



KILIMANJARO EVALUATION

JUNE 2012

THE VISION

In June 2012 Claire Lillis led an expedition to climb Mount Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest mountain. The trip was conceived as a development of Ian Mikardo's well-established practice of taking students on residential trips, but this time the vision was even bigger. The climb would involve four former students and create a powerful message about the heights they can achieve when they take on a massive challenge.

Audacious? Certainly. Given the complex nature of the students' Social Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties, the boldness of this venture should not be under-estimated. But after ten years as Head Teacher, Claire wanted to celebrate the school's outstanding progress from failing school to a vibrant and caring community that gives vulnerable young people the skills they need to return to mainstream society and to flourish.

Through numerous Outward Bound trips to Scotland, she knew that taking disaffected young men way beyond the few streets they know, and offering them exciting challenges, is an effective way to give them a sense of achievement and to develop their self-confidence and resilience. It also facilitates a warm and friendly environment in which they are accompanied by supportive adults for 24 hours a day, and this can help students to build positive and nourishing relationships, and to understand what it feels like to be relaxed and comfortable. It broadens their horizons in many ways and opens up a greater range of possibilities for their future.

By giving former students the opportunity to test themselves and experience an immense personal achievement, Claire knew that the school's core message - that irrespective of our students' pasts, every one of them has the potential to have a positive future – would be unmistakable throughout the school and in the wider community. The trip would be used to raise awareness about the school's success, and to raise funds for a new area of the curriculum, My Home, which will teach students how to live independently.

THE PREPARATION

After long and careful consideration, Claire chose her team. The former students were: J, 24, A, 19, and L and B, both 18. They would be supported by Claire, Kevin Wildrienne, My Body Coordinator, and Caroline Buckingham and Penny Wark, Chair and Vice Chair of the school's charity, Friends of Ian Mikardo High School. While the group would work together as a team, Claire also set up buddy relationships: Claire was to support A, Kevin would support J, Caroline would support L and Penny would support B.

"I knew that Kilimanjaro would be a test of the mind so what was over-riding was the resilience of the people I took," Claire explains. "I wanted to be as sure as possible that the students would be able to cope no matter how tough it got. They had all completed their time at the school and were still connected to Ian Mikardo community – that was important too."

J was one of the first young people Claire got to know at Ian Mikardo and in terms of neglect, abuse and rejection, he has one of the most extreme social care backgrounds she has seen. She has watched him grow into a loyal young man with a strong moral sense and the

maturity to move away from gang activity. This has involved separating himself from his family and building a new unit with his girlfriend, and their five-year-old son.

Claire knew that once J had committed to the climb, he would be reliable and not give up. His motivation was strong – he is determined to show his son how to lead a creditable life away from gang activity, and knows that, as a father, he must become a positive role model. Having taken the difficult step of separating from his parents and brothers, J would also benefit from being part of a bigger social network.

Recognising that J had reached a potentially life-changing stage in his life, in February Claire invited him to work with the New Day Foundation, a group of former gang members who delivered a week of motivational workshops at Ian Mikardo. Preparation for Kilimanjaro, including voluntary work with students making an Ian Mikardo flag that would be carried on the trek, kept J involved in the school over the following months, and gave him additional stability and access to a range of relationships with supportive adults who will be available to him in future. These included Raj, the school's child and adolescent psychotherapist, who saw J regularly.

A is a quiet and gentle young man who wants to become a carpenter. He has come a long way – he didn't speak for the first two years he was at Ian Mikardo – but while he can now look people in the eye and talk to those he knows only slightly, he has yet to develop the confidence to engage with training.

Claire felt that the key to facilitating his progress could lie in tapping into his pride in his heritage. He had already visited Jamaica and Barbados, and Claire has taken him to Egypt where she saw a glimmer of how relaxed he might be in an environment in which he felt at home. She hoped that by taking him to Tanzania he might have a sense of his roots. She also knew that she could rely on him to do what he committed to do, (equally that if he decided not to do something, he wouldn't do it), and that he had the maturity to manage on his own in a hotel if he had to leave the mountain.

L was an obvious choice in terms of his physical capabilities. He's lithe and fit, excelled at Outward Bound activities when at school, where he won an Outward Bound scholarship, and would relish living outdoors in the mountains. He is also a former student for whom Ian Mikardo has gone beyond its brief because of his circumstances, which revolve around persistent rejection and manipulation by his extended family. He was made homeless immediately after leaving the school, and Ian Mikardo supported him to move to Leicestershire to live with his mother. He has retained a good connection with the school.

Claire's reservations about taking him were that if he did not reach the summit, he could be very disappointed, and that his puppyish enthusiasm could lead to him burning himself out. He needs to learn to moderate the way he uses his considerable energy, and to pace himself in his interactions with people as well as his activities. Kilimanjaro would help him to feel accepted by other people and give him confidence, which he needs to move into further training or employment. L is a talented artist whose exceptional work was the focal point of the school's art auction in December 2010. One piece of his work raised £1500.

