

# The Magic of West Heath

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## **Introduction**

The purpose behind this research project was to investigate the progress of some of our former students, and to see if between us we could identify “What is the magic ingredient that West Heath has?” Our Vision has always been “Rebuilding lives through education”, and we know that all of our students are very vulnerable when they arrive having previously been exposed to trauma, bullying, and a mainstream environment that cannot meet their needs. These children need expert help to develop their physical, mental, spiritual and moral capabilities so that they can reach their emotional and academic potential. But what is that we do to ensure this happens?

Based on the following quotes, taken from a previous research study on (then) current students conducted in 2014, some of our students obviously have their own ideas:

“It feels like a family – I know everyone really well”

“My first school broke me, my second school fixed me, and West Heath painted me”

Keeping these thoughts in mind, I conducted in-depth interviews with four of our former students to see if they could spread any further light as to what makes West Heath such a special place. I also talked to a selection of staff (past and present), and to parents (when possible) to gain their views. The findings are as follows (please note that names have been redacted to protect students’ identities):

## **Case Study 1: Student A**

### **A’s Details:**

Date of Arrival at West Heath: 01/09/2008

Age at Arrival: 12 years 0 months

Date of Leaving West Heath: 21/07/2015

Age at Leaving: 18 years 10 months

### **A’s behaviour on arrival:**

A joined West Heath as an articulate child with Asperger’s Syndrome (diagnosis only received in 2009) who had failed, and been failed, throughout her primary education. It was known that she had difficulties in forming appropriate relationships with adults and peers and in dealing with changes of routine. It was also known that she could

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be aggressive and display inappropriate behaviour, and that she required a firm and consistent setting to help her continue to recognise acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. At the time she joined WH it was not known that she also had ADHD and that she suffered from extremely high anxiety (stemming from traumatic childhood experiences), particularly when being separated from her mother.

A's objectives on her statement were:

- A should have access to a broad, balanced, and differentiated curriculum, incorporating the requirements of the National Curriculum, suitably modified both in content and presentation to take account of A's emotional and behavioural difficulties.
- A's teachers should take every opportunity of offering her experience of success, to maintain her self-esteem and self-confidence.
- Key learning objectives:
  - a) To feel positive about herself and her achievements
  - b) To maintain appropriate relationships with adults and peers
  - c) To continue to develop literacy and numeracy skills
  - d) To stop using bad behaviour to manipulate others
  - e) To improve her ability to cope with change

To help achieve these outcomes, the following strategies were put into place:

- A variety of learning materials and teaching strategies were used in order to stimulate and engage A's interest
- Her teaching materials were modified and adapted as appropriate
- Her perseverance with work was encouraged
- She was set realistic and achievable steps, with positive feedback to A about her success at each stage
- She was provided with trusted members of staff to guide and support her
- She attended social skills groups run by the Speech and Language team
- She was taught strategies to help regulate her emotions

### A's progress over the years at West Heath:

When A first arrived in 2008, she was defiant, angry and refused to take direction. She was also loud, opinionated, stubborn and dominant. In her first term, she was excluded on three separate occasions for being disruptive, bullying other students, and smoking. Her report from the Head of Lower School stated: *'A is an extremely bright student and has the capabilities of achieving very good academic results if she makes the right choices in the future. Unfortunately, all too often she chooses to behave inappropriately, disrupting both her own and other student's learning'*.

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Similarly, the Induction Officer's report stated: *'A, when she chooses, can be a mature, polite and caring young lady with a great sense of fun, she is a pleasure to be with. A is a capable student who has the ability to succeed in so many ways. However, when she chooses to use learned avoidance techniques, she can be rude, abusive and extremely disruptive to both staff and fellow peers. A is in total control of whether she follows the advice and direction given to her by staff and whether she accepts their support or not, again it is A's choice'*.

However, by the time of her annual review in 2009, following a period of exclusion, things were beginning to change as can be evidenced by her Learning Director's comments: *'A has made huge progress since rejoining the school and is now attending full-time. This is largely due to her determination to change and a clear desire to be a part of our school. She has formed trusting relationships with a number of key staff and has made firm and important friendships with other students'*. This transformation continued until by 2011, the following report was submitted by the Learning Director of Upper School: *'A is a most thoughtful, and often insightful, young woman. She is capable of great kindness, and can be very supportive of others, as well as being a student who has already demonstrated the ability to succeed at a good level academically. A has for some time been a central figure in the school community and this has only increased over the past few months, as she emerges as someone with the capacity to be a real leader'*.

