

Interviewee: Fraser Boyd

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My first memory of being involved with it was when it started really as a project that Jenny had done via the Sunday School in the youth group at Dunblane cathedral. And it was pretty much meeting maybe every couple of weeks or once a month down at the Dunblane centre. They use the art room down there. And it was quite a nice, fairly informal thing that Jenny just put on every few weeks. And it was all, it was all kids like Ian, Ian's age - Ian Brown. And it really started as a youth-led thing and all the awareness that was done in Dunblane, and then the Cathedral, was done by the kids who I think at that time were 11,12,13. Jenny obviously had experience of it, and she just wanted someone else along with her, who obviously had experience working with kids as she did. And, yeah, we just had a lot of, I guess they kind of started the, the pen pal project was one of the first things that we did. And that was between the local primary schools and Nansato primary. And one of my kind of early roles was filtering through all the pen pal letters when they were being sent out there in bulk and coming back in bulk. And then there was a huge delay really between the letters being written and you know, the kids would write about Christmas, and they would arrive in June. It was quite interesting, in the sense that the kids in Dunblane, there was a real naivete about what the kind of things that would read about it, okay, they're just primary school kids, but you, you kind of thought even as a teacher, you were sitting there going, do I give the kids a bit of guidance here. And what was what was coming back from Malawi was really insightful, what the kids were asking about and telling them about, and I hope that at the time, the kids in Dunblane who read the letters back, you know, took some time to discuss them with their teacher. And because there was so much on them, that gave an insight into just what the kids in Malawi had an interest. And you could I mean, as an adult, you could tell a lot about how they were learning English by reading the text.

The first visit that Jenny did where the four or five kids who went were about 15, I wasn't involved in the visit, I'll be honest, and say I actually thought at the time, the kids were too young. And I thought, are they really going to be prepared for what they're going to see as a young person out there, just in terms of the poverty? And I wasn't, I wasn't negative about it, I was just more worried that it was just a little bit too young. But I turned out, I would happily admit I was wrong, completely. And when the group came back, you know, I found myself thinking that you should have gone like, they had loads of stories for years afterwards, that made us all sit up and be a lot more motivated, because they could tell you something all the time about an experience that they had.

We had visitors over from Malawi. And one of them stayed, I was still staying at my mom and dad's house at that point. And we had one of the guys stay with us for a few nights. They moved around just so they got a bit of variety and so many people actually had offered to host them. And we kind of wanted as a committee at that point to make them as welcome as possible but also give them a variety of different places and some time on their own.

Yeah, that's kind of how I got involved in the sort of early stages. And then there was quite a big block of time where I came off the partnership committee. I was on it at the beginning. But when it became a SCIO, or whatever it was, it became a business as well as a charity. It was a roundabout at the time I came off. And it wasn't meant to do with that decision. There were just other time commitments and whatnot. I didn't feel I was giving as much as it needed to be. And there were other people who were. I only really came back on the committee as such in 2019,20. But I still kind of continued to, you know, just contribute little bits here and there. And then it was 2015 that we began planning the first Boys Brigade visit out there, which was 2016 and then again in 2019. So, the first project was purely painting walls, painting the metal grills and the windows. And doing some artistic painting as well with like wall displays in the classrooms, but with the money that we'd fundraised that also paid for the floors to be redone and the outside walkways and things like that that were crumbling a bit to be to be rebuilt.

The first year we went we split the group in two and one group went to Pisani. But yeah, I was in a group that was at Nansato. So, we did about the same amount in both schools, I think in the first project, overall, I think we renovated 18 classrooms, whether it was painted, or the floors recast and stuff like that. But it was very much working from eight in the morning till three in the afternoon kind of thing and then trying to do as many other things as we could. The second project, we did actually do some building of walls because we paid for two new classrooms to be to be built from scratch, because Pisani was teaching six classes outside under trees and stuff like that. So, in that second project, all the work that we did was a mixture of building and painting and then the windows like before, it was pretty much all at Pisani. There was some work done at Nansato, but it was done before we arrived. The money was used and then we arrived and just did the

manual work at Pisani. It felt quite different. Because on the second trip, the kids were still in school, whereas the first trip they did finished for the summer holidays, although there were some in for exams and things like that, but it was quite quiet. Whereas the second time, we I don't know, you almost felt like you were disrupting school life a bit. You were definitely a distraction. The connections that the boys made with the local kids that second time we went were far deeper and more meaningful I think just because you saw the same kids every day.

