



WHEN MENTORING BECOMES A FEMINIST MOVEMENT

With their mission to unleash the potential of disadvantaged girls, Becca Dean and Charly Young are our *Stylist*/Prix Clarins winners. They tell *Stylist* why mentoring is the movement we should all get involved in

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It all started with a school trip in 2011. "I was working as a teacher," explains 28-year-old Becca Dean, co-founder of mentoring charity The Girls' Network (TGN). "I took a group of 15-year-old girls into central London to show them the financial district. We were standing outside the Gherkin and one of them tapped me on the shoulder. She said, 'Miss, why is that woman wearing a suit? Where is she going?'

I explained that she was going to work. She looked at me, confused, 'Like a man?' It had never occurred to her that a woman could work in an office. It made me realise that so many of these young women didn't know what opportunities were out there for them. That initial realisation went on to become The Girls' Network."

Like all genius ideas, The Girls' Network has such a simple premise that it makes you question why you haven't heard of it sooner. It offers secondary-school-age



THE GIRLS' NETWORK'S BECCA DEAN (LEFT) AND CHARLY YOUNG: INSPIRING THE LEADERS OF TOMORROW

→ girls from less privileged backgrounds the chance to be partnered with a mentor, a professional woman who, over the course of a year, acts as a guide and sounding board, helping with everything from university applications to confidence training. "It's such a wonderful relationship to see flourish," says Dean. "We've now worked with 2,000 mentors since we started in 2013, from banking and law, to engineering and medicine. Often they tell us how building up another person's self-confidence and self-worth, which is a huge problem for these girls, has had a hugely positive impact on them. The mentors are telling the girls to be fearless, forthright and to follow their dreams, and it really drives home the fact that they should too."

Indeed, in any mentoring situation, it's not just mentees that benefit. "We always talk about how mentoring is good for the recipient but the reverse is also true," agrees Sir Cary Cooper, professor of organisational psychology and health at Manchester Business School, University of Manchester. "The skills you gain as a mentor can be the difference between becoming a good leader and a truly great one." From more effective communication, across different generations and backgrounds, to getting a valuable insight into the latest tech trends, mentoring can be a truly eye-opening and skill-boosting experience for us too.

In fact, it's this ability to touch such a range of lives that essentially gave Dean, along with her friend, The Girls' Network co-founder and former teacher Charly Young, 30, the edge over the hundred or so other applicants for this year's *Stylist*/Prix Clarins award. Now in its 20th year in France, the prestigious international prize is to "honour women who are making a difference to the next generation and beyond," says Christian and Olivier Courtin-Clarins of the Clarins family, rewarding one pioneering charity with £30,000 and access to expert business guidance. "The Girls' Network really sparked our imaginations," explains Shoshana Gillis, public relations director of Clarins UK who along with *Stylist*'s columnist Lucy Mangan, journalist and broadcaster Cherry Healey and *Stylist*'s acting editor Susan Riley, was on the judging panel of this year's Prix Clarins award. "In fact, we were blown away by how The Girls' Network, as an organisation, was taking a proactive approach to changing young women's lives. Mentors don't just offer guidance; they do everything from arranging work experience placements to working on exam revision plans. We could see the limitless potential." Healey agrees: "Charly and Becca had an amazing mix of business acumen, creative talent and philanthropic ideals which means that the work they do



FORMER TEACHERS, YOUNG AND DEAN CONNECT GIRLS WITH MENTORS



has a long lifespan. They're also so passionate and full of energy, it was hard not to be swept up by their enthusiasm."

And as *Stylist*'s acting editor Susan Riley points out, "When TGN's success stories include a young woman named Ria whose mentor helped her gain a place at Oxford University, despite the fact that it wasn't something she'd considered before that year, it's impossible *not* to take notice."

Building ambition

Dean and Young met in 2011 while completing the Teach First programme, which fast-tracks professionals into teaching (previously, Young was an education researcher while Dean worked for adoption charity BAAF). "Back then, we'd convene every Friday in the pub and swap stories," explains Young. "Like the two girls in my class who were on track for As and A*s in their GCSEs and who confidently told me that they wanted to be a criminal psychologist and an archaeologist. I said, 'That's amazing, do you know what A Levels you'll need? Which uni courses have you looked at?' Their response made me want to cry. 'Oh no, Miss. After our GCSEs we're leaving school and getting part-time jobs. That's how it is for girls like us.'"

