



Phil Howard left, editor Natalie Cooper, 2nd from right, founder Keeley Prowse, Mega Mentors right

LIFE CHANGING

The *Mega Mentors* mission

Here **Natalie Cooper** finds out why founder Keeley Prowse set up Mega Mentors and interviews Observer's restaurant critic Jay Rayner, Michelin star celebrity chef Phil Howard, polar explorer Ben Saunders and adventurer Alastair Humphreys to discover why they believe in mentoring, and why they want to offer life changing experiences for young people to inspire them to realise their career aspirations.

Keeley Prowse, founder of Mega Mentors

Educated, socially able young people who are nurtured and have access to a number of different types of support that make them well rounded, are capable of creating their own future, of having dreams and realising them. Young people who do not have the benefit of such support still long for the same things, but have no legitimate route for them. For some, the response is to take an illegitimate route. Mega Mentors provides legitimate routes to success, emotional and practical support and helps inject into children a number of key mental attributes they need to be able to be successful in their future career.

The Mega Mentors concept – working with NEETs

My inspiration was the 40,000 NEETs – school leavers not in education, employment or training – who hang about aimlessly across London with no aspirations, little guidance, and not much motivation to make something of their lives. Some of these 40,000 were in front of me on a daily basis in my last role as a community worker in Newham, East London. Faced with the question, 'what would you like to be when you are big like me?', the kids at the community project would often return their answer

in the form of a blank expression, and at times would even deride me for my enthusiastic belief that each of them had a gift or a talent to offer the world, and that in time they might even become anything that could remotely be described as successful.

This bothered me immensely, and during one sleepless night, haunted by the thought that I would have to watch these kids leave school one by one and become NEET No. 40,001, NEET No. 40,002 and so on, a little idea buzzed through my mind. Maybe I could find out what these kids are interested in, what really floats their boat, and then maybe I could find a professional person who is highly skilled in this area, someone at the top of their game, to mentor them and help them form and establish their own dream. And so it began, the idea of Mega Mentors was conceived.

I have been saddened though by the way the desire to do something meaningful with your life is often received with an unwelcome onslaught of negativity and cynicism. This response seems to be par for the course. Sadly, for whatever reason some people will take great pains to try and thwart your efforts to bring change in your community. Just ask Jamie Oliver.



MEGA MENTOR

Alastair Humphreys

I got an email out of the blue from Keeley. After reading her website I decided to meet her for a chat. I was so impressed with Keeley's work and aims that I was delighted to sign up as a mentor. I was not particularly 'successful' as a child so I realise the importance of giving young people encouragement and the confidence to do bigger and bolder things than they might imagine they are capable of.

With the escalated break-down of family units and local communities it is harder for children to have exposure to different kinds of people, different ways of life and different ideas. As a mentor it is possible to get young people excited about their potential and make them believe that they are capable of more than they realise.

Many children are being raised in low-aspirational households, perhaps even as a third generation that has never known regular employment. That is a cycle that has to be broken. Encouraging children to aim higher is valuable not only for them, but for all of society.

Mega Mentors is such a low-budget, effective, efficient way of making a real difference in the lives of vulnerable young people. Funding Mega Mentors would be an extremely rewarding investment for any company's CSR budget. I would be delighted to be able to continue my involvement as a mentor for Mega Mentors.

Alastair Humphreys

Alastair has cycled round the world for 4 years, raced a yacht across the Atlantic Ocean, canoed 500 miles down the Yukon River, walked the length of the holy Kaveri river in India and run the Marathon des Sables, (finishing as one of the ten fastest Brits despite breaking his foot during the race). He's also rowed to France with Major Phil Packer, a soldier paralysed in Iraq. In 2010 he completed an unsupported crossing of Iceland by foot and packraft.

MEGA MENTOR



Jay Rayner

I was approached by Keeley and she is a force of nature. She has a will that shall not be denied. Not wanting to sound too grandiose about it but I get called upon by a lot of charities because of my public profile. Input around supporting other causes can be a bit vague however in this case Keeley was very focused right from the start.

We are bombarded by messages from employers complaining about the quality of recruits. If they really mean it, they should put their money where their mouth is.

Hard nose businesses should view it as part of their responsibility to reach out to their communities and enable their employees to help

individuals to reach their full potential. It's rewarding, plus, it's the right thing to do.

Nobody, and that includes the most vulnerable, should be left behind or forgotten. Not everybody gets the support from home they deserve – sometimes that support needs to come from somewhere else. It doesn't take much to help people. There was no struggle in my life. I grew up in a loving, supportive, affluent household and had the best education money can buy. This isn't the case for everyone.