A not only learned to regulate her behaviour and to use strategies to curb her anxiety, but succeeded in reaching her academic potential achieving 7 GCSE's whilst at West Heath including an A\* in Textiles, a B in English and two B's in Performing Arts. She also achieved Level 2 passes in Careers and Citizenship and Skills for Employment. She remained at West Heath for KS5 and attended K College supported by WH staff. She responded well to the academic rigour of a mainstream environment and formed a good social network. During this time, she achieved three A Levels at grade C in Sociology and Health and Social Care.

### A's views as to what helped her at West Heath:

When interviewed, A said that the two things that helped her most during her time at West Heath were the staff and boarding. In particular, three members of school staff stood out in her mind as going over and above what could be expected, and provided her with the support she needed to make a success of her life. This included always being available to talk and giving her the courage to address events in her past. Boarding on the other hand, in addition to always being there to provide support, gave her independence skills – particularly in enabling her to learn to drive, for which she is extremely grateful. When I asked A what she thought was the key to her success at West Heath, she replied "I lost my label".

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### Mum's views as to what helped A at West Heath:

*“Following an extremely chequered childhood (she was permanently excluded from primary school and then unsuccessfully joined a Special Needs School before being offered a PRU), A eventually joined West Heath, after a long battle, as a very angry – and frightened – 12-year-old. The only way she could cope was to get excluded, which she managed on a regular basis – the main reason being that she wanted to be at home with me (mum). On top of being terrified about school, she was expected to board because of the distance from home. The turning point came when she was excluded and was warned that this was her last chance. At this stage she wrote to her Head of Key Stage asking to come back, and things finally started to take a turn for the better. By this time, A had been given a diagnosis of ADHD for which she was medicated (in addition to ASD) and had made some firm friends – many of whom endure to this day. I also gave up work to drive A into school, and then stayed with A in boarding on one night a week to slowly build up A's confidence. In addition, the staff (in particular the 3 members that A also identified plus her key-worker in boarding) worked very closely to ensure that A was supported at all times. I am certain that a combination of having people who believed in her, plus positive reinforcement, plus self-science, and regular head massages made all the difference to A's success”.*

### Staff's views as to what helped A at West Heath:

- “Having the flexibility and time to be able to invest in A and really get to know and understand her”
- “Recognising and acknowledging her strong internal reference”
- “Validating her views”
- “Using NLP to enable her to reflect on things, and slowly shift her ideas”
- “Being honest with her and always saying what you mean”
- “The consistent approach between school and boarding”
- “Providing her with firm but fair boundaries”

### A's Progress since leaving West Heath:

A is currently in her 2<sup>nd</sup> Year at Buckingham University studying a degree in Criminology. She shares a house with friends, and works part-time as a waitress to support her studies. In her spare time, she is not only social secretary to the basketball team, but also a key player. Her ambition is to work in Youth Justice or Child Protection Services.

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## **Case study 2: Student B**

### **B's Details:**

Date of Arrival at West Heath: 07/09/2009

Age at Arrival: 11 years 4 months

Date of Leaving West Heath: 21/07/2015

Age at Leaving: 17 years 5 months

### **B's History:**

B joined Year 7 of West Heath in September 2009. His statement at this time gave him a diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome and associated behaviours including social communication difficulties that created a barrier to learning. He was also highly sensitive to noise, had a high pain threshold, delayed co-ordination, and difficulties with higher-level language. Furthermore, he was demonstrating extremely aggressive behaviour, and in November 2005, B was seen as an emergency in-patient at the local hospital following an aggressive outburst when he also threatened to self-harm. Life at home was at breaking point.

