

**Work & Careers****A weekend rite of passage forges bonds between men**

Older men act as mentors to guide disaffected youths into adulthood and working life



The charity A Band of Brothers offers weekend experiences and mentorships to young men on a mission to access their masculinity © Andrew Hasson/FT

Nirpal Dhaliwal 12 HOURS AGO

“I didn’t know when I became a man,” Kyle Dumka tells me as we stand by a fire at dawn, clutching mugs of tea close to our chests, after a cold night camping at a retreat near Eastbourne, south-east England. “There was never a moment when I realised I was no longer a boy. It’s always felt vague. Not having a rite of passage to mark it as in other cultures leaves a lot of men feeling unfinished in some way, I think.”

I have joined the 38-year-old carpenter, husband and father of two young children at a weekend retreat, with a mission to access our deeper masculinity. It has been organised by a charity, [A Band Of Brothers](#). This weekend is called [the Quest](#), and seeks to help participants transition into manhood through a combination of ritual, group discussion and introspection.

A Band of Brothers was co-founded in 2007 by Nathan Roberts, now its chief executive. The charity is focused primarily on helping disaffected young men — many of whom have suffered extreme trauma, addiction, homelessness and imprisonment — to feel better about themselves and

find their place in society. It offers them this weekend experience and also pairs them with an older mentor, who will be available to them for the next 12 weeks.

Participants have been deliberately kept in the dark about what to expect but are well supported by a team of qualified male therapists. All of the therapists have done the programme and have volunteered to help us feel safe as we journey into our darker, vulnerable selves.

“It takes a man to show other men how to be man,” says Mark Nightingale, the weekend’s 54-year-old lead trainer, when I ask why there are no women here. “I wouldn’t presume to know what women require to be women.”

And what is a man, I ask.

“An elder who doesn’t look at a troubled youngster and says you are the problem,” replies Mr Nightingale, “but rather asks: ‘How have we contributed to this young person being this way, and how can we show up for these young people?’ . . . We’re creating a community of older men who don’t pretend they’ve got it all worked out. Our job is simply to listen to these youngsters and provide a space where they can safely deal with their issues.”



Mark Nightingale, lead trainer: 'It takes a man to show other men how to be man' © Andrew Hasson/FT

Most participants stay involved with the organisation and several have returned to help out at the retreat. They mix confidently with the older volunteers — who include company directors, artists and ex-military personnel. There is a spirit of fellowship as everyone peels, cooks, cleans and keeps things running to schedule. Everyone is here to help the retreat attendees, whatever their age, begin their transformation into more useful contributors to their communities — into adults, that is.

Mr Roberts points to the huge differences the programme makes to participants' lives. "Eighty per cent report a significant reduction in the severity or frequency of their criminal offending, or complete cessation," he says. This type of intervention is desperately needed in a society in which 95 per cent of [prison inmates are men](#). The programme can also help address mental health issues — a growing concern in the prison population. "Three have told us that this programme saved them from suicide," he says.



'The Quest' weekend retreat is a two-day rite of passage for men making the transition from boyhood to manhood © Andrew Hasson/FT

An internal evaluation of the Quest programme in January 2018 also found significant improvement in participants' work prospects. On arrival, 75 per cent of the young men who come on to the course were NEETs (not in education, training or employment) and only 7 per cent were employed. Afterwards, the number who still classified as NEET dropped to 20 per cent and over half had jobs.

The processes of the weekend are kept secret only because they work best when the participants don't know what's in store. In a forest setting, there is much reflection on nature and the cycle of life, and the place of one's hurt and loss in that. The weekend is an exercise in letting go of shame and self-recrimination. The aim is to replace it with admiration for the strength of the human spirit — which has allowed participants to survive their past and seek a sense of purpose.

"It's important for men to have the experience of being nurtured and cared for by other men," says Mr Nightingale. "And it's important that men nurture and care for others."

"However successful we become," says Mr Roberts, "we still face the big questions. Who am I? What should I do? Is there any meaning? . . . We provide an opportunity to go beyond personal

development and be of service. We've received over 180,000 hours of volunteering time from men who get as much out of it as they give." The charity has 400 active volunteers and has trained more than 300 mentors.

The emotional work at the retreat happens in a very masculine way. "We need to clear the rage out before we can address the grief underneath," explains Mr Nightingale of the rowdy, physically intense activities. "Men have to learn to express that anger cleanly. Then we can grieve . . . It's when we don't grieve that we hold grievances."

Explaining why women are not allowed on the weekend — although Abob has female patrons and directors, Mr Roberts says: "The dynamic always changes among men when a woman is present. They will naturally project their feelings of fear, sadness and grief on to her. But men have to learn to own them, and when women aren't around men have to do the nurturing."



The retreats have helped many young men into work © Andrew Hasson/FT

The older volunteers were effusive about the long-term benefits. Neal Allistone, 45, a former business analyst and police intelligence officer did the retreat 18 months ago. Now he works in a prison, helping inmates maintain relationships with their children. "My wife married a rich man," he laughs. "My income is a third of what it was, but we're both much happier now. I do this work to make a better world for my son to grow up in."

"Being self-made and the boss, I always struggled to relate to people," says Roger Ross, the 69-year-old owner of a Chelsea auction house. "I was a petty tyrant. This gave me a chance to be on level terms with others, not in charge. It's very humbling." Becoming a mentor to young men has "helped a lot in my relationships with my own son and daughter. I've learnt to listen, ask how they

are.”

A month later, one of the young men tells me the weekend “saved my life”. Aged 23, he’d found Abob after being released from prison, having been involved with gangs and drug-dealing. He grew up without a father, spent time sleeping rough and been hospitalised by a brutal stabbing.

Despite having to return to a hostel rife with drug use and violence, he says, “I want to move on and get on with my life.” With the support of his mentor, who he sees twice a week and speaks to regularly, he now has a vision for himself: “I want to study palaeontology. I’m going to the Isle of Wight next month to look at some fossils”. He’s also reconnected with his mother, who he previously hadn’t seen for 18 months. “She’s loving the fact that I’m changing and doing well.”

Another young man, aged 22, who had spiralled into cocaine and cannabis use after his mother’s suicide three years ago, tells me he can now “sit with my panicky feelings” and just let them pass. He has reconnected with his family. “I feel really positive. I have a clear vision of what needs to be done and what’s acceptable and not acceptable. I just want to be happy and have my daughter stay with me at weekends. I want to go to university and become a psychiatric nurse.”

*Abob relies on donations for much of its work and is looking for patrons to help it continue supporting young men: [www.abandofbrothers.org.uk](http://www.abandofbrothers.org.uk)*

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