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I think the second year we went one of the things that actually we hadn't done the first time, and it completely took me aback, was visiting just a family's house. I had an idea of what a typical Likhubula house would look like. But it wasn't what transpired at all. And I'm sure there's a variety, because obviously, they're all unique and built by hand. But I think the boys as well were like, that, no, that can't be the actual house, that's got to be the bit where they keep the animals at night, well, it was the bit where they keep the animals at night, but it was also where seven humans were staying as well, you know. That was quite profound. And then there was a couple of houses that had had flood damage that year as well. And they were still rebuilding them. And I think that was you kind of go the second time thinking, I've been here before, you know. And I know what to expect. And I know what these people are going to be surprised by and whatnot. And you're sort of thinking, well, there's not much else that's going to shock me this time that I didn't see the last time but seeing the house was quite, quite shocking. And then I think the fact that even in Blantyre, we stopped outside the house of one of the drivers, who's obviously quite well paid in a professional job. We stopped outside his house at one point on I think in the first trip. And I remember thinking like he must be getting a better wage that he can have a better house, you know, and then the teachers houses nearby that I don't know, they're kind of provided, but they're, you know, doing the same job I do. And yet the building they're living in is profoundly different. There's a lot of unknown conversations, I think, that the boys have had with people their own age when they were there, and younger kids as well, that I know they've really valued. And if we go back again, I want to make much more out of that interaction between the kids that are the same age as them. Because I know there's a lot of a lot of value to that and just finding out what's important to people.

I remember after the first visit, we did a couple of presentations in the autumn for like the rotary and people who'd supported it financially or just had asked to hear about it after we came back. And I think I remember at that point, you know, the boys could share little anecdotes and whatnot. But I think they still didn't really delve into the emotional side of it too much. You tended to get more, like a parent of those boys would tell you months later on you know, oh we can see a difference in them and he thinks much more about such and such, or things just come up at the dinner table that even months later they'd never mentioned in the initial dump of a fortnight's visit that comes out straight away. But parents would tell us, you know, farther down the line.

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I think the three guys that did that podcast - that was about the second lockdown they recorded that, so that would have been 18 months after they'd been. And I remember sitting recording that with them thinking, you've never said that before, or you've never been as open about it before. And it may just have been the setting, or it may have been the time. At the time though, when we were actually there, we you know, we had a group meeting every night. And they were as honest as they'd been in their BB careers around the circle each night talking about things that they'd seen, that they talked to the Malawians about during the day. And we just made a point at dinner every night. The blog that they wrote, that really just helped them kind of focus on a lot. We also, both times that we went we met up with a Boys Brigade group in Blantyre. The one thing the boys always used to say was that the boys in Malawi sewed their own uniforms, not so much the shirts, but the hats that they wear over there, that we used to wear. They had all made their own one. That's one of the first tasks you have to do when you join. We would never do sewing, well not we would never do it, but they would never ask for it. Whereas over there the boys were showing off with pride, you know, what they'd made for their own uniform and things like that. And we'd pointed out how the boys in Malawi's shoes were shinier than ours were. So, the effort there was obvious to them as well. But that's been a good connection to make. We hear from them relatively often, outwith the partnership.

That link that was supposed to provide the training, that funding then disappeared, and it wasn't replaced after COVID, I don't know why. So that's never ever happened. But I know that the Boys Brigade has this organisation called Global Fellowship of Christian Youth. So, they do try to, they've got an East African Officer who they're supposed to be supporting with training and stuff like that. So, I think we can kind of build on that because it's always people their own age as well.

