

Les Walton has a wealth of experience in the education sector. A searing experience at school when he was just 13 helped to shape his views

Lewis Arnold

Let's learn to have belief

IT'S been 20 years and education supremo Les Walton still hasn't got round to penning the book he promised.

Many profess to having a life worth writing home about but few can claim to have turned a childhood tragedy into a spur to success in the same way Les has.

The former headteacher, who was born and raised in Rowlands Gill, was just 13 years old when he lost his father in a freak accident. Two years earlier his 14-year-old sister died, leaving a young Les in charge of holding his small family and grief-stricken mother together.

Les, now 69, remembers going to school on the day of his father's funeral, as by law children were not

Les Walton has had a long and distinguished career in education and, at the age of 69, he still has things to do and things to say. Next week he starts a new regular fortnightly column in *The Journal*. RUTH LOGNONNE spoke to him

allowed time away from the classroom for a family funeral.

"I distinctly remember being told off for not doing my homework," he said. "My father had died and I had failed to produce a piece of homework. I felt as though the teachers didn't care about me or my family's situation.

"That is partly why in 1982 I established the National Association of Pastoral Care with fellow education

heavyweight Michael Marland. It's difficult to imagine now that the 'pastoral care movement' at that time was incredibly powerful.

"This indeed was a forerunner of Every Child Matters and NAPCE is still going strong. Our catch line was 'caring, confident and capable children'. A school that purely focuses on exam results and doesn't focus on care for children is not good enough."

Les achieved national recognition for his work as headteacher of Northam Community Technology College, in North Shields, one of the first community specialist colleges in the UK.

The school was sponsored by significant private sector organisations including Rolls Royce and Procter & Gamble. It was cited by HM Inspectors as one of the most effective urban schools in the country and in

1996 he was awarded the OBE for services to education during his time at the school.

As executive director and chief education officer in North Tyneside Council, Les achieved beacon status for tackling failing schools in 1999.

In 2000 he led the interim management and subsequent outsourcing of education services to the private sector in Bradford. During this period he introduced partnership boards involving some of the country's most outstanding headteachers.

In 2002 Les was appointed as chief executive and principal of North Tyneside College. He then created



► Les Walton at the Cobalt Business Exchange. "Quite often our children do have aspirations but the blockages we

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Tyne Metropolitan College through the merger of two large colleges. The amalgamation was described as 'exemplary' by the Department for Education.

Les has worked in the private sector since 2000. Under Les's leadership of Northern Education, the company has grown to become a significant force in education.

In July 2009, he was appointed by then schools secretary Ed Balls as chair of the Young People's Committee within the Learning and Skills Council, a position he held until 2012.

The new secretary of state for education Michael Gove then asked Les, together with Peter Lauener as chief executive, to lead the establishment of the Education Funding Agency.

This was one of the most significant and successful national education change programmes ever achieved.

Within two years the Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA), with a £7bn budget, was transformed into the Education Funding Agency with a £52bn pot of cash.

Les currently chairs the advisory group for the Education Funding Agency and is also on the North East council for the Chamber of Commerce and the board of the Institute of Directors.

Now Les primarily focuses on his

role as chair of the Northern Education Trust, a large and influential academy sponsor based in the North East. In 2013 he was awarded the CBE in the New Year's Honours list.

The education stalwart has contributed to the development of learning at a local and national level and played a leading role in the establishment of Schools North East, a representative organisation for all schools in the region.

Despite working in London, Bradford and Haringey, Les prides himself on never having lived more than five miles away from the place he was born.

"I always wanted continuity for my children growing up," he said. "I didn't want to shift them around the country because that, in my opinion, is disruptive."

"I've always said children are happy when parents agree. They are happy when they know their parents are putting them before their own personal or career desires."

In the North East, youth unemployment is one in four, with 51,000 out of work. To close the gap with the region with the lowest youth unemployment (the South West) the North East would need 20,000 extra young people in work.

Questions have been raised about the level of aspiration among the region's young people and whether schools, colleges and even parents

are doing enough to ensure a bright future for our children.

However, Les said it is very easy for others to lay the blame.

"My father was a miner and he used to say his aspiration was to have a job with clean hands," he said. "He was ashamed of his own hands because he worked for a coal works."

"It was only last year that I thought, 'that's quite a low aspiration to have' but actually that was a massive aspiration for my father not to go down the pit."

