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David Ross's quest to help Nottingham children achieve their potential

By Nottingham Post (<http://www.nottinghampost.com/people/Nottingham Post/profile.html>) | Posted: September 24, 2013



David Ross

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David Ross is a man who has the trappings of success. He was born into the Ross frozen food family in Grimsby who sent him to school at Uppingham. He read law at the University of Nottingham before joining Arthur Andersen and becoming an accountant.

But what distinguishes him from others is that he recognised his own entrepreneurial spirit early on. Together with friend, Charles Dunstone – they met while at Uppingham – they set up Carphone Warehouse from a flat in Harley Street. The story is well known. The business became the largest independent phone retailer in Europe and made Ross very wealthy indeed.. According to the Sunday Times rich list, he is worth more than £700m.

Today, Ross is no longer involved with CPW where he was chief operating officer for 13 years until 2003.

Among many interests, he has become a philanthropist, although he is probably embarrassed to be called that. Ross gives the impression that he is not entirely comfortable with interviews. He is accompanied by Mark Bolland, who, as deputy private secretary to the Prince of Wales, was credited with winning round public opinion to the heir's relationship with Camilla Parker Bowles.

Among his interests is being a council member of his alma mater in Nottingham.

Ross has set up the David Ross Foundation and David Ross Educational Trust. Through these charities, he has put significant money into Nottingham Potential, an initiative of David Greenaway, the vice chancellor of the University of Nottingham who wants to help children in disadvantaged areas of the city get to university.

Two IntoUniversity centres have opened, in St Ann's and Broxtowe. A third is on its way. Here, less advantaged children are coached by university students and staff so they can learn to confidently read, write and add up. With these skills fully developed, the children will learn more easily and improve their chances of doing well in their exams and winning a university place. There are swathes of Nottingham where young people have not taken exams, let alone aspired to university.

The Nottingham Potential programme is a major investment in the future of primary and secondary-age school pupils, a multi-million pound initiative to help break down barriers to [higher education](#). Youngsters aged 8 to 18 also receive careers advice and help in choosing the right university course.

All this has been made possible by a £2.1m gift from the David Ross Foundation.

"These centres are providing children with a support network they can use to fulfil any ambition they may have," said Ross. "These aims are central to the mission of my foundation and we are glad to be working with the university on such an exciting project."

We meet in an office in the Trent Building of the university. Ross has arrived by helicopter to attend a university council meeting.

Why is philanthropy important in his life. "That's quite a big question, isn't it?" he replies.

The initial roots lie in the [financial support](#) he has given to the Academies movement which gets schools away from local authority control and into independent management. He worked closely with Andrew Adonis when he was involved with education in the Labour government, later becoming a Labour peer as Minister for Schools.

Ross contributed £2m for a new academy, Havelock, in his home town of Grimsby, which brought him some responsibility for its strategy, [management](#) and success.

"It was a school that traditionally provided the fisherman who went to sea on trawlers. This had a family resonance because my family had been involved over a number of generations.

"I put in £2million, the government put in £20m and gave me £6m or £7m to run the school which struck me as a pretty [good investment](#). In terms of spending your philanthropic dollar, this was not bad leverage. I realised there was a great philanthropic model in doing what the State already does, but there's an extra challenge in trying to do it better or in a more innovative, interesting or creative way."

Today he is involved in 15 schools – six secondary, two special and the rest primary, all in the East Midlands.

Ross said he has learned that to be successful, he needed to be involved from primary level to the day students leave university.

"This meant we had to build strong university links.

"It also became clear there was a tragic waste of talent among children who were turned off by the idea of university at the age of 14 or 15. They see it as something not relevant to their life so may not bother taking exams.

"What I saw with Nottingham Potential was a way to engage with children at an earlier age.

"It is not as simple as saying 'you need to fudge your numbers' – I don't agree with that. The integrity of the university admissions process has to be respected.

"But I do believe children who are not attracted to the concept of university need to be engaged from an earlier age.

"That is why Prof Greenaway, came up with Nottingham Potential."

Ross said two by-products had emerged.

"We are able to learn techniques and other things we can take back into our schools for children. Secondly, we are building incredibly strong links with the university, such that any child from one of my academies who has an interest in coming to Nottingham, will be welcomed for masterclasses and day visits.



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"It is a two way street, not one way. The academies and the university can both learn things while encouraging the building of these links, undoubtedly for the benefit of children in my network of schools, but also for the university as a way of engaging with students before they are 16, 17 or 18."

Ross says he is interested in education per se. He recalls an incredibly happy education, first at a state school before moving on to Uppingham.

"I was incredibly lucky and felt I learned a lot – primary, state and Uppingham, university. They gave me something I enjoyed and benefited from. They gave me a number of skills."

Britain's competitiveness also depends on improving the quality of our education across the board, says Ross.

He refers to China and the emerging growth of the middle classes, their education and ambition which Britain will have to compete with in the future.

"If we don't relay that urgency and ambition to our students, we will end up second best in that battle."

Britain needs to be internationally competitive."

Ross is passionate about the theme.

"To me, education in Britain is a curious dichotomy.

"At one end we have the very best education in the world and at the other end we have some of the most dire. Look at Nottingham University, it represents some of the best in global education. It has taken that and put it into Academies. In time it will be doing that in primary schools."

Ross argues that independent schools have a responsibility to help State schools "in a socially responsible way" or end up being resented.

"The Academies movement gives world leading organisations an opportunity to engage with under-performing organisations and give them a lift. It is incumbent on any world leading organisation in the educational sphere to be aware of that."

Ross tries to visit every school in his network every term, although the growing number is making this a challenge.

In setting up his foundation, it was important it was a project which he could engage with, he says, "Otherwise they stand still."

His foundation has a very clear focus around education supporting academies, his old school and university, and the Royal College of Music among others.

"We support organisations we feel are not only worthy recipients of our support, but that are powerful role models and supporters of children in our network. We are developing a broad network of partner organisations."

The foundation distributes several million pounds a year, but Ross is coy about putting a precise figure on it.

Nevertheless, the idea is "to get it all out the door," he adds.

How does society encourage philanthropy?

"For society to feel giving is a good thing, it has to feel valued and encouraged. One way to feel encouraged is a tax break. One way to feel valued is to read positive things about philanthropy."

Americans are very good at it. "When they leave university, they understand that relationship. We aren't as overt."

On a high summer afternoon, men in dinner jackets and women in long evening dresses gathered on the lawns of Nevill Holt, a stone medieval pile on the border of Leics and Northants. This ancient house would not be out of place as an Oxbridge college. Art and sculptures are placed strategically around the grounds, showing off some of the best of modern British talent.

In small pavilions spread out around the gardens, guests are picnicking.

They were gathered to enjoy a performance of Mozart's Magic Flute put on by young opera singers who come together to form Nevill Holt Opera, a celebration of some of the finest young British musicians and singers.

Nevill Holt is the Leicestershire home of David Ross where once a year, for a week, the old stable block is given over to Glyndebourne-style magic. The orchestra and opera singers are drawn from some of the best musicians coming out of British music schools and the Royal Opera House.

While writing this, a letter arrived from the Art Fund inviting me to a preview of an exhibition at the Djanogly Gallery at Lakeside University Park, next January. It is billed as the first public exhibition of one of the most important collections of late 20th Century and contemporary art – David Hockney, Peter Blake, Richard Hamilton, Leon Kossoff and many others. It is the David Ross Collection.

On Wednesday July 10, David Ross celebrated his birthday. He was 48.

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