

## **What is The Polar Academy?**

The Polar Academy is a charity that works with Scottish teenagers struggling with mental health, bullying, anxiety, depression and a lack of confidence. It was set up by Craig Mathieson in 2012, Polar Explorer and the Explorer in Residence for the Royal Scottish Geographical Society expedition to the South Pole in 2004. Teenagers who are selected for the programme experience a year full of mental and physical training before going on a two-week expedition to East Greenland. Whilst in Greenland, the teenagers develop life skills such as living independently, resilience and teamwork. The young people chosen to participate in The Polar Academy, go from being tunnel visioned, shy, vulnerable individuals, to inspiring, outgoing superstars! In their own words, Carys and Peter share their experience of being part of The Polar Academy team in 2024-25.

### **Peter: How did I become involved?**

I'm Peter, and I was one of those invisible kids. Before Polar Academy, I had been failing to attend school due to a concussion, causing chronic headaches and brain fog, for nearly 5 years. I was incredibly far behind at school and about to have National 5 exams. I thought there was no way out for me. I had tried over and over throughout the years, but my life was just grey.

One day, I heard from my friends that The Polar Academy had come to our school. A couple of days later I tried to sign up in school. It couldn't hurt I thought, but once in school, I couldn't find where to sign up,

I had missed my chance.

Over the next few days regret swelled in me, until a few days later my Mum called the school and asked if I could be considered, which was met with confusion. I had already been nominated and needed to attend a mandatory meeting the next day at which they'd announce who got through. Apparently, my guidance teacher had suggested me without saying anything. And that's how I became part of The Polar Academy -without signing up or even being at school.

When they say they find the invisible kids, they mean it.

They found me.

### **Carys: How did I become involved?**

The Polar Academy found me in late October 2023 when I attended a school assembly where Craig explained the Polar Academy programme. It was the first assembly that I had attended in four years. I went home and did all the research I could and felt a growing sense of excitement about this amazing charity. From a very young age, I have struggled massively due to being a neurodivergent, trying to live in a neurotypical world. I found social situations difficult, including attending my classes at school. My younger brother was my voice for everything, even when it came to just talking to a neighbour in the street. I never thought that I would be able to achieve such amazing things, and I am so proud of how far I have come already.

## **Selection and training**

Training to be as fit as an athlete. Training to be as fit as the rest of my team. Training to pull a 45kg sledge across frozen lakes for days on end. Training to achieve incredible things. Only a year ago, I would never have imagined that I could do such things. Now, I could do it all.

I continually pushed myself out of my comfort zone, whether that was eating new foods that weren't my 'safe' foods, or doing nightly push ups, or even working with a group of people, all similar to me, trying to become our best versions of ourselves. One of the highlights of the training for me, was when the whole team got together for our last tyre haul across West Sands in St Andrews. We walked through the cold North Sea (it was February!) pulling our tyres, with the relentless weight of the wet sand, pulling at our feet. The water was freezing cold, although we kept moving, pushing through as a team.

We were ready. We were all ready.

We left for Greenland 2 weeks later.

## **Finding a sense of belonging in Greenland**

The biggest challenge of being on expedition to Greenland was coming back home to Glasgow Airport, because, as much as I missed my family, I absolutely loved the country and would go back tomorrow in a heartbeat. Greenland is my safe place, where I feel seen. The Greenlandic community is utterly incredible. They are all so welcoming and open. The scenery, the Northern lights, the mountains seen by so few, it was a dream come true. From skiing across lakes, with mountains either side of you, to surviving an arctic storm with winds up to 50mph, this was my trip of a lifetime.

## **Being a scientist in Greenland and collecting data in the field**

We used the Kestrel weather stations which we borrowed from the Royal Meteorological Society to predict the weather for the following day.

Once we had established camp for the night, we set up the Kestrel during dinner and let it run the course. The Kestrels collected data such as air pressure, wind speed and temperature. The air pressure helped us predict the arctic storm that was coming, as the pressure was decreasing at an insane speed. We managed to spot some cumulonimbus clouds, which told us that there was snow on the way.

This data feeds into our understanding of the impact of weather upon us. We presented the data that we had gathered to Academics and students in St Andrews University and produced graphs to show the increasing temperatures within Greenland.

## **What happens next for me?**

The biggest change in me has been my growth in confidence. I will forever be saying 'yes' to new opportunities, even if it seems scary at the time. I have taken on new sports since being back, such as paddle boarding. I would like to work in the outdoors and travel the world alone. I would also like to deliver speeches all around the world, sharing my experience of The Polar Academy and be a climate change activist.