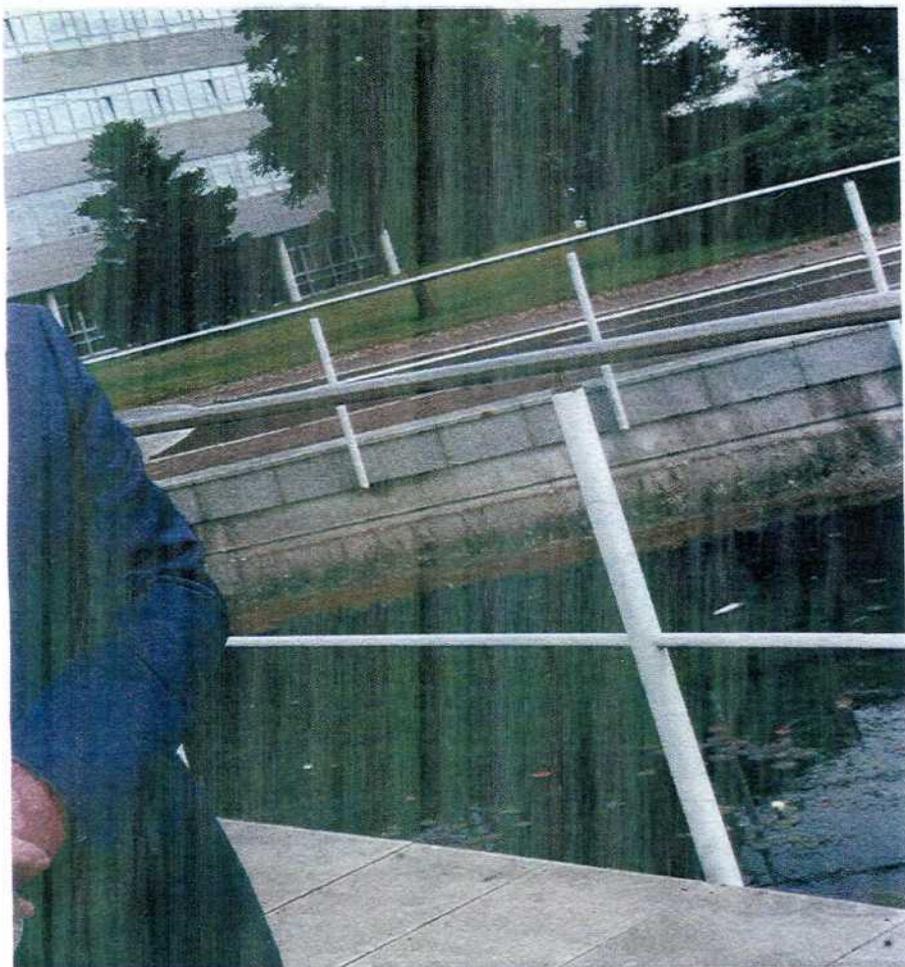
"It's very easy for others to say parents have low aspirations for their children because they haven't ambitions to go to Oxbridge or any other university for that matter. We've got to be careful about what we say, for one person's aspiration is someone else's low expectation."

"Quite often our children do have aspirations but the blockages we put in their way - for example pathways to employment - only complicates matters."

"Children with the most complex needs tend to have the most complex hurdles to go through. Children with the most unstable backgrounds are often presented with the most complex and unstable situations."

"Meanwhile, children from more affluent backgrounds are provided with a more consistent curriculum with pathways that are clear."

As well as a series of childhood



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tragedies, Les was also struck with cancer of the colon back in 2000. He survived the disease but three years ago was diagnosed again, this time with prostate cancer.

“When I got cancer I decided to pack in my job at North Tyneside Council and write my book, *Education: The rock and roll years*. The thing is, I’ve been writing it for 20 years now. I just kept getting preoccupied with something else.

“I would advise anyone going through a serious illness to ask the simple question: was my illness caused by my work? I’ve never let cancer dominate my decisions about my life or my decision to go back to work. I don’t believe in battling cancer, I’ve just learned to cope with it.

“All of the consultants I have seen over the years have said if you enjoy your work and you believe in what you are doing then why would you let cancer get in your way?”

The Government continues to encourage primary and secondary schools to become academies with the number of schools converting across the country passing the 4,000 mark.

The overall aim is to create a more autonomous and diverse school system that offers parents choice and concentrates on improving standards.

“I’ve always advocated autonomy in schools,” said Les. “Long before



➤ Les Walton with Mark Knopfler and North Tyneside students

the Government proposed academies as a good idea.

“The Northern Education Trust currently runs 16 academies with three more ready to join us in September. Because academies are not under the control of their local authority there is a common misconception that we’re at war with each other.

“I believe academies are an enhancement of local authority-run schools. When I wrote the guidelines for North Tyneside Council in the 1990s I said the role of the local authority is to manage and encour-

age autonomous schools.

“We want schools and their staff to have the self-belief that they can manage their own destinies. I want children in the North East to be like that, to manage their own destinies and to have their own self-belief.

“We want our children to be creative and forward-thinking but also collaborative and to work as part of a community. This is the belief I have shared since starting out as a teacher.”

■ Les Walton will write fortnightly on Mondays for *The Journal*, starting next week.