I remember after the first time I went, or it's probably while I was still there. I worked in the States every summer for 20 years at a summer camp. Initially doing the whole thing, later on only doing a bit because I was teaching then, and the holidays weren't long enough. But that had been a huge part of my life from 1998 till 2017. And I remember in Malawi saying, right, well, I'm not going to be going over there forever, that I'm going to make this my sort of new... I'll be that annoying guy who's, 'what are you doing now to raise funds for Malawi?' Because I could tell after the first visit that I thought we will be coming back here. And Fiona will maybe tell you, but, the second time we went, we'd had a sort of proper farewell thing the night before we were leaving Likhubula. But on the morning that we were leaving - and we were going to do a sort of safari thing for two nights at the end - we'd gone back to Pisani school to hand something over or there was

some little bit of ceremony or photograph that still needed to be taken, you know. We, we did that. And I remember being sort of quite emotional about it and these kids. I sat down in the minibus to for us to drive away and the kids were kind of [excited noise] out the windows, you know, and I, I completely lost it and just sobbed like a baby for about 10 minutes. And Fiona. The boys in the back of the bus behind me all went completely ...and I was like, oh, are they shocked? Are they? Are they having a moment? And Fiona was like no, they're all looking at you, Fraser. Well, I'm actually glad to have seen that. Because at that point I wasn't in charge. I was taking over in the August coming up after that. And feeling I was like No, that's good that they've seen you crying in front of them without any problem before you take over as BB Captain because they need to know that you're human. And as a male, you're not afraid to cry in front of people and things like that. But the overriding feeling at that point was we definitely want to come back here - we didn't know about COVID at that point - but you kind of still felt yourself thinking, have these kids got a chance that in three years' time if we come back on the same rota, they'll still be at school, they'll be alive, their parents will still be alive. There just felt like there was so much uncertainty about leaving the place that, I don't know, it all just kind of came over me in one, one moment. I think I wasn't the only one. But I just remember that quite starkly.

In that second trip, because on the first trip we did the same thing, we went on a two-day safari thing up at Mvuu camp. And the second one, we didn't go there, we went to the one that's just outside Blantyre. And I remember pulling up to it thinking, what are we? Why are we coming here? Like, it's, it might as well be somewhere in Western Europe, kind of holiday resort almost thing. We went into the dining room on that first night, and it was full of American evangelicals from Oklahoma. I just thought, why are we doing this? And the first year, nobody said this. And obviously, nobody went, well, Alex and Matthew, Fiona and Paul's kids, they did go twice. But it was only the second year where the boys were like, I don't know why we did that rich bit at the end. It was really nice, and you needed that time too, if you hadn't done the sort of Safari bit and seen it, you'd have been thinking, Ohh, but something just didn't feel right about it. And in the first year that we went at Mvuu Camp, there were British army guys who were helping with that Prince Harry thing where they were taking the elephants out of wherever it was, and they were off duty, and they were raucous. And you just thought, oh, no, it's like a corner of Malaga in Malawi, and it's just not, it's not right. I still think though that we would, you'd still want to do it again, because you still want the boys to have that experience. In a sense they could ice break a conversation back home by talking about rhinos and elephants and stuff like that. And then use that as a way of getting into say, but actually, when we were in Likhubula, this is what you know. And you would, you would never go all that way and not go and look at the wildlife.

I've like, I mean, since coming home from both of them, like as a teacher, I sometimes have to stop myself going, right kids, or right colleagues, stop complaining about this because in Malawi... But you never want to use it that way. It's more. I don't know. I definitely 'check my privilege' as the phrase goes if we're sitting in a staff meeting, and we're complaining about something that you think, first world problems folks, come on.

I would like to get my school more involved if I could. The only thing really, well, the only thing we've done is the 90 kilogramme rice challenge five or six times and we rescued a load of furniture the council was about to put in a skip and I said, get it to banana box trust in Dundee and get it on the container which they did. So, that's gone to a brand-new school somewhere in the north of Malawi that was just opened in the summer. But yeah, I almost feel like every school in Scotland could be doing something, you know. Scottish government tells schools to do a lot of stuff. See if they actually said that, you know, not for travelling or anything, but just like set up a partnership work out where you can support people directly and work out a way you can learn from them. Because there are hundreds of ways that you know, people can think about their attitudes apart from anything else. A way to find out about how climate change affects people. It would be a much more valuable thing for school to do than some of the stuff that they that they say you should be doing.