B's objectives on his statement were:

- To further develop his understanding of social situation, particularly the perceptions and motivations of others
- To understand that it is necessary for him to follow instructions given to him by adults
- To effectively manage his anxiety so that it does not escalate into anger and violent behaviour
- To develop greater confidence and improved self-esteem so that he is able to view himself and his difficulties in a more positive light
- To further improve his higher-level language skills such as predicting and inferring
- To develop greater tolerance to loud noises and close proximity with others
- To develop further his coordination skills
- To continue to develop his cognitive and academic skills in order to be able to achieve his learning potential

In order to achieve these outcomes the following strategies were put into place:

- Opportunities to learn how to interpret social cues in context and to practise these skills in a structured and supported environment

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- Alternative arrangements were made for activities that he found difficult (e.g. assembly)
- Daily opportunities to talk with an adult about any social situations that he found difficult to understand
- Opportunities to have a role in decision-making and making choices with respect to his time in school and learning
- Consistent, predictable and reliable support was regularly available
- Attempts were made to dissipate any signs of B's anger or frustration before a violent episode occurred
- A firm and consistent behaviour management programme with clear rules and strategies was used
- Staff prepared him for the routines and activities of each day to help manage his anxieties
- Visual timetables were used to explain to him what he can expect at the beginning of the day and build in time for him to de-brief at the end of the day
- Opportunities were provided for B to discuss his emotions and in particular his anger
- Praise and rewards were used to celebrate his successes
- Weekly speech and language sessions to develop his higher level language skills
- Staff checked that he understood what was expected of him and encouraged him to say when he was unsure
- Staff ensured that B understood any figurative speech that was used
- Staff gave B due warning when a loud noise occurred in the classroom
- Staff avoided raising their voices
- He was provided with opportunities to practise practical skills e.g. doing up buttons
- Visual materials were used to support verbally delivered information
- He was given opportunities to have a greater degree of control over his learning tasks
- He was provided with learning tasks that were cognitively challenging
- He was provided with opportunities to achieve frequent success during the day

### B's behaviour on arrival:

It became immediately clear on his arrival at West Heath that B needed to be in control and did not like to be challenged. His behaviour was used to intimidate others and he used the threat of becoming angry as a means of control. Adults had to use a range of distractions and negotiation techniques in order to manage his behaviour and get him to comply with instructions. B also found interaction with his

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peers difficult, particularly in understanding the feelings and motivation of others. He reacted aggressively to conflict situations and found it difficult to manage any type of change.

### B's progress over the years at West Heath:

During his time at West Heath, B gradually transformed from a very angry boy into a very polite young man who was always keen to help others. He built good relationships with staff and peers, and became able to talk to trusted members of staff. He became more comfortable with social situations and developed many friends at school. His confidence and self-esteem improved and he approached subjects that he was interested in with much greater confidence. By Year 9 he had been appointed as Head Boy of Key Stage 3.

At his first review the Learning Director of Lower School wrote the following: *'B's attendance to date is an excellent 93%. This is commendable, particularly given that B was out of school for five months immediately prior to his admission here. B loves our school and is obviously happy here. B's mum is delighted with the improvement in him at home since he joined. She said she could not praise the school enough. She always knew that B loved learning but he did not like school. Now he enjoys learning in an environment where he feels comfortable and secure. B's mother no longer has to walk on eggshells with B. They have long chats, they are comfortable with each other and she feels like she has got her son back.'*

However, whilst things improved at school, life at home became very fragile again and mum was finding it very difficult to cope. At this point, the school stepped in, and following a respite foster placement, B started boarding when he was in Year 8. This provided a turning point in B's life and gave him the opportunity to develop his independence skills in a safe and nurturing environment and provided him with respite from a difficult home situation.

When he first started boarding he wouldn't eat (but pretended he did), he was very regimental, and he had extensive scarring on his arms from years of self-harm (which he kept covered up). Gradually, and with much patience, his key-worker managed to get him to open up to her and they eventually developed a supportive and trusting relationship which still continues to this day. During this time, B eventually was persuaded to try new foods, and to talk about his feelings of anger and frustration. His self-harming also stopped. He joined the Army Cadets and became a keen body-builder, spending many hours at the gym.

B remained at West Heath for KS5 during which time he attended Hadlow College. The mainstream environment facilitated by WH staff really suited him and he blossomed; he made good friendship groups, and really developed his independence skills through work experience. He also moved out of boarding and

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into semi-independent living at the YMCA at this time which again helped with his independence.

