

BUILDING STRONG MINDS

Rugby legend Gareth Thomas visits a secondary school to talk about the vital role teachers play in supporting young people

We're standing in an echoing school sports hall in Dagenham with Gareth Thomas. He's talking to a group of students about how it felt to open up about his sexuality while he was still playing professional rugby – and you could hear a pin drop.

He's someone you'd never tire of listening to, and not just because of those melodic Welsh tones. He's open, engaging and eloquent – despite the fact, as he's quick to tell us, he wasn't a confident student himself. "Academically, I struggled," he says, "but sport was what unlocked school for me. Not only did I get to play rugby but I was learning about being in a team, being a leader, at the same time."

Men's Health is spending the day with the former Wales rugby captain at The Jo Richardson Community School in east London. He's here to talk about mental-health awareness and the invaluable role teachers play in supporting young people, both academically and pastorally.

Thomas speaks as naturally about his battles with mental health as he does his triumphs on the rugby field. "The biggest challenges I faced in my career were personal ones. The world of sport is a very stereotypical environment, where difference is sometimes feared. The fact that I was captaining my country and doing what I'd always dreamed of, but



at the same time hiding the fact I was gay, was incredibly difficult," he reveals. "I wanted to challenge the perception of what a man was in the sporting world. And I wanted people to judge me on my ability, not on my sexuality."

You suspect he would have made a great teacher, if he hadn't been swayed by rugby at an early age. His admiration for the profession is clear. "We put our faith in teachers at school," he says. "It's a time when we're particularly vulnerable and to have that safe environment, with people who are looking out for any signs that maybe we're not OK, is vital."

He's pleased to see the work that's being done at the school to encourage conversations about acceptance. "It

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must be so rewarding to know that you're not just teaching a pupil a subject but life skills as well," he suggests to psychology teacher and mental-health first-aider Helen Quail.

"The biggest rewards of teaching definitely come from seeing the pupils succeed," agrees Mrs Quail. "Sometimes, that's seeing a student who's worked really hard for top marks get an A*, and



INSPIRING THE NEXT GENERATION AT AN EAST LONDON SCHOOL

sometimes it's seeing a student who's struggled just complete the course.

"A lot of what I do is raising awareness and letting the students know that we all have to look after our mental health, in the same way we do our physical wellbeing. Children today are growing up in an increasingly exciting but complex world. We're trying to train them to be resilient; we teach them things that will help them to be successful as adults. As a teacher, you have the opportunity to

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shape lives – and that's a huge privilege."

Thomas regularly breaks off from our interview to chat to the students outside in the corridor, at one point having an impromptu bench-pressing competition. He seems almost surprised by their unconditional acceptance of him.

"It saddens me that there are still so few openly gay sportsmen," he tells us later. "But meeting the kids today gives me the belief that it will change. When you speak to them, you can see that any form of intolerance has no place for them, whether on the street or on the terraces. It's not OK, full stop. That's a testament to the teachers, because the way to break down stigma is through education."

So how is his mental health today? "It's in a controllable place because I'm not

afraid to say that I get sad," he says. "I deal with it by talking about it and knowing that my ability to show people I'm vulnerable is one of the greatest strengths I have."

"Am I a role model? When I think of role models, I think of people who stand up for those who can't stand up for themselves. If I can do that, I can achieve more than I ever did as a rugby player."

But, of course, Gareth Thomas doesn't really deal in 'ifs'.



THE FORMER RUGBY CAPTAIN CAMPAIGNS FOR MENTAL-HEALTH AWARENESS



GARETH WITH PSYCHOLOGY TEACHER MRS QUAIL

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