

WALKING OUT OF TROUBLE

CAN HILLWALKING HELP TURN AROUND THE LIVES OF THOSE EMBROILED IN VIOLENCE, DRINK, DRUGS AND HOMELESSNESS? DOMINIC BATES VISITS A PROJECT IN CENTRAL SCOTLAND DOING EXACTLY THAT.

Only two show up. Grant is disappointed, hoping for seven after working his mobile phone hard for two hours. "Getting them up and in on time is my biggest challenge, d'you know what I'm saying to you?" he says in a broad Essex accent that sticks out a mile in this small Scottish town.

Excuses are made. Perhaps last night's torrential rains have put people off climbing a hill mired in mud? One guy's skipped town, it's suggested, after a fight led to death threats. Grant nods – he's heard the rumour too.

This is the second time hillwalking has been offered to participants at Forth Valley Street Sport – an Alloa-based programme of sport, education and health activities that aims to help people from disadvantaged and problem backgrounds re-enter society. The first attempt was abandoned after one lad arrived half-drunk and spent the walk swigging from a can of Tennent's. Barely six months later, the culprit – Mark – has become the project's most avid hillwalker and will join an expedition to the Himalayas in October as part of a delegation of 15 locals.

The irony isn't lost on Mark, a stocky 22-year-old, who recalls the drinking incident with a wry smile. "Not very clever, I admit. I held my hands up and apologised."

Grant Kerr, the project's support worker, was furious: "These things take ages to organise, doing the risk assessments and building up trust with partners." Fortunately, he convinced the volunteer walk leader the incident wouldn't be repeated, and today Robert Russell leads us up West Lomond in the Lomond Hills Regional Park, near Kinross.

We meet at Clackmannanshire Council offices, where Street Sport has a small garage containing an Aladdin's cave of outdoor equipment. This is the first time Steven, 18, has been hillwalking and he looks awkward in his walking boots and waterproof trousers – both borrowed from the project. With him is support worker Amy, who seems pleased to be getting paid for frolicking up hills for the day.

There are 20 currently enrolled in the project, with ages ranging from 16 to 34. "I call them, they're up at 8am, and ready by 9am, then I've got them till 3pm,"

says Grant. "They might start drinking afterwards but I've had them clean for most of the day. It doesn't sound like much of a success, but it is."

Born in Glasgow and raised in Essex, far from any hills, Grant confesses to having no affinity for hillwalking himself. But the former amateur boxer bears a healthy respect for the activity, comparing its effects on his participants with being in the ring: "It takes them out of themselves physically and mentally and teaches them discipline."

And he's in no doubt about the boys' enthusiasm. "They love it," says Grant. "They're buzzing afterwards. For them to get out of Alloa for the day is fantastic, because it's a pretty rough place."

Battling boredom

Set against the magnificent backdrop of the Ochil Hills, Alloa is a heavy industrial town in rapid decline since the closure of its port over 30 years ago. One of the most deprived places in Scotland, 14 per cent of the 19,000 population survive on benefits and unemployment is estimated as high as one in five. Problem drinking and drug-taking are rife, and a culture of violence starts young. Mark and Steven both talk of attacks with "chibs" (knives), machetes and axes as commonplace by young people "loopy on drink, drugs and boredom".

Given such deprivation, it seems obvious anyone would be grateful to escape for a day out in the hills. Street Sport offers everything from mountain biking to volleyball to entice people in, but the

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biggest draw is football training at Falkirk Football Club. Yet local health promotion officer and project-founder Elaine Cochrane insists hillwalking is key to the project's success and the most important activity for developing participants.

"Football gets them in, but hillwalking brings them on," she says. "The boys are in a fear zone. Walking gets rid of their aggression, expands their horizons and gives them a feel-good factor." She also

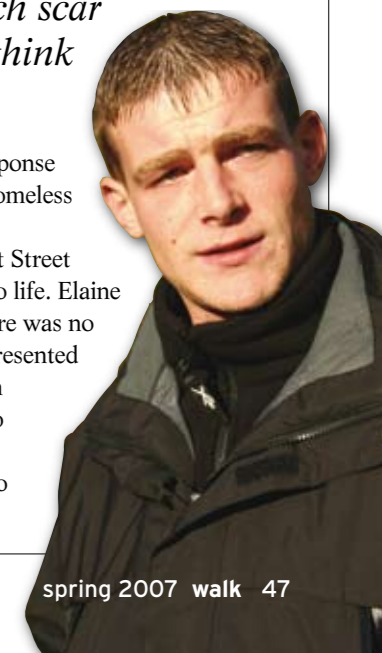
stresses its broader appeal, particularly for less competitive participants and women, who are under-represented on the project.

Mark lights a cigarette as we begin our ascent. He plans to quit before he goes to Nepal. It's hard to believe that only four years ago, Mark was on life support after being stabbed 12 times in the back of the head and torso. He had to be revived three times and damaged his kidney and spleen in the attack by a friend who turned on him after binge drinking.

"Getting stabbed was the best thing that ever happened to me," Mark reflects, touching the five-inch scar at the nape of his neck. "It made me rethink my life and where I was going." A family background of alcoholism and an education cut short by numerous expulsions for violent behaviour led to long periods of unemployment, heavy drinking and a jail term before Mark was referred to Street Sport. Now, as well as helping supervise the project's fitness sessions and working to complete the conservationist John Muir Award, Mark visits schools and community groups giving talks against knife violence.