### B's views as to what helped him at West Heath:

B is a man of few words but during our conversation he identified the following:

- Help from staff
- Boarding – particularly support from my key-worker
- Socialising
- School foster placement

### Mum's views as to what helped B at West Heath:

*“Absolutely everything! I cannot praise the school enough – they gave us back our lives. A combination of support from staff – academically as well as behaviourally – as well as boarding made all the difference. Without West Heath B would not be the successful young man that he is today”.*

### Staff's views as to what helped B at West Heath:

- *“Staff relationships”*
- *“Boarding”*
- *“A very close working relationship between school, boarding and home”*
- *“Firm boundaries”*

### B's Progress since leaving West Heath:

B is currently working for Gaza Timber whilst also working towards becoming a personal trainer. He is moving into his own flat and has a good relationship with his mum.



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## Case Study 3: Student C

### C's Details:

Date of Arrival at West Heath: 16/06/11

Age at Arrival: 14 years

Date of Leaving West Heath: July 2015

Age at Leaving: 19 years

### C's History:

C experienced many adverse life experiences in his childhood before being adopted at the age of 7. By the time he came to West Heath he had struggled throughout his school career partially as a result of his traumatic early life and partially because of the difficulties he had with his receptive and expressive language. In contrast to the majority of students at West Heath, C did not have a SEN, but based on his needs, the following strategies were put in place:

- A range of opportunities for C to experience success in both academic and social situations.
- Active encouragement for C to talk freely about his experience of life and school.
- Encouragement for C to participate in school clubs and interest groups.
- Continued adult encouragement for C to make friends appropriately with adults and fellow students in our school.
- Self Science sessions, including Stress Management and Relaxation, to help him to understand his behaviour and learn to utilise a range of appropriate self-help strategies.
- Weekly meetings with his tutor to plan targets and challenges which are personal to C and/or which directly relate to the objectives of his Statement of Special Educational Needs.
- Involvement in setting his own targets, so that he feels more in control.
- Feedback to C on progress he has made towards achieving targets.

### C's behaviour on arrival:

C did not start at West Heath until he was in Year 10, but, despite being 14 years old, he acted like a much younger child, and was very unsure of himself and needed constant reassurance. Whilst polite to staff he had a tendency to get into problems with his peers as can be evidenced by a report written by the Learning Director for HEART after C had been at West Heath for a few weeks: *"C is a polite and friendly young man with adults and he has made some good relationships with staff. He is clearly more comfortable conversing with them than with his peer group. He is struggling with developing positive relationships and friendships with his own age*

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*group and we are putting in support to help him. Instead of greeting other students in a socially acceptable way, C appears to resort to inappropriate comments and gestures and this, understandably, causes upsets”*

This was further expanded by a report from his Learning Director who commented: “C has made a positive start and is very kind and caring with a good sense of humour. However, he struggles with forming relationships with his peers and will purposely isolate himself from them, sitting away from others in the classroom. He seems to have predetermined that his peers will not like him and this then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, with C making gestures at students behind the teachers’ backs. C is being supported to help him believe that he is likeable and that other students would value his friendship. Once this key area is addressed, it will embed C’s academic success”.

### C’s progress over the years at West Heath:

However, despite a shaky start, C quickly appeared to make good progress and at his first Annual Review the Learning Director of Upper School wrote the following: “I have been extremely impressed by the way in which C has developed over the course of the past school year. He has overcome significant challenges as he has increasingly established his place in the school community, developing the skills and awareness necessary to begin to build a series of positive relationships with staff, and more significantly, peers too.

*C has worked well in many curriculum areas, generally applying himself even in areas that are not perhaps his favourites. He has done particularly well however on his course at Hadlow College, where he has been a great ambassador for the school.*

*While there will be further challenges ahead I have every confidence in C’s ability and determination to meet them. As such the year ahead is one that he can choose to approach with confidence and excitement. Needless to say, this is a very important year, not only in terms of C achieving to his fullest potential in the wide variety of assessments and examinations ahead, but also in taking a growing personal responsibility for planning for and managing his transition to Post 16 provision”.*

This progress continued throughout his time in Post 16 as is documented by the following report: “C is good fun to have around the department. He is cheerful and friendly and we enjoy some good-humoured conversations. C has made good use of his college provision and he thoroughly enjoys working with horses. C’s attendances at school and college have both been good”.