I think now if you because the high school still has their Likhubula race across country thing every year. I think probably because of that the partnership is quite well known or at least a token level. I still think there's still a lot of people who are surprised when you tell them that Dunblane has a partnership. I almost think we need to sign at the entrance to the town because every other town in Scotland that's gotten, like Perth who's in partnership with a city in Germany, why not have a sign at the entrance to Dunblane that says, 'Partnership with Likhubula in Malawi'.

I think our two projects with the Boys Brigade had a pretty big impact on visibility and knowledge about what, you know what we were doing, what we were aiming to do. I don't necessarily think it raised the profile of the general ongoing work through the education and the fertiliser and stuff that was done in the past with the goats and stuff like that. But people knew there was a connection going on. I think we could probably have done more in between projects or after projects to kind of raise awareness of, of what was on. I still think it's quite small in terms of the, just the knowledge of people. People may know there's a link and they may have heard the name. I'm not sure people really know the full extent of ... because it is very significant, what the partnership does, but I don't know that the wider community knows that.

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Like, we're just saying I would like it to get to be higher profile within Dunblane and I would like it to be looking at how the people in Dunblane can actually learn and make it truly reciprocal. I think we should make a more regular priority to get Malawians over here to share with us. I don't mean we should do it for the sake of it, and we should do it for a purpose and make a big thing out of it. I think that tertiary education has got to be something that we that we look at seriously. And also, just try to understand more about the challenges within Malawi itself in primary education even or seek to understand more about the impact of how important just the primary education is, while still obviously making sure that the bursaries happen.

I was contacted, nothing to do the partnership. But before we went in 2019, I got contacted through the Scottish Primary teacher's group on Facebook - which is huge, it's got about 15,000 people in it - by a Malawian guy who was asking teachers for support with materials for, for schools and whatnot. And I had said to him, I was like, well, we're going out to Malawi in July, I'll be quite happy to meet you in Lilongwe, because we had this five-hour gap between flights. So, I did. I mean he cycled miles and miles out of wherever his place is, and he was telling me all about the school that he basically started for children, who, for whatever reason, they've not been told officially, but they don't attend mainstream school, either because they have a disability or some kind of learning difficulty. Or they had the stigma of they've tried two or three times to pass the end of year exam, and they haven't and so they fallen behind their peers. And they're like, I don't want to go to school with people three years younger than me or six years younger than me, whatever. So, he and two or three other people had started this school, completely free, voluntary, but were just basically seeking support in different ways. So, we've sent him stuff my school was chucking out even just like chalk, we've got rid of all the blackboards, so I said, we'll send you all the chalk, sent piles of jotters and carefully selected reading material and stuff like that. But speaking to him that day, just sitting outside the airport, I'm thinking, well, right, we noticed in Likhubula that kids did not go to school if they had cerebral palsy, for example, or just a physical disability that prevented them from getting to school or getting around school or whatever, or just because it was a family matter of shame, or whatever, that you had that kid with a disability. And I think, for me, it's got to be important not to impose our cultural norms on Malawi, but I think also in the future, as a partnership we need to look at well, we're supporting education and that, but what are we doing that makes us actually just improve access to education, which is free, or should be free and should be inclusive.

That has to be driven, the future of it has to really be driven by the needs of the community in Likhubula, and we have to do well and do better about listening to them and encouraging them to come to us with their needs. You'll have sensed my frustration, probably, that things when they're done by committee can sometimes also be very well, hold on, hold on, hold on, you know, we can't, you know, we can't do a short notice fundraiser because... I'm like, well, cyclones don't happen with plenty notice, you know, you think things like that, where we, we need to be able to respond and have funds that we can use in emergencies, because we're going to have to. The climate change stuff is not going to get any worse, not going to get any better. So, I think we've got to be prepared to look at long term, sustainable, climate based, you know, development that we can put our money into and get Scottish businesses potentially to put their money into as well. You know, what the community needs there that you do hear about it happening elsewhere in Malawi, that planning for the climate change to happen and not you know, not responding to when it happens. So, I think those would be things for me to push the Partnership on. I think it's got to be driven by what Likhubula needs, really.