



EDUCATION Karen Hindle

eafamily

Mr Motivation shows students the big picture

Motivational speakers in schools - are they saviours or snake-oil salesmen? Well if charismatic Keith Warren is anything to go by it is the former. After his visit to Westbourne Sports College, near Ipswich, some might say he is a force not to be ignored. KAREN HINDLE gets motivated

FOR harassed head teachers, faced with a challenging year group which makes up for a lack of motivation with the power to disrupt, booking a brief visit from a former food company manager with two indifferent A-Levels and a catering degree would hardly seem the solution to their problem.

Then again, if the visitor is the charismatic Keith Warren, it might just work.

Keith runs The Big Picture - a motivational self-help organisation, which goes into schools to talk to students.

An increasing number of schools (120 at the last count) are finding Keith's pep talks have the power to change student behaviour, to increase focus, to instil urgency and to improve exam results.

One of the latest schools in Keith's lengthening list is Westbourne Sports College, in Ipswich, where he addressed around 200 Year 11 students this week.

So what made Westbourne book Keith in the first place? Deputy Head Dave Lee-Allen said that one reason was that Westbourne is a National Challenge School, making them part of a Government initiative to improve GCSE results:

"It means there's a lot of attention paid to our figures for students gaining five A-C grades, so we looked at a range of measures to help, and we felt The Big Picture website looked good enough for us to take a chance on the presentation inspiring our students to do that extra bit of graft."

A Big Picture presentation is not a cheap option - Westbourne paid £915 from their National Challenge funding - so schools have to feel it is worth it.

Mr Lee-Allen said: "It was excellent. Our students don't take easily to sitting in a hall for two hours, essentially being lectured at, so there was every chance that it wouldn't work, but right from the start, Keith's confidence and personality shone through.

"There is an irrefutable logic to what he says, and while we have many talented members of staff who are more than



PEP TALK: Motivation Man Keith Warren with students
Photos: CONTRIBUTED

capable of delivering the message, sometimes it's more powerful coming from someone else who is not a teacher."

He added: "I feel confident that the combination of this with the other things we are doing - assertive monitoring, extra revision classes, course work catch-up, careers fairs and so on - will have a positive impact."

Keith's secret, it seems, is to give his audiences the insight to take responsibility for their own futures, and get excited about feeling empowered.

Schools who have brought him in invariably say how the kids were buzzing after his session. Teachers talk with incredulity of formerly problematical pupils volunteering vows "to work harder," or to "stop wasting time" or to "believe in myself more".

One school's responses even included promises to "eat healthier" and to "apply for an audition at the National Youth Theatre."

The feedback Keith gets from both teachers and students is so positive (more than 1600 students are signed up to his Facebook group) that he can afford to acknowledge the occasional dissenter.

"One student the other day - his name was Javad - said:

"You're a fraud and a preacher," says Keith.

"So I said to the year group: 'He's very brave to say that, but that's not true...' And I said to him 'I'm sorry if you think I'm preaching, but I'm not. I never preach. I never tell students what to think or what to say.'

"So it's good that what they write down at the end of the talk is things like 'I will stop mucking about.' 'I will work harder...'"

Keith's admission that one or two students see him - initially at least - more as snake-oil salesman than saviour is brave too, but what seems quite extraordinary is that he gets students to care more about what they can do to shape their own future - by convincing them that no one else cares enough to really affect it.

It sounds a rather bleak message, but it proves Keith's point about not preaching. His clear-eyed, unsentimental wake-up call is almost brutal in its detachment:

"They fill in these feedback cards forms saying what they want to change in their lives, and a month later they are posted back to them.

"So I tell them that if they're not doing what they said they would, I don't care.

"If they are studying harder, achieving more goals, doing what they said they would do, they will feel gratified when they get the card; if they're not, they will feel guilty. Then it's up to them to respond to that."

This is a

motivational technique, of course, not evidence of an uncaring nature.

In fact Keith shares with his audiences some of the traumatic experiences that led him to re-evaluate what he wanted to do, and why.

He was at a crossroads in his life and career when he decided to concentrate on working with school children. Motivating them was the key to pulling himself out of the doldrums:

"Getting divorced left me feeling depressed. I was in a very dark place, left on my own, and I knew I had to change.

"The biggest thing I really wanted to do was something that was life-changing for other people. I thought, 'If what I do changes someone's life for the better, who wouldn't want to do that?'"

"But when I tell them 'I don't care about you,' it sounds really rude but it's not; it's just true.

"I knew when I was divorcing that my parents really loved me, and they really get on with me, but they didn't pay my mortgage, or set up my three companies, or look after my kids.

"No one really cares about you except for you. Your parents may love you, support you, all that stuff, but if you think your mum or dad can do all these things for you, you're deluded."

The background to what Keith acknowledges was something akin to a personal breakdown was a life committed to work. But it wasn't making him or his wife happy. By 2005 she had found someone else: "Within five weeks I was out of the house."

Try the zany side of education

OTLEY COLLEGE

John Nice



WHAT have an Elvis impersonator, a teapot walker, a ventriloquist and a war veteran all got in common?

The answer is that they were some of the 2400 people to participate in the Antony Gormley inspired fourth plinth.

This idea allowed members of the public to stand on a podium in Trafalgar square last year for an hour at a time.

Within that time they could do whatever they felt like doing and this excellent idea helped champion the eccentricity, diversity, bizarreness and charm of everything that the nation has to offer.

In a small way, education can echo exactly the same virtues that the Gormley inspired art project promoted, in the array of courses and subjects that one can study.

On the one hand you have the heavily debated degree courses that can allow you to study anything from David Beckham to the Beatles and Homer Simpson to, well Homer.

On the other hand you can study traditional topics. And hobbyists can be satisfied with options that incorporate anything from the spotting of trains to the keeping of bees via unusual weather patterns, (the last being particularly relevant at the moment).

Our education system is much maligned yet the opportunities are there for everyone, to learn about any whim or genuine need, and although everything isn't always perfect, it's more perfect than not.

At Otley we represent the full spectrum of educational courses that can lead to jobs, University degrees that can develop into expertise and fun and unusual sessions that can give new skills to people of all ages.

With the latter bracket in mind, the college has just joined forces with LandSkills East - an organisation that represents a rural skills training programme for the East of England, with the aim of providing the skills that will be required by the region's land-based sector in the twenty-first century.

The first set of courses includes flint work, lime plastering, hedge laying and poultry - taking place between early February and March 2010.

For more details you can contact Neil Ridley on 01473 784165 or email nridley@otleycollege.ac.uk

Alternatively, you can come and metaphorically stand on the Otley plinth by finding out about all of our courses at an open event.

It takes place on Saturday 6 Feb 2010 between 9am and 1pm at our main college campus. You don't have to come dressed as Elvis, but it would be fun if you did.

Otley College
SUFFOLK

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www.otleycollege.ac.uk