

'Change is possible'

Lindsay Graham from the Highland capital to Holyrood and Hollywood. Susan Welsh meets the remarkable woman helping to improve the healthy eating habits of the nation's children

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AMONG the mail dropping through Lindsay Graham's Inverness letterbox this week was a letter from Arnold Schwarzenegger, Governor of California, apologising for not meeting up with her the last time she was in the States, and a dinner-party invitation from celebrity chef Jamie Oliver.

Not bad for a girl who left Dingwall Academy with two O Grades and dreams of becoming a nurse.

Lindsay is one of the UK's leading specialists in health promotion and school food, a familiar face to Scottish, UK and American governments.

Although she is small in stature, she's a big force to be reckoned with, a woman determined to achieve her aim - a nation of healthy children who know the difference between junk food and good food, and choose to eat the latter.

"I married and had a son, Kyle, who was born with development co-ordination disorder (DCD). Sadly, my marriage broke down and life became pretty tough as a single mum.

"I remember feeling like I'd reached rock bottom when the bank sent a letter fining me

"At that point, I had literally no money, there was no petrol in the car and the fridge was bare.

"I was in despair, but swore I'd get myself out of the situation, provide for my son and never allow myself to get to that position again.

"My mum lent me I took on four part-time jobs and worked all the hours I could."

At the same time, Lindsay was becoming increasingly frustrated about the lack of practical support and advice available to parents of children with DCD.

"I set up a parent support group, the Highland Developmental Co-ordination Group. With the help of a brilliant hard-working committee, it gained charitable status and I then went on to co-found Highland Children's Forum, another charity which gives children affected by disability and their families a voice.

"Working as a community volunteer opened a huge number of doors and gave me access to people I may never otherwise have met, but it was also a great way to influence change.

"Volunteering can be hard work; it can be very rewarding, and sometimes very humbling.

"I've met some truly inspiring families and real local heroes working in children's services."

In 2002, Lindsay took on her first full-time job, health development officer at Alness Academy, where she worked on projects ranging from sexual-health issues for teenagers to anti-bullying and healthy-eating campaigns.

Further promotion saw her involved in implementing the Scottish Government's target for all schools to achieve Health Promoting status - a target reached two years ahead of time for which Highland Council received a national education award.

"The Government then introduced a national policy called Hungry for Success, which radically overhauled school food to make it healthier," said Lindsay.

"There was quite a lot of controversy when the policy was introduced, but once people understood the aim was to give children the best possible start

in life, it was easier to engage with them to come on board to make the necessary changes.

"Good health education, where pupils learn about the importance of choosing healthy food instead of junk food, coupled with quality, nutritious food on the plate, made complete sense to improve our younger generation's health."

Lindsay was then poached by the Scottish Government as national development officer, eating for health, a role jointly funded by the Scottish Executive and Health Scotland.

Her job involved working with all 32 local authorities and about 3,000 schools in Scotland.

"My goal was to reduce inequalities and improve the health and educational outcomes for children and young people." said Lindsay.

"I learned a lot about the way politicians think, but I also learned a lot from those at grass-roots levels, such as teachers, school nurses and canteen dinner ladies.

"The job was not without its challenges as sometimes it was difficult to get people to initially come round to see how important it is to tackle these issues and share good practice and innovation.

"I remember feeling frustrated about the lack of progress at one really difficult meeting, but after seeing the message, 'change is possible' flash up on the parking meter I was feeding coins into, I felt inspired.

"It made me smile and I thought, 'That's right, change is possible, so don't give up!'"

Her positive attitude towards change, and her mantra to always have courage to grab opportunities which excite you, has seen her rise to the top of her field, and she is now one of the country's top specialists in school food and health promotion.

Her commonsense approach, can-do attitude and years of experience allow her to deliver an inspirational, but practical, approach to the food and lifestyle changes to be made by nations which want a healthy population.

Something she is planning to take "on the road" in conjunction with Hull University is a research project - the 2012 PAT project will see 20 people travel globally to 12 countries to share skills, good practice and innovation in child health and education.

Her job has already taken her round the world and introduced her to many a famous face.

"I have met some amazing people along the way - I've been kissed by Raymond Blanc and had great fun with TV chefs Lesley Waters and Brian Turner. I was also lucky to work alongside Pru Leith in England

"I've met Jamie Oliver and admire his passion for wanting to make a change for the better in people's lives. I was recently invited to join him for dinner in London, along with other experts in the food and health field, something I am looking forward to."

Lindsay now runs her own company, LGL, which specialises in advising and supporting local authorities, government bodies, industry and others on food, health and obesity, and she is a director of Redbrook Garve, the company which recently launched the School Meals Investigators module.

The module supports primary pupils' understanding of a healthy, balanced diet and captures valuable data on pupil and parent perceptions of school food services.

"My aim from the time I was a single mum struggling to make ends meet has always been to make sure there is equality for all and that every child gets access to good, healthy food, which is why I'm passionate about things like free school meals and pre-school breakfast and cookery clubs.

"My son had free school meals - I wouldn't have managed to make ends meet without them - and I wouldn't be in the position I am today it wasn't for him being my inspiration."

Kyle, for people like myself who like to know these things, is now a 20-year-old handsome and strapping six-foot tall lad leading an active and

rewarding life.

Lindsay offers this advice to others hoping to carve out a successful career no matter which field they work in:

Do what you are good at or are interested in.

Get involved as a volunteer - it's good for you and your CV.

Look at every opportunity which comes your way and ask yourself whether you may regret later not taking it.

Set realistic targets for the end of the week, month, year, three years and five years, and once you have decided on what you want, start straight away.

If you are setting up a new business or looking for work in a particular field, let people know you are there. Phone and send e-mail shots, and don't be embarrassed. People will be impressed by your courage and determination.

Remember, "change is possible".

About the Author

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