

Alternative Roots

Ex-army man Ian McClelland (centre) and hostel worker Nosheen Raja (left) help the homeless to get fit



Running Story

A London hostel is giving the homeless some military training

It's a sunny, August day in London's Hyde Park, and 12 homeless men are doing press-ups at the behest of a combat-trousered man. "Five trees!" he yells, and the men scatter into the greenery in a bid to touch five of Hyde Park's towering Beeches before his next order.

This is the country's only homeless fitness class – taught by a member of the armed forces – and it's working wonders for the men involved. "I've been trying to quit drugs, and the class has really helped me with that – my body just rejects them now," says David 'Scouse' Barton. "I've been doing it for three months. It's great, thoroughly invigorating."

It all started when the fitness-mad managers at King George's homeless hostel in Westminster persuaded a few residents to join them on a run. During their jogs around Hyde Park they noticed some high-octane classes being led by British Military Fitness, who provide outdoor fitness classes run by former members of the armed forces.

Nosheen Raja, 24, the hostel's substance-misuse worker, acupuncturist and nutritionist, rang the group and struck a deal for two specially catered sessions a week.

"Only five guys came initially," says Raja, "but it's grown from there. We've seen a tremendous reduction in drug use among

those involved and less chaos in the hostel. I've also earned the nickname Miss Motivator – it's not easy getting them out of bed for class!"

After just four months, the class raced in the British 10k and are now training for the fiendish Military 10k – an off-road run involving hills, forests and a lot of mud.

Ex-army man Ian McClelland is impressed

"I used to just sit around doing drugs, being depressed, but exercise took me out of that. I feel a lot happier now"

with the progress his class has made. "We began with guys who literally couldn't run fifty yards, and are now racing in 10ks," he says. "We have more profanity than your average class, but they also have more drive."

Five months' worth of classes have convinced Raja that this is the way forward in reforming drug addicts. "Your bog-standard counselling, rehab and detox works for some, but the majority come out of rehab and are straight back to square one. This works, and it is far cheaper too."

For 50-year-old Barton, the classes have been integral in turning his life around. "I used to feel like crying when I started, but I've come on since then. I used to sit around doing drugs, being depressed, but exercise took me out of that. I feel a lot happier now."

For more information about British Military Fitness go to www.britmilfit.com or call 0870 241 2517

New Door Policy

Two disabled DJs are changing the face of clubbing

For 22-year-old DJ Lee Farrell, enjoying a night out clubbing is harder than it is for most. The Islington-born Londoner is disabled, with mobility problems and a speech impediment. "I've not been let in to clubs many a time," he says, "and lots of my disabled friends have experienced the same thing. We are always left out or not accommodated for."

Just like many young people, Farrell (below) wants to go out with his friends, have a pint, meet people and have fun. Discussing it a few months ago with his best friend Dean Hickey, also a DJ, they decided to set up their own club

"Our goal is to have a night for disabled people where everyone can relax and have a laugh"

night. "Our goal is to have a night for disabled people," he explains, "where nobody looks at each other any different, where people can relax, have a laugh, and feel sure they will have their needs met."

After months of planning, the launch night is this week at the Bar Academy in Islington, which regularly plays host to musical big guns, from Bloc Party to Kasabian. On the decks will be Farrell as well as Hickey, spinning old-skool beats and hip hop.

Disabled people are seven times more likely to be out of work, and twice as likely to have no qualifications as non-disabled people – something Farrell has experienced first-hand. "I'm not working at the minute, and have had trouble finding a job," he says. "I'm hoping to turn this night into a social enterprise though. To go to a bigger venue and involve more and more disabled people in the running of it."

Duncan Angus works at Disability Action in Islington, a charity that challenges the exclusion and discrimination of local disabled people. He says: "I've worked with young disabled people for five years now, and we are just inundated. So many of them are just sitting at home doing nothing. They can't physically access most buildings,

and the attitudes of commercial clubs doesn't cater for them. Finding work is another real barrier. So

I think it's a credit to these young people who are actually going out of their way to try and start their own business."

Remix 'N' Scratch, Bar Academy Islington, 16 Parkfield St, London, N1 (www.islington-academy.co.uk, 08444 772000). September 3. Doors 8pm. Tickets £5 adv, £7 on the door.

