



Kevin, age 52

Brought up in foster care, I left school at 16 and got an office job which I turned into a career in the court service for about 20 years. Private life got out of control due to social life with the more 'bohemian' elements which led to recreational drug use which led to hard drug addiction, family break up, loss of career, bankruptcy, homelessness, complete loss of self-confidence and self-worth. I was starting to 'turn a corner' and had engaged with drug and housing services. It was decided that one tool for helping me to progress was to find activities to stimulate my interest in life – my key worker at Broadway housing showed me a leaflet and website for Get Out There! and I applied. I admit that initially I was attracted to the free lunch and free boots!

Once the course started, I quickly discovered that the more I attended, the more I enjoyed it. Apart from the obvious benefits of fresh air and exercise, I rediscovered my deep seated love of nature and the environment. I also found myself wanting to learn again. The things that I enjoyed about the course made a dramatic difference to my life. I very quickly started feeling physically better. My age and the years of self abuse and stress had taken their toll but the course put a real spring in my step. I found the course personally rewarding and got a real sense of achievement which did wonders for my self confidence. The increase in self confidence and self worth has given me the impetus to carry on addressing my personal problems. I continue to engage with other agencies and I'm now short listed for re-housing and successfully continue to address my long term addiction issues.

Since I initially completed the course I've been lucky enough to be asked back, first as a mentor and now as volunteer assistant to the course leader. This in turn has continued to boost my self confidence. I've been rewarded by the course who have funded me to attend three BTCV training courses in fungi ID, practical conservation leadership skills and leading guided walks. An unexpected side effect has been contact by sections of my family that I had lost contact with. The main thing is that I'm now in a position and frame of mind to continue to volunteer even if the course comes to an end; and to continue to learn new skills and gain fresh knowledge. I also dream of maybe gaining paid employment in the field.

Finally I would like to take this chance to say a big thank you to the course and especially to Anna Guzzo who runs the course and has shown such faith in me. I think doctors and social workers should be able to prescribe attendance on the Get Out There! course to people who've lost their way in life as I'm certain that, like me, they'd soon find themselves back on the right path.

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Since I first composed the case study things have continued to improve dramatically! I still live in my Housing Association flat. And it feels like home. In September 2013 Anna Guzzo left GOT on maternity leave and I was lucky enough to be given her job. It has been a steep learning curve and not all plain sailing but I believe, with massive support from my Director and colleagues, I successfully guided GOT to the conclusion of its lottery funding. I also successfully presented a training session on volunteers with support needs to complete the GOT Leaders Group training that Anna started. The training session was specifically concerned with volunteers who are/have been homeless.



At the end of the lottery funding the decision was taken to continue GOT as a one day a week volunteer session because the demand clearly still existed. Without the major funding stream, the 3 days per week job was not sustainable and I could only be guaranteed one day per week, although I was given other work for the Association whenever available.

In March 2014 I was approached by one of the trustees about a vacancy that had arisen at Cultivate London, a charity/social enterprise based in Brentford. After interview I succeeded in gaining the post, initially on secondment from HCGA but I now work for them 4 days per week as their trainee supervisor, overseeing 17-24 year olds using horticulture tasks to train them to be work worthy and organising a short work experience placement for them. So now I'm working 5 days per week and I continue to turn my life around. None of this would have been possible if I hadn't started volunteering with Get Out There! all those years ago.

In the last year I was awarded a Natural England/Access to Nature honour for mentoring and skill sharing and was presented with a small commemorative plaque by John Craven! When I started work at Cultivate London I also found myself speaking on Radio 4's "Farming Today" programme about my work!

None of this seemed possible just a relatively short time ago and I am so grateful for the help and support I continue to receive from the trustees, director, management and staff at HCGA...and not forgetting the volunteers without whom I wouldn't have a job! What drives me on is a desire to make some of their lives capable of the same transformation as mine has had.