

North east entrepreneurs work together on efforts to help the less advantaged

They were brought up just six miles apart, both worked at Consett steelworks and both went on to become successful businessmen.

But what also unites Sir Bob Murray and David Harrison is that they have combined business with philanthropy with a wish to help those from ordinary backgrounds make the most of their lives.

Former Sunderland AFC owner and chair Sir Bob launched the Foundation of Light 20 years ago this year and since then the club's official charity has used the power of football to educate and inspire hundreds of thousands of children and adults. The Foundation has grown to be one of the most respected sports charities in the world, but its mission is simple: to improve people's lives through football.

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Mr Harrison launched the Harrison Foundation in 2007 and later the Harrison Centre for Social Mobility in 2017, which places an emphasis on skills and employability.

The Harrison Centre shares a home with the Foundation at the Beacon of Light in Sunderland and works with hundreds of young people to provide the tuition and training they need to become more work ready and ultimately secure a job.

After setting up the centre, Mr Harrison went on to co-found the national Social Mobility Pledge, alongside former Secretary of State for Education Justine Greening. The pledge asks businesses to work with local schools, offering

apprenticeships and adopting fair recruitment policies, such as name-blind or contextual recruitment.

Since it was launched, 700 businesses and universities across the UK representing seven million people have signed the Social Mobility Pledge. One of the first companies to sign the Pledge was Mr Harrison's financial technology business, True Potential, based in Newcastle.

Both men agree that the desire to help others 'up the ladder' stems from their own County Durham upbringings.

Sir Bob was born into a Sunderland coal-mining family before moving to Consett. He left school at 15 with one qualification, expecting to find work at Consett Iron Works, like his dad.

"When they told me to come back a year later I was devastated," he said. "I was an only child and had a happy childhood, but there was no money and the wage I was expecting to get was important to the family.

"That year of being unemployed affected me deeply – I knew I had to sort myself out so I signed up to do 0-levels and an HND in business studies at Consett Technical College.

"That was the making of me. I hated school and was glad to leave, but when the steelworks said come back in a year's time I was destroyed. I was expecting to bring in a wage and just felt a total failure. I didn't have a penny – there were no benefits back then.

"I realised if I wanted something I would have to work for it – up until then I'd just taken things for granted."

Sir Bob returned to start work at the steel works, but he continued to study and through a combination of night classes and day-release courses, finally qualified as an accountant by his mid-20s. By the age of 34 he was a millionaire businessman

and owner of successful kitchen firm Spring Ram.

His experiences and passion for expanding educational opportunities led him to establishing the Foundation in 2001.

“Ten years of evening classes and work-release were hard, but they changed me and shaped me,” he said. “They gave me a life-long love and appreciation of education.”

Mr Harrison also has mixed memories of school, though in his case that was Consett Grammar School. Adopted soon after his birth in Cardiff, he was brought up in New Kyo, just six miles from Consett, with a happy childhood and primary schooling at Annfield Plain.

He said: “I passed the 11-plus exam, which I was sure was down to my birth date rather than academic ability and went to Consett Grammar School. I probably was a frustrating pupil to teach.

“I gained two O-levels but didn’t really know what I wanted – I wanted to go to sea, but it turned out I was colour blind so I would have to work below decks, which I didn’t fancy. So, I left school at 16 and started at Consett Iron Works as an apprentice, but I didn’t settle.

“I was a bit of a nomad really for a few years, always looking for the next job which would earn me more money. My dad was a butcher and when I mentioned that once at the Job Centre I ended up working in an abattoir, which was just brutal.

“Eventually I worked for many years as a bricklayer but realised there was more money to be made employing people rather than just doing the work myself. So I went from being self-employed to being a business owner – without really realising what a huge step that was.”

A football injury prompted a change in career and Mr Harrison then moved into sales, eventually working for insurance

company Allied Dunbar. While there he studied at the Open University, eventually gaining a Masters in Business Administration (MBA).

In 1996 he launched his own company Positive Solutions, which became the UK's biggest independent financial advice business. That business was sold in 2003 and in 2007 Mr Harrison established a new business, True Potential, an award-winning financial and technology company. In 2020, and despite the effects of Covid, True Potential recorded its best ever year and continued this trend in 2021 with current group EBITDA of £140m.

Mr Harrison said: "I believe everyone needs a second or third chance, so if things don't work out at school there should still be opportunities available – skills, education and opportunity are the key."

Mr Harrison has put his money where his mouth is, donating millions of pounds to charitable causes since 2007 through the Harrison Foundation. Meanwhile, the Harrison Centre for Social Mobility has invested more than £250,000 in Foundation of Light employability programmes since it opened its learning centre at the Beacon in 2018.

Over the last two years 1,069 young people aged 13 and over took part in courses providing essential skills in ICT/digital, managing finances, maths and English, personal and social development, and business and enterprise. This year alone, nearly 600 sessions were delivered face to face, alongside 85 hours of delivery during lockdown.

Mr Harrison explained how the partnership came about: "We were looking at how we could support social mobility in the area and my team identified the work the Foundation was doing. I came for a look round and was blown away.

"I knew of Sir Bob, but we'd never met. He and his team had done all the hard work, we just needed to offer them our

support, which we've been doing since the Beacon was completed. We've piggybacked on Sir Bob's hard work and commitment.

"There is a genuine community here and it's no surprise that the Foundation has a national and international reputation. The role of our centre within the Foundation is to help you get a job and then keep you in it until you get a better one.

"We're looked after very well here, share common goals and were only too happy to renew our successful partnership. It's a great charity to be involved with – I'd urge others to get involved too."

Sir Bob said: "I take great satisfaction and pride on seeing the impact the Foundation has on the lives of so many people. The output of this place is phenomenal and now more than ever the Foundation matters to the people of the North East.

"At a time when we are all facing unprecedented, challenging and uncertain times, the Foundation is supporting our communities and the most vulnerable within them."

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