

Bouncing Back: LiA Showcase Report

My Leadership-in-Action Project: Dean Heritage Centre, Forest of Dean, England.

Introduction

Reflecting on my LiA journey has highlighted how challenging it has been, but also how great the experience and personal growth it has given to me. It is with huge gratitude that the Laidlaw Scholarship's leadership development programme prepared me so well for it, and its thanks to the enduring support of the Scholarship Team that I successfully completed my LiA project at the Dean Heritage Centre in the Forest of Dean. My showcase of this experience is divided into the background of my project, its value to the local community, and then my personal reflection on the volunteering leadership experience.

Background

In remaining positive about this year, I think the best way to describe it is ultimately as character building. In June 2023, just before I was going to start a project in my university town of York, I broke and dislocated two vertebrae in my neck and fractured my wrist in a mountain biking accident. This left me in ICU for a week and put quite a dampener on my summer prospects. However, not to be too deterred and while still in hospital, I contacted the local history museum in my home area of the Forest of Dean. The Dean Heritage Centre is an award-winning local museum that catalogues, preserves and promotes the rich and varied local farming and industrial history of the Forest, and I was hugely excited when they agreed to let my very-broken self to volunteer for them for six weeks from July to September.

Here, I had the privilege to work with researchers and the museum curators to catalogue historical artifacts, manage incoming donations and lead the development of a new presentation on the families of the historically significant local mining community. Much of my time was spent digitising the photograph and postcard collection, with each one being of historical significance as they told the varied story of the Forest of Dean from the last two centuries. Despite not being able to do as much as I would have wanted due to my injuries, the volunteering experience gave me a greater understanding of the importance of local museums and their valuable contribution to their local communities whose history they preserve.

The Dean Heritage Centre – Recording local history for all

The Forest of Dean is in the western part of Gloucestershire, bordering Wales to the west and the River Severn to the south. Its diverse history and industry have significance all the way back to Roman times, with an emphasis on its forestry, iron working and coal mining industries. The Dean Heritage Centre (DHC) is the depository for artifacts relating to its local history and it receives 10-15 new items a week, which are added to its archives of over 35,000 items. For my Leadership-in-Action, I focused on cataloguing and digitising these contributions so that their historical value can be accessed quickly and easily by the local community and researchers.

Considering my restricted movement due to my injuries, the museum curator gave me the task of cataloguing and digitising hundreds of photographs and postcards from the 1860s to the 1980s. This work involved creating new entries in the museum's online archive for each photograph and including any known provenance and background, so that researchers can utilise them for academic work. Over the 6 weeks I completed over 200 new entries, which out of a photograph archival collection of more than 10,000 was a massive achievement.

In discussing the proposal for my LiA project with the curator, I was drawn to the photograph work as such visual artefacts provide an immeasurable benefit to the recording and interpretation of local history by more than just the academics writing about it. There is huge value in being able to see how people lived and worked many generations ago, and I believe these photographic snapshots helps inspire new generations to become interested in archival work and the recording of social history.

I also spent a lot of time preparing a new museum display which showcased the historical importance of the families of the workers in local industry. The Forest of Dean has always been isolated historically and culturally from the rest of Gloucestershire, and this insular community often had to rely on its own members for support. The family networks which sprung up in the mid-19th and the early-20th centuries were at the forefront of such community action, and some of them were so strong that they still exist today. The work on the museum's presentation included cleaning and sorting historical items which included traditional clothes and household items, as well as sorting through photographs and audio testimony from the Voices from the Forest collection which would complement the display and help immerse visitors in the history being shown. This was hugely rewarding work and I am very grateful to the museum curator for allowing me to take some leadership over it.

Final Reflections

I think the defining takeaway from my Leadership-in-Action experience is the resilience I have developed this year through the scholarship. Starting in February, when I suffered setbacks in my international plans for my LiA and a broken leg while working abroad, I learnt a huge amount about myself and how I can better respond to project issues and high-stress situations. This self-development helped immensely, as in June I broke my neck shortly before a planned LiA project. Not ever looking down on myself, I joked to the surgeon who had just operated on me that I was going to be back on my mountain bike in a couple of weeks. Surprising to no one other than me, this did not happen, but I found that the desire to bounce back as quickly as possible after a life-threatening injury gave me a new drive to complete my LiA project, especially one of significant value to the local community I am from. In working for the DHC I believe that I achieved this goal, and I have come away a stronger and more motivated leader as a result. In concluding this showcase, I leave a quote by the novelist Jodi Picoult which I think summarises the diverse resilience which I've gained from this year in the Laidlaw Scholarship and the LiA programme.

“The human capacity for burden is like bamboo – far more flexible than you'd ever believe at first glance.” – Jodi Picoult