

Summer 2

Laidlaw Leadership in Action & Final Reflection

To begin my final Laidlaw reflection, I look to the old cliché – “All good things come to an end”. This is to say that yes, perhaps my time as a Laidlaw scholar is nearing its close as is my time in university (that’s not to say there isn’t room for alumni participation) but it has triggered the beginnings of my life after uni. Here, I hope to pay tribute to and recount my experience of the programme, how it has altered my life, my choices and what I have learned over the course of the past two years.

My LiA: Letters from Kabwe

Many of life’s learnings come when you are put in unfamiliar situations. I arrived in Zambia, expecting to bear witness to the huge disparities between Irish and Zambian social life and healthcare, yet I left Zambia with a love for life there, an understanding of how often less is more and a want to break down the barriers facing Zambian youth.

My project was based in Kabwe, where I worked with an Irish Charity called ZAMDA, which is dedicated to providing direct and effective aid to various projects in and around the city of Kabwe, in particular to the primary school called Sables Nua. To give background to what has been labelled “The world’s most toxic town”; Kabwe is the northern capital of the Zambian Central Province, situated 100km north of the capital Lusaka and near the central Africa’s Copperbelt. It is known for its mines, particularly the terrible legacy of Zambia’s lead mines. To this day, people still live on toxic soil. Many of the children in Sables Nua come from the “nearby” compound called Makululu (a one/ two hour walk). It is an area of informal settlement, where access to public services is extremely poor. These children walk to and from Sables every day.

My purpose with ZAMDA was on the burgeoning field of sport-for-development and my role there was to help facilitate access to sports for the children in Sables Nua primary school. Judo and soccer were my particular focus having had many years’ experiences in the Irish Judo scene, female soccer teams and



mixed five-a-side. The idea of the sport-for-development movement stems from the belief that sport will improve the welfare of others through development. Its focus is to provide better opportunities for others. Sport is a universal language; it was described by Nelson Mandela as “being able to speak to people in a language they can understand”. The premise for my project with ZAMDA sought to include youth regardless of economic means, gender or ability in sport. I particularly focused on supporting positive perceptions of women in sport, to break down barriers, increase participation and also develop leadership opportunities.



Each day I played sport in Sables. Increasing female participation and representation in Soccer was a hit, it proved extremely successful with the girls in the school. There has been a consistent shortage of female participation in soccer at Sables. Throughout my time there, I trained with the girls’ team, coached them and imparted my experiences to them. There is one girl from Sables who has progressed to play for Zambia, the other girls look to her as a mentor and someone who has brought great glory to her family in Kabwe. They strive to be like her. I have seen the passion the girls have for soccer. They play barefoot or given the shortage of football boots, they play matches with a single boot on their “best” leg. With mentorship and coaching this passion is furthered to incredible skill and it is the girls that I met and coached that will go on to do the same for those who are not yet old enough to join the team. Looking back on this experience, I think I achieved what I set out to do and yet I know there is always more to do. As they say in Bemba “panono panono” – little by little, slowly, slowly.



Four times per week I entered the dojo, a place of huge respect for the boys of Sables. No shoes, no messing, just pure athleticism and hard work. The only judo training here is for boys, and even at that the numbers were dwindling. The minute I entered that Dojo, I realised what it meant to them. Many of the boys disliked school but they loved Judo. Judo was a way for them to progress and compete in tournaments, tournaments which would take place in Lusaka or even further in the neighbouring Zimbabwe. The boys loved the idea of training with “musungus” – meaning “wanderer” a term for non-natives. Attendance increased the more we partook in the training. I began to understand the importance of that dojo whilst I was there. The boys needed it.



It gave them something to commit to every week, something to help clear their heads and something to provide an escape from the bubble of whatever life they lived in Kabwe. Many of these boys were “street boys” and frequented the emergency shelter provided by Sables. But to contradict myself a little, the dojo was more than a simple escape, it was also an opportunity. Opportunity is something that really struck me whilst in Kabwe and perhaps I feel it is something that separates the life I had in Ireland as a teenager compared to the average teenager in Kabwe. Many of these children are capable of excelling, they have the ability, but they lack the opportunity. Looking at my life I have had ample opportunity. This dojo is an opportunity. An opportunity to develop key skills, to travel past the boundaries of Makululu, to network with others in the sport and see horizons outside of the Kabwe skyline. The learning I took from that dojo and the symbol that dojo represents – a hope – is something I will carry with me for the rest of my life. The concept of “opportunity costs” is what I took home with me. Students in Sables didn’t suddenly get smarter or suddenly become so skilled at judo that they got onto the Zambian team. They simply had a

sporting or education opportunity that wasn't available to children ten years prior. This is the difference. Opportunity.

At the end of my Zambian experience, I can say that I have worked on intercultural fluency, emotional intelligence and my ability to empathize. I was placed in a challenging environment, and it was hard but I am all the better for it. I know that I imparted my skills, my enthusiasm for judo and soccer and my ambition to the children I mentored and coached. But I also know that they imparted so much more to me.

My Laidlaw Journey

The lessons I have learned from my time in the Laidlaw Scholarship Programme do not solely come from my Summer 2 experience of Zambia but have been built upon over the past two years. Unfamiliar situations need not just be on a different continent, matter of fact they are far more likely to be close to home. Laidlaw has taught me the lesson of self-confidence and self-belief. There were many times over the past two years where I had felt out of my comfort zone during Lead sessions, where I wanted the ground to swallow me whole and for the day to be finished. And yet, there is a kind of perverse but brilliant feeling that comes with sticking with it, speaking up and pushing yourself over the edge of that "comfort zone" line. It may not be the adrenaline rush that comes from ziplining over the edge of the Victoria Falls valley dividing Zambia from Zimbabwe, but it's a different type of thrill, an understated nuanced one.

My understanding of leadership has grown, I feel as though I have lived what it was. In my Summer 1 video, I talked about my perspective on leadership, how it is not about dominance or territoriality, how it concerns others and not the self. It's about service and compassion. I still believe leadership is exactly this, but I feel as though I have demonstrated my version of leadership through my LiA, my summer one research and through the various leadership sessions. I find it interesting to look back at how I thought my LiA would go, how I was set on continuing research on Ionic medicines. I still have a passion for ionic liquid medicines and sustainable medicine, but I now also have the beauty of a very different summer 2 experience in Zambia. Looking back now, there is nothing that I would change. My lab experience taught me practical skills, resourcefulness, critical thinking, and teamwork but my Zambian experience taught me empathy, humility and how rewarding a life of service to others is. To bring this reflection back to what has stuck with me from Zambia to Ireland. Opportunity. I was given the opportunity to apply for Laidlaw. Laidlaw gave me the opportunity to work in Zambia. One opportunity creates another and so on. Why not use the opportunities we have all been given to create opportunities for others so that no child, teenager

or adult is left behind? To echo the words of the founder of ZAMDA; “the good you do in Zambia may only be a small drop in the ocean. But the ocean is made up of drops”.

