

Look at us NOW!

There will always be those who question our abilities in life. Rachael Tinniswood talks to three readers who defied the doubters and never looked back

Mother-of-three, Sab Sahota-Lyons, 37, is head of house and learning manager for English at the Priory School in Lewes, East Sussex. An impressive feat in its own right, but even more remarkable given the fact she is blind.

From the moment she started her English literature A Level course, Sab dreamed of being an English teacher. But there was one obstacle in her way – at the age of eight she contracted Still's Disease, a form of arthritis that can inflame the eye as well as the joints. Over the next ten years, her eyesight deteriorated dramatically and, by the time Sab sat her A levels, she needed to dictate her answers to a scribe.

For many, the disability would have reduced any hopes of becoming a teacher to nothing more than a pipe dream – in fact some of Sab's friends and family told her that her plans were unattainable. But Sab had other ideas and, while



Although unable to see to read, Sab has excelled in a profession that depends heavily on sight



many continued to doubt her abilities, she set about quietly collecting the qualifications she would need to achieve her goal.

Sab is just one of a growing number of people who are staging something of a backlash against the 'you can't do that' brigade. Instead of listening to the negativity, this group of self-believers are reaching for their dreams, and defying the doubters by making them come true. Which is exactly what Sab did when her concerned father questioned her ability to control a class of rowdy children.

"As a teenager, I went to a school where we had a blind headteacher, so I never ever thought of it as an obstacle," says Sab, from Hove.

"When I first said I wanted to be a teacher, my family and many of my friends said it just wasn't possible. My dad thought my blindness would

stop me living a normal life. He said, 'You want to be a teacher? You're blind, you're a woman, and you're Asian. How will you do that?' It just made me want it even more."

Despite Sab's determination, finding her first paid position wasn't easy. She was invited for just three interviews out of the 18 positions she applied for, and during one interview was even asked if she was worried about walking into walls.

"I just decided that even if the interviewer wasn't going to be professional, I was," she recalls.

Sab was eventually offered a job at her third interview, at the Priory School, in Lewes, where she had previously carried out her six-month placement as part of her PGCE at Sussex University. Within days, Sab was travelling to and from the school by train with just her cane to assist her. Determined not to let her

lack of sight put her at a disadvantage, she quickly established techniques to monitor even the most unruly of pupils, such as learning the names of every child in her class in the space of one lesson.

Within eight years, Sab had been promoted to both head of house and learning manager for English and also achieved a great deal out of the classroom. As well as being mum to three daughters, aged between one and five, she has also earned a black belt in karate – which she achieved when she was almost seven months pregnant with her third child – and enjoys waterskiing and indoor skydiving.

"People are often surprised when they hear about me," says Sab. "But I have never put limitations on myself – and it's allowed me to make my dreams come true."

"My family told me I was useless and always would be"



Denise Phillips, 38, from Crawley, has faced plenty of bullying in her life. But after a particularly horrific assault that almost paralysed her, she decided she was no longer prepared to be a victim. Now she runs her own successful personal training business.

"I grew up in a dysfunctional household, and my home life was an absolute nightmare. I was repeatedly told I was useless and always would be, and for years I believed this. After being taken into care at the age of 12, I moved

from care home to foster parents to care home, until the age of 16. I then moved into lodgings and got a job at one of the shops in Gatwick Airport, followed by a production line job at a factory, before working as a secretary.

"I could never settle anywhere I lived, which I think comes from not feeling safe and secure. My mum always made it clear that she didn't like me – she used to say I didn't deserve anything, I was just a nothing, a nobody, and I would never be anyone, so I spent my life desperately trying to be liked.

"At the age of 25, after losing my brother to a drugs overdose. ➔



“My headmaster said I’d never amount to anything”



■ **Will Devlin, 34, from Nutts Corner, Northern Ireland, spent his school years smoking behind the bike sheds and chasing girls. At 16 he left school with no qualifications. Eighteen years on he is an entrepreneur with a whole host of businesses to his name.**

“I was useless in school. I had the attention span of a gnat. When it came to maths in particular, it bored me as I thought it was too easy, so I didn’t put any effort in. But you needed maths for everything; physics, chemistry, so I was branded stupid. I very quickly became

uninterested in any of my lessons, and was more interested in smoking and chasing girls than trying to gain any qualifications. As a result, I often found myself in trouble with the teachers. I’ll never forget being called to the headmaster’s office to be reprimanded for misbehaving, and having him tell me my lack of interest in school meant that I’d never amount to anything.