It was one of a slew of similar encounters that eventually pushed Dean and Young to set up a speed mentoring evening. "Working in northwest London schools where 75% of the children were on free school meals, we realised there were ambitious, bright young women, but they came

from three or four generations of women who didn't work," says Dean. "Or their mothers had multiple jobs. It was more about scraping together enough money to live. Aged 14, 15 or 16 they had no real concept of 'career', no-one at home who could explain university applications or how to formulate a CV."

The first speed mentoring evening in 2012 was a huge success. Dean and Young brought together a group of their own friends – from a barrister to a midwife – who did individual five-minute sessions with 30 girls, explaining how they'd picked their own careers and what routes they'd taken to get where they were. "The next evening I was marking in my classroom," explains Dean, "and one of the girls came tearing in, she was so excited. 'Miss, did you

know that you can go to work, have a baby and then *come back* to work?' I was so shocked. She'd never heard of maternity leave. I thought, 'That one small piece of information could change the course of this girl's life forever.'"

By the end of that year, after a series of speed mentoring evenings which became increasingly in-demand, Young and Dean decided to quit their teaching jobs and work on The Girls' Network full-time. They applied for a grant through

the Teach First programme. "It meant we had enough money to set up the organisation and free office space for a year. We had to move back in with our parents but it felt like it was worth it. We were doing something we believed in." Now, five years later, they help more than 1,000 girls each year, and are funded through multiple channels, from partnerships with the likes of JP Morgan to the small fee they charge a school or local authority for each girl who is mentored. It costs about £500 to mentor a girl for a year (including training, workshops and travel). So they both beam when discussing their plans for the *Stylist*/Prix Clarins prize money. "The funding is going to be incredible," says Young. "It'll help us to pilot a new programme of leadership workshops, which without Prix Clarins we wouldn't have been able to get off the ground, certainly not for a long while. And now we can expand our mentoring scheme to cover more rural areas too. These young women often face even bigger barriers to university or apprenticeships because they're in more isolated communities so find it even harder to access guidance and information."

Be what you see

This democratisation of opportunity has also been at the heart of the *Stylist* brand since the start. "The Girls' Network really aligns with our belief that, as women, we should all be supporting each other as much as possible," says Riley. "It's something we've focused on since way back in the



→ early days of our launch when we created the *Stylist* Network, inviting readers to meet the business leaders who could help them make their start-up dreams a reality."

And as Dean and Young know, finding the right role model can sometimes be as simple as reflecting a girl's own personal situation. "At the end of the year we have a celebration for all our mentors and mentees," adds Dean. "Last year one girl gave a speech about how much her mentor meant to her. She was particularly shy at the beginning of the course because she was partially sighted but she'd expressed an interest in becoming a barrister. Her mentor arranged work experience for her with a partially sighted barrister, which gave her a huge amount of courage. The girl now runs a debate society at her school and plans to apply to university to study law. It makes us so proud."

"Watching The Girls' Network harness the power of role models to affect tangible, long term improvements to the lives of young women everywhere was beyond inspiring," says Riley. "They're proof that mentoring isn't just good, it's necessary." Just last month, in fact, a six-year

"YOU GET A REAL SENSE THAT YOU ARE HELPING SOMEONE AND TAKE STOCK OF YOUR OWN ACHIEVEMENTS"

study by the University of Massachusetts found that women at the university who'd been assigned female mentors reported higher "confidence and motivation, a greater sense of belonging, and less anxiety" than those who had no mentors, or whose mentor was a man.

"Most of us have benefitted from having a woman in our lives who's given us a leg-up," says Healey. "And having been a mentor throughout my career, I get *so much* out of it. On a very basic level, it's a real ego boost. You get a genuine sense that you're helping someone, but it also really reinforces your own knowledge base. You get the opportunity to take stock of your achievements, which is such a rare gift in today's pressured and highly competitive world."

