. That's a unique opportunity, not many people get to do the jobs they want to do. I know it's voluntary; that does not matter, as long as I can pay the bills, I do not care. The fact that I can give help to people and give some of my experiences in that environment is just what I want and I feel very excited, more excited than I've been for years. And the two years previous which have been very dark and the year before that when it all started to come to light, the light has come at the end of the tunnel now. There were times before where it was so dark at both ends that you never thought you'd survive and it is proof positive that it can happen. I think if I can do it other people can do it, and I mean that.

In terms of family, my family were a rock when my situation arose, especially my wife and my children, and I think they had the hardest job while I was away. They had to live in the real world with all the problems that was. I had to just put up with being locked away for four months. They're the rocks, not me. The first thing they say, my friends, they take the Mickey out of me. There's no problem with that. I've never hid it from my friends. The one thing you can say, when you go through a traumatic experience, especially one like this where there is a stigma attached to it, you find out your real friends. That's a good process, I think everyone should go through that process of finding out who your friends are and it's those friends that matter the most, especially when you're in trouble. I've not got a problem now. If I'd been defensive when I came out and not accepted the Mickey-taking and that it would have been a problem. They accept me because of the fact that I did something wrong, paid the price and I'm now getting back on my feet. It's not a problem.

In initial terms it's to get into the voluntary sector. Once I'm in there in the next 12 to 18 months it's to learn the ropes, so it's two years for the CAB, a year being a mentor at the Lighthouse project. Within that take qualifications. Whatever NVQ qualifications that come that are appropriate to move up and I want to take the qualifications as I say up to NVQ level 5, degree level which will then find my path back in to proper paid work. But I don't think I'll ever stop the voluntary side.

This project was managed by jo.knight@niace.org.uk - who can be contacted for more information. She works for NIACE (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education). Birmingham and Solihull Learning and Skills Council funded the project.