“You wouldn’t have guessed it from the way I acted in lessons, but I actually loved doing maths. I used to go home and work out the square root of the living room, just for fun!

“At 14, I landed a job at a petrol station in a shopping complex. When someone working on the

meat department in the complex’s supermarket called in sick, I was asked to cover for him and took to the job instantly. Everything was like a mathematical equation. I loved that part of it, as well as the need for good presentation skills.

“I left school at 16 and started working full-time at the meat department, and it was at this point, I really started learning the concept of business. I was able to quickly work out the best way to make the most money, and everything I learnt, I mentally filed away to expand my own knowledge of business in general.

“A move into the drinks industry followed, with positions at different

I started going out with a man I’d met through a group of friends. Within 18 months I had given birth to a little boy, Tyler, but sadly, after four years the relationship came to an end.

“I was getting on with my life again when, two years later, I was subjected to a horrific assault by an acquaintance who locked me in a room and savagely beat me.

“He spent at least four hours punching, kicking and strangling me, smashing my head on the walls, and nearly broke my back. There was barely any part of my body that wasn’t covered in bruises. But the worst part was that he kept telling me I would never see Tyler again.

“Eventually I escaped but, despite the nature and severity of my

injuries, which almost left me in a wheelchair, I was told I was unable to press charges due to a lack of evidence. The news left me on the verge of a breakdown.

“Determined to turn my life around, and make sure I was never so vulnerable again, I channelled myself into the fitness side of things and I decided to try life as a group exercise instructor. At last, I’d found something I was good at!

“I seemed to have a knack of relating to people who came to the gym – I think it was because a lot of gym users have issues in one way or another. This led to me qualifying as a personal trainer, a clinical nutritionist and a sports massage therapist. I worked in a gym to learn the ropes, before finally going freelance. The last

couple of years have been extremely hard as I’ve tried to get myself established, but I am a lot more confident in myself now. I have never felt sorry for myself: life makes you who you are and there are people out there far worse off than I have ever been.

“Maybe one day I will find a partner but at the moment my son is still my inspiration. I look at him and remember that he has only got me, there is no family around for support. And the more life has thrown at me, the more determined I have become to do right by my son.”



For more information on Denise’s work, log on to www.ftiden.co.uk

pubs and bars. With every job, I made sure I was learning what was involved in running the businesses and saving to build up the deposit I knew I'd need to one day set up on my own.

"At 24 I created my first business – an indoor go-cart track – with the intention of building it up over a period of three years and then selling it. It worked. After a three-year stint persuading multi-national companies to sponsor me as I indulged in another of my hobbies – motor racing – I was in a position to create the Finell Group – named after my two young daughters, Finn, now six, and Elle, two.

"I despaired on occasion as to what I was going to do when I was young, but I always thought that I wasn't as

thick as people made out. It seems I was right. Within the past two years, the Finell Group has launched a hotel, four bars, a nightclub, two coffee shops, an export company and PR and media companies – and we are constantly planning future ventures, with the aim being to ensure the Finell Group achieve

the sort of familiarity that Richard Branson's Virgin business has.

"It's funny how things turn out; at one point I interviewed the daughter of my old headmaster for a job in my firm. Not bad for someone education had written off as thick all those years ago."



How to reach your full potential

Cognitive hypnotherapist Trevor Silvester from The Quest Institute gives his tips on how to reach your goals

1 Tell people what you are going to achieve and display it somewhere public. Research shows that doing this makes it much more likely that you'll achieve what you put your mind to.

2 Choose who you hang around with. Many of the decisions we make about ourselves are a response to how we're viewed by those around us. If you hang out with negative people, your belief in yourself will be eroded. Find 'can-do' people and connect with them. Ditch the friends who tell you what you can't do.

3 Learn. If you have a particular dream, you're probably not the first to realise it, or have similar obstacles to overcome to achieve it. Read what successful people have to say, especially those who come from similar beginnings. Every book you buy is an investment in your future.

4 Break your dream into pieces. When do you want to have achieved your dream by? What will you need to do to get halfway there? A quarter of the way there? What do you need to do this week? Today? There's only one way to achieve your dream – one step at a time.

5 You're going to make mistakes, so believe in the adage, "There's no failure, only feedback." It's not the mistake that matters, but what you learn from it that moves you forward. Forgive yourself and get on with it.