Truth is, whichever side of the relationship you're on, we often underestimate the power of mentoring. But as The Girls' Network proves, for many girls it's the difference between feeling like their lives are predestined, and showing them that anything is possible. And that's truly priceless.



Sharpen up with mentoring

Four ways that being a mentor will further your own career...

HONE YOUR CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

"The higher you climb in your career, the less likely you are to be questioned, or even to question yourself," says Stephanie Maurel, chief executive of volunteering charity Concordia, who has been a mentor with The Girls' Network since its inception. "Having a mentee can be like opening yourself up to a dose of critical thinking. When I'm mentoring, I'm constantly being faced with the question of, 'Why? Why did I choose this path over another or why is this business decision the right one?'" This questioning can be invaluable as, according to psychologists, if the part of our brains dedicated to critical self-evaluation isn't exercised we can end up making increasingly bad decisions. "I'd find myself stopping and really, critically, questioning the choices I had made and was making," says Maurel. "This adds whole new layers of reasoning to every part of your life, especially at work."

SEE ONE, DO ONE, TEACH ONE

This is an age-old educational technique used, most famously, to teach surgeons their trade. Teaching someone else a skill that we might take for granted serves to further reinforce our own understanding of that skill. Misha Liu is a mentor for The Girls' Network. She works in wealth management and, thanks to her experiences with The Girls' Network, last year set up her own executive coaching business, *lamspiration*. "Recently, through my work with *lamspiration*, I coached a young guy who was a consultant in The City. He had a big interview coming up and wanted presence and body language training. These were all skills I'd acquired from years within a corporate environment but passing them on had the surprisingly beneficial effect of making me less intimidated in my own boardroom environments."

GET 360 DEGREE INSIGHT

"When you're applying for senior roles you're expected to have ideas about how to improve an organisation," says Professor

Cary Cooper from Manchester Business School. "Mentoring within your own company can give you an invaluable insight into the day-to-day workings of all aspects of a business. More importantly, it enhances your understanding of the perceptions of those in lower positions – are they happy? Do they feel fulfilled? If they don't, a mentee-mentor relationship, which operates slightly outside the everyday confines of work, is the perfect place for them to open up." Even outside of the workplace, as Maurel explains, it's an eye-opening exercise. "You end up mentoring people who are younger than you. It's a whole new brain, a new way of thinking. One that's often really digitally aware. New apps, interesting podcasts, even electronic to-do lists, I have my mentees to thank for all of them."

DEVELOP THE MOST IMPORTANT SOCIAL SKILL

"When you're mentoring someone," explains Cooper, "your job is not to give them answers but to get inside their way of thinking and prompt them to find their own solution. That process hugely helps develop your empathic skills." Research from the Center for Creative Leadership analysed data from 38 countries and found that empathy was one of the most important metrics when it came to performance reviews; managers who were seen as empathetic were overall viewed as better performers by their bosses. Before you decide to mentor someone, Liu advises you to look for a spark. "Make sure you have chemistry with that person and can empathise with what they're going through and what they aspire to be. It's as simple as having coffee with them. If you don't feel a small connection, it's hard to be the best possible mentor."

Want to volunteer as a mentor for The Girls' Network? Sign up to their newsletter at thegirlsnetwork.org.uk for details of their next recruitment drive in the autumn, or to give a regular donation. For more information email info@thegirlsnetwork.org.uk

THE BEAUTY OF GIVING

To raise funds and awareness for The Girls' Network, Clarins has created an exclusive offer for *Stylist* readers. For every £50 or more spent on Clarins products at Harrods (available in store or to order – call 020-7730 1234 and ask for the Clarins counter) during July, it will donate £5 to The Girls' Network, while you'll receive a bespoke make-up

pouch in either hot coral or chic cream – with a gold charm engraved with the *Stylist*/Prix Clarins logo on one side and your initial on the other. So, as well as supporting an amazing cause, which invests in the futures of thousands of young girls, you'll finally get to replace that tatty old make-up bag with a brand new one. Win-win.



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