Steven picks his path carefully as the route steepens, receiving the odd good-natured goad from Mark striding up ahead. After 15 years of living with his aunt, Steven now has a place of his own, but his learning difficulties require 24-hour supervision. Problems concentrating make it hard to find work. "I think I'd prefer to just ramble off round the world really," he says, but he's just started at the project and enjoys playing football with the other lads.

It was in response to the 2005 Homeless World Cup in Edinburgh that Street Sport sprang to life. Elaine discovered there was no local team represented in the selection tournament, so she contacted Falkirk FC who



helped attract and train a team of more than 30 local homeless lads.

“In that short space of time, we saw a huge improvement in participants’ self-esteem,” Elaine says. Boys from rival towns learnt to respect and work with each other, and their faces appeared in newspapers for footballing and charitable achievements instead of crime. “We saw the power the project had to change lives,” she says.

Transforming lives

One changed life was Grant’s. Homeless after his release from prison, he met Elaine in a soup kitchen. A lifetime of “ducking and diving”, drug-dealing and theft had instilled a talent for organisation which Elaine spotted, recruiting him as a support worker. “It’s the first real job I’ve ever had and it’s totally changed my life,” he says. “I’m helping these boys because I don’t want them to end up like me learning how to live for the first time at 33.”

Under the pair’s enormous passion and vision, 90 people have passed through the project thus far, and its target group has broadened to include the unemployed and clients with mental health, social care, and criminal justice backgrounds. Similarly, its aims have grown to tackle every aspect of social exclusion, including literacy skills, employment training, health advice and addiction counselling to offer a complete support network from homelessness to first employment.

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“Early on, we realised separating the issues of drink, drugs and mental health is a waste of time,” Elaine explains. “We’re trying to work with the whole person and get as many different agencies, experts and partners involved as possible.”



Keen to introduce hillwalking to the project, Elaine approached the Ramblers’ Association to help provide walks leaders and insure the walks. In the past, she and her husband, a Mountain Rescue volunteer, had taken groups of problem teenagers hiking in the Highlands. “The change after the walk was unbelievable,” she recalls. “It was the first time they had to put all their trust in someone, and I’d watch these swearing teenagers suddenly turn polite.”

Jim Brown, Social Development Director of *Big Issue* Scotland, works with Street Sport. He noticed similar results devising the Abercorn Experience, a series of residential programmes for people from problem backgrounds that use hillwalking for personal development. He knows of no other projects in the UK or abroad aimed at the same client group that make regular use of hillwalking, and is convinced that a huge potential for positive social change is being missed.

“In 14 years at the *Big Issue* we’ve tried all sorts of approaches to helping homeless, and the most effective tool we’ve used is our hillwalking club,” he claims. “It works right across the board and is far more valuable than more structured programmes. It expands their horizons, gives them experiences and social confidence, and helps rebuild health after drug misuse, so that education and employment lead on naturally of their own volition. I’ve seen it time and time again.”

Every person Street Sport prevents from offending or reoffending saves the taxpayer an estimated £50,000 in court fees and prison costs – enough to fund the project for a year. But it is currently looking for long-term funding, and Jim is critical of the difficulty facing such projects in the current funding climate that demands strict measurable outcomes. “Lots of projects tick boxes but don’t get results. Conventional programmes have pre-made choices for the client with no concern for the individual. They simply don’t work. It needs a leap of faith from the government to try something different and take a risk with different

FURTHER INFO

Ramblers Scotland

www.ramblers.org.uk/scotland/walking
☎ 01577 861222, scotland@ramblers.org.uk

Forth Valley Street Sport

www.forthvalleystreetsport.org.uk
☎ 01786 431103, info@forthvalleystreetsport.org.uk

The Abercorn Experience

Abercorn House, Abercorn Village, By Newton, West Lothian EH30 9SL
☎ 0131 331 2771, administration@aberncornhouse.com

approaches. They’re funding failure at the moment because you can measure it, but who wants to measure failure?”

A spokesperson for the Scottish Executive communities department responded to the criticisms, saying it already helps fund Street Sport through the NHS Innovations Fund, and any changes to funding criteria would not be made until after the elections this year.

Ramblers involvement

Whether or not the government funds more hillwalking projects, the Ramblers’ Association is sitting on a ready-made network of walking clubs, and the challenge is to ensure they reach out to the most marginalised in society. “I’m sure everyone involved in our Groups can do more to ensure that people from all backgrounds are not just welcomed on walks, but are wholeheartedly received into our wider network,” says Kathryn Wortley, walking promotion officer at Ramblers Scotland. “We are delighted to be involved in Street Sport. Walking can transform lives and we are keen to be involved in similar worthwhile projects nationwide.”

Approaching West Lomond’s summit, Steven and Mark spot a shortcut and break away from the path at a canter before Robert blasts them to stop. “Hillwalking’s not about speed,” he admonishes. “It’s about the companionship and conversation. So we’re going the long way round.”

Sticking to the path, we arrive together at the cairn buffeted by icy winds but with breathtaking views of Loch Leven, Edinburgh and the distant Pentland Hills. “I’ve climbed those too,” Mark boasts, pointing towards them before leaping back down the hill with Steven in his trail.

Robert smiles. “I’ve learnt to lead from the back with him walking,” he says.