

# The ex teacher and former army captain transforming lives



Reactive8 Reach for the Stars programme with founder Michelle Crook second left

Take one passionate former teacher and an equally enthusiastic ex army captain and paratrooper.

Mix them together and hey presto! You get Reactiv8 – a social enterprise dedicated to uplifting young people.

One-time PE teacher Michelle Crook, 39, and her business partner Jon Reynolds, 32, who's served in Kosovo and Afghanistan, have joined forces to provide their Reach for the Stars programme, aimed at 19 - 29-year-olds.

It's already been commissioned by Luton Borough Council and early results have exceeded all expectations.

Their remit was to try to get some of the seven young people on the project into part-time work by the end of the 12 week programme.

Michelle said: "We're only half way through and three already have jobs and one has been for an interview. "It's surprised even us - but it's been immensely rewarding.

She added: "The course is 70 per cent practical and 30 per cent theory. You've got to be totally committed and we've got a unique approach that sets us apart – combining British military techniques with formal education methods.

"It's the first time Jon and I have worked together but we want to do a lot more to effect positive and sustainable change for young people in Luton."

She added: "Anyone signing up must be aged between 19 and 29, live in Luton, not be in education, employment or training (NEET) and come from a background of lawlessness or gang culture."

Stopsley single mum Charlene Ellis, who's on the current course, fits the bill perfectly.

She calls herself a "bouncer" - not in the nightclub sense but because she always bounces back, no matter what life throws at her.

"I'm an Ellis," she said. "I've got strong blood and I can get back up, I can heal."

The 27-year-old admits she took Class A drugs and has served time for a double stabbing.

But she was determined to put all that behind her and she credits Michelle and Jon with helping her turn her life around.

"They said they could see the potential in me and were prepared to support me all the way until I reached my goal," she explained.

"At first I thought the Reactiv8 programme was just another course. But it's changed my way of thinking and made me much more positive.

"Now I'm an ambassador for them – if I can make it, anyone can. They just need to change their mindset."

Charlene has her work cut out with three jobs - telesales, night work and cleaning - and is launching her own personal trainer business in August.

"My ambition is to make my first million and buy a £700,000 house," she smiled.

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