### C’s views as to what helped him at West Heath:

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*“Definitely the staff, particularly a few key people who really encouraged me to believe in myself. They were always very professional and patient with me. I also loved Poppy, the HEART dog!”*

### Staff’s views as to what helped C at West Heath:

*“Although C was in Year 10 when he arrived, he acted like a much younger boy, and had a tendency to get into trouble with the other students. Gradually, through work done by certain members of staff, particularly in Self-Science, he started to become more comfortable with himself and slowly built up his self esteem. However, he still remained unsure of himself and needed to touch base on a regular basis”.*

*“C responded well to people who understood him and didn’t judge him. When he realised that staff believed in him, slowly but surely he started to believe in himself and realised there was a better way....”*

### C’s Progress since leaving West Heath:

The following is taken from an email that C recently sent to staff at West Heath:

*“Since leaving West Heath I had a year doing very little, but did a couple of short term paid jobs including 2 weeks as a receptionist at a vets practice in south London, 2 weeks animal care assistance in south west London and 4 weeks at the Mayhew animal rescue centre looking after the dogs.*

*I went away this year in June for my 19th on my own to Bloemfontein (South Africa) working on a project rehabilitating abandoned and abused horses and dogs. I was there for 8 weeks and loved it so much.*

*However last 8-10 weeks from September till now I’ve changed my mind and working with adopted children aged 6-12. As you know animals is my life and dream, but I have found other things that mean a lot to me, and because I am adopted 12 years this November 23rd I know what they’re going through and I really enjoy it. I have been offered a full time job there and have taken it. I will obviously need training, but at least I’m taking life to the full and full-filling my dreams.*

*I remember (and I’m sure you do) what I was like at west Heath. I know for a fact that when I look back I am not who I was, I have left my shadow behind and I have grown into a lovely young man. (I think)*

*However I never got an opportunity to thank you for putting up with me. I know I wasn’t easy at all, however West Heath can really change people’s life. It really changed my life and made me believe in myself and put a clear picture of not who I am but who I want to be. I know where I am in life to this current day, wouldn’t of happened if I didn’t attend west Heath”.*

*(do feel free to share my story, it may make people who now go West Heath understand what the school really can do if you let it, but most importantly believe in yourself”.*

### Case study 4: Student D

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## D's Details:

Date of Arrival at West Heath: 05/11/03

Age at Arrival: 12 years

Date of Leaving West Heath: 04/04/08

Age at Leaving: 17 years

## D's History:

D had previously attended two mainstream secondary schools but had been out of school for nine months prior to joining us in Year 8. He had a diagnosis of Social Communication Disorder and Asperger's Syndrome, and had been demonstrating very rebellious behaviour. His objectives on his SSEN were:

- To develop strategies to allow him to take responsibility for his own actions.
- To develop appropriate communication skills and build positive and appropriate relationships with peers and adults.
- To raise his self esteem.
- To develop his literacy and numeracy concepts.
- To develop his ability to think flexibly.

## D's progress over the years at West Heath:

At his first Annual Review in January 2004, the following report on D's progress indicates that his behaviour radically improved in a relatively short amount of time:

*D joined our school on 5<sup>th</sup> November 2003 and in the short time he has been with us, has made good progress against a range of objectives featured in his SSEN. Most importantly, he has achieved an excellent attendance record, which is remarkable given that he had been out of school since the previous February. Further, he attends all of his lessons and he is to be congratulated on this progress.*

*D's teachers describe him as having a lively and enquiring mind and he is capable of contributing well to his lessons. The development would be for him to ensure that he arrives punctually for all his lessons so that he can settle down to work and really show off his potential.*

*D likes coming to school. His mum says that he is more relaxed at home and more willing to rise in the mornings in order to come to school. He has made and sustained some meaningful friendships with his peers and currently has three special friends. It is fair to say that D has been involved in incidents of bullying, but he is confident that this poor attitude is all in the past. He is anxious to do well with us, and wants his place here made permanent.*