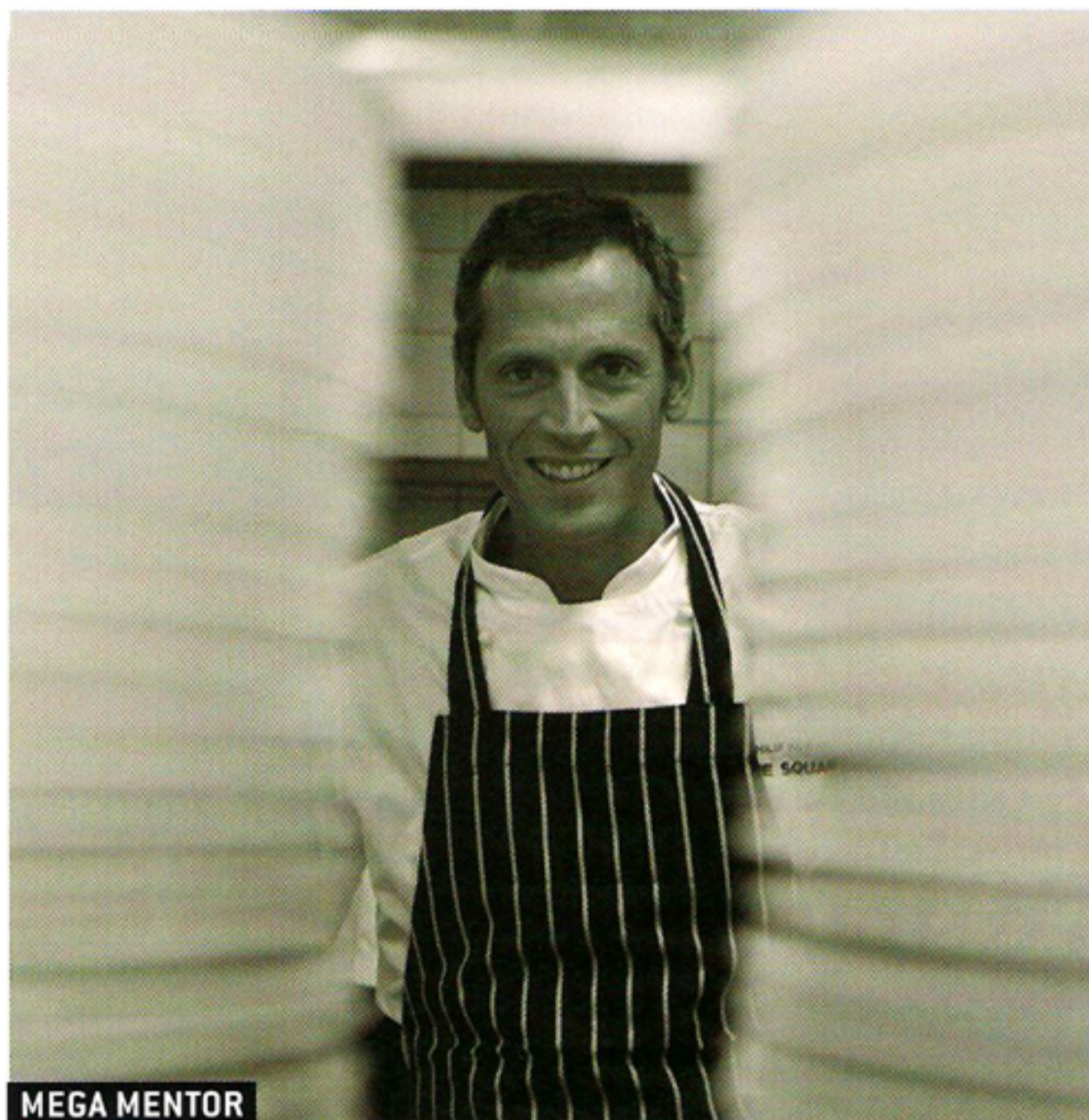
I have always been slightly suspicious of the phrase: 'it's the least I can do' but you can be effective and influence individuals' lives.

I've mentored one person who perhaps has not had the right attention in their life. Sometimes it's about giving someone the opportunity to have a voice. Just by stopping the clock for an hour and asking a young person the question: "Tell me about yourself, what do you want to do with your life" and listening to them you can have a remarkable impact.

Young people need role models and mentors because they get to impersonate, to try on different clothes and see if they fit. While it would be easy for me to talk to someone about what working in a newspaper environment looks like, by giving my mentee a real insight into another world, that young person is able to consider if this is what they want to do in life or not.

As a Mega Mentor, working with individuals at a younger age allows us to impact on their lives sooner rather than later.

Jay Rayner is an author and Observer's restaurant food critic.



MEGA MENTOR

Phil Howard

Prevention is quite often more effective than cure. By working with kids who are potentially going to be vulnerable down the line, Mega Mentors gets them at a point when they can respond to positive influences in their life and offers them a reason to succeed before they've encountered some of the other potential pitfalls in life. Once a teenager has derailed in whatever way, shape or form in life and discovered drugs, alcohol or crime you've then got a whole different set of issues you've got to try and deal with before you can actually try and motivate them to be a more productive human being. The pressures these days on children means they often don't have the opportunity to choose their career or think about what they would enjoy doing – it's just about education and results. People end up doing jobs they don't like because they have no other choice. By having a mentor, a young

person is given an opportunity to look at different career choices before they have to start making key decisions.

I'm grateful I discovered something in my life – cooking – that I was passionate about and I could make a career out of it. What's so nice about cooking, is for all those kids out there who don't find sitting behind a desk the most attractive option, cooking doesn't require huge intellect but it's an immensely fulfilling career option.

Phil Howard

Phil is chef and owner of The Square, Mayfair, and has been running the restaurant for 19 years with co-owner Nigel Platts Martin. He remains where all chefs should remain – in the kitchen of his restaurant.