*Adults find D affable, and the longer he has been with us, the less argumentative he has been. Indeed, he has become noticeably more compliant recently, saying that he feels listened to and*

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*his views taken seriously. It is a measure of his identification with us that he is fully involved in developing a skateboarding facility in our school, which will be to the benefit of all. He takes great pride in calling into the Principal's office to give her regular updates of this project and his progress generally.*

*D has made an encouraging start with us. He has a gorgeous personality and the emotional fibre to make him a strong candidate for Head Boy in the years to come. He has established a firm platform from which he can continue to develop into the fine young man he has the potential to become. Well done D – keep it up!*

However, it was not all plain sailing, and, as can be evidenced by his second Annual Review, D continued to struggle with his social communication skills: *“D has maintained steady academic progress since his last Annual Review. However, socially he has not had an easy year, finding it difficult to manage his behaviour when dealing with groups of people. He frequently finds himself in the centre of social conflict, mostly during unstructured times such as morning break and school lunchtimes”.*

This behaviour continued as can be evidenced from his subsequent Annual Review: *“D continues to generate enthusiasm and frustration in equal amounts! He is able to lead, inspire, encourage and motivate others. He can communicate that he is ready to focus all his efforts to the ends of fulfilling he undoubted potential and yet .....And yet there are still too many occasions when he lets himself down with behaviour which attracts attention to himself in a negative manner and in ways which are intended to undermine others. D's behaviour in assemblies provides ample examples of both phenomena”.*

However, with a consistent approach, strong boundaries, lots of input from the Speech and Language team, and 1:1 TA support, D gradually learned to control his behaviour. By the time he had finished Year 11, he had achieved a number of GCSEs including an A in Music. He also achieved a Preparation for Working Life Certificate level 2. He then joined our Post 16 provision and started to attend West Kent College with additional support from West Heath staff.

Throughout his time at West Heath, D had always shown an aptitude and love of music. His choice of course at West Kent College in performing music was one that really suited him and gave him plenty of scope for practical involvement in making music – his passion. In 2008, D's tutor at college wrote: *“D is an excellent performer both visually and technically. He is a multi instrumentalist taking part in 3 concerts in front of a 500 plus crowd. He has achieved a strong pass in his Music History essay”.* This was all the more impressive in view of the fact that by then D had been diagnosed with narcolepsy, a condition which had plagued him throughout his teenage years....

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### D's views as to what helped him at West Heath:

*"I felt safe, I felt valued, and knowing that everyone had my back really helped. I realise now that I was a nightmare, but staff giving me a consistent message and putting in boundaries, whilst still giving me the opportunity to explore myself really made a difference. A couple of members of staff were fundamental in helping me turn myself around – they were always compassionate, always patient, and always listened to me. I also had a lot of 'lessons' in social interaction from my peers – they used to ignore me completely when my behaviour got out of hand! Oh – and the merits system of rewards really motivated me too!"*

### Mum's views as to what helped D at West Heath:

*"In my opinion what helped D most was the support he received from the staff. At mainstream school he was always seen as 'bad' and disruptive and missed every treat or outing due to lack of training in how to deal with his behavioural difficulties. The team at West Heath supported him no matter what, and despite some very tough times there was always someone to listen and help. The other students were both a help and a hindrance, but this will always be the case with such a mix of personalities. The small class sizes were brilliant as the high staff ratio made issues to be flagged up much quicker. All in all, the school saved D from a life out of education, and helped make him the lovely young man he has become".*

### D's progress since leaving West Heath:

D remained at West Kent College and achieved a degree in Performing Music which was accredited by the University of Kent. Shortly after he graduated he returned to West Heath as an associate teacher in the music department where he remains to this day. He also teaches music at Meadows School, plays in his own band and will be starting his teaching degree in September 2017.

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## **Conclusion**

I hope you have enjoyed learning more about some of our past students. As for what actually is “The Magic of West Heath”, I shall leave you to draw your own conclusions. However, whether it’s the supportive staff, the caring atmosphere, or the amazing opportunities given to all our young people, I think the fact that many of our past students keep in touch with us (and several, including D, have returned to work at West Heath) says a huge amount about the affection they have for the school, and their appreciation for everything, and everyone, that helped them whilst they were here.

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15<sup>th</sup> December, 2016