B has successfully used art to explore his psyche at Ian Mikardo, has since spent two successful years at college and will become the first former student to go to university in 2013. He is a young man with considerable potential and because he is articulate and has good social skills, he appears to be confident. To move into the next, more independent stage of his life, he will need to develop new skills that will involve listening to other people's views, building relationships with people outside his supportive family, and learning to work with them.

Claire was aware that taking him away from the world he knows and into an extreme setting would be a test of the mind and make him feel uncomfortable. She took him to Kilimanjaro because he had made remarkable progress in his course work and mental health at school, and she wanted to show him that he is ready to move outside his comfort zone.

Weekly training sessions were arranged from February 2012, and the cost of the trip was met by generous **sponsorship** from four companies where senior staff have the imagination to understand the value of Ian Mikardo's dynamic and creative work. Barclays sponsored four places, HLM Architects sponsored two places, and Facewatch and Citizen M each sponsored one place. The school is immensely grateful for this support; the trip would not have taken place without it.

THE REALITY

We took the seven day Lemosho route up Kilimanjaro because it involves repeatedly climbing high and sleeping low, and offers the best chance of acclimatisation to the altitude. Five of the seven days involve trekking above 4000 metres, the summit is 5896 metres. By any standards, this is a tough walk, rising from the rain forest with its distant unexplained noises, through ravines peppered with alpine plants, to the harsh, black lunar landscape which, at the top, is locked in ice. You walk up to 15 hours each day, the watchwords are *pole, pole* and *sippy sippy*: go slowly, and drink six litres of water a day, and you quickly realise that you are pushing your mind and your body to extremes. Mild altitude sickness is common; for us it kicked in on the second day. Between us we experienced vomiting, nausea, piercing headaches and catatonic exhaustion.

For those seven days it was as though the rest of the world did not exist; you have no contact with it, no knowledge of it, and you tend not to think about it. At the same time, rather like Ian Mikardo, Kilimanjaro is an environment where there is nowhere to hide. By day three, you have reached a landscape where there is no vegetation, and emotionally you are exposed. Being part of a tight, supportive and caring team is invaluable.

The average Kilimanjaro trekker is a white, professional alpha male, macho and contained. There are a few spirited middle aged women who don't care what anyone thinks of them, and some younger women who are never seen without make-up. Then there was Team Ian Mikardo: noisy, exuberant, usually singing – and watching out for each other like hawks.

Summit day was surreal. After four hours' sleep we were woken at 11pm and confronted with breakfast. We set off at midnight, the steep scree in front of us lit by head torches. The temperature was way below freezing and we were told that there were eight hours of

climbing between us and Uhuru Peak. When dawn eventually broke we became aware of zombie-like people with frozen hair and delirious eyes coming down the mountain, some of them supported by guides.

We plodded on, so debilitated we could barely speak. Claire reached the summit on time with J, Caroline and Kevin, and together they raised the Ian Mikardo flag signed by all the students and staff; Penny made it 90 minutes later with a guide. B reached Stella Point at the crater rim, L turned round three hours before the summit, A had stayed at base camp. Kevin and Penny both looked like delirious zombies and were supported to base camp by guides. After half an hour's sleep and a meal, we set off on the four hour walk to the next camp. J and L did it in two.

THE OUTCOME

J was good natured and kind throughout the trip and, as an enthusiastic and thoughtful photographer, provided the school with an excellent visual record of the expedition. His determination and exemplary behaviour showed Claire that he has the maturity and motivation to work effectively with young people. She has invited him to apply for an apprenticeship to train as a teaching assistant at Ian Mikardo. In his own words:

“Kilimanjaro became my challenge. This is my first time in Africa and I didn't know about the poverty. It makes me want to cry when I think about it. At home we take things for granted. I live like a king compared to Tanzanians. This has opened my eyes. I brought a big bag of sweets and when I got to the hotel they'd gone because I was throwing them out of the window to the kids. When I'm home I'll explain to the boys in the school how life is on the other side of the world.

“The summit meant everything to me because of the way a lot of people back home treated me. They said I wouldn't get up there, they thought I was an idiot for going. Getting to the top is like a drug for me. Half way up I turned to Claire and said, 'I've got to get up there, even just to explain to my son.' I thank Claire for giving me that experience. I didn't even know what Kilimanjaro was. I had to prove to everyone that I could do it. And I didn't want to let Claire down. People throw stones at me. Now I've thrown something back at them and I've got a certificate to prove it. A year ago I was a bum. At last I've achieved something. On top of that, at Keranga camp, Claire's suggested that I should apply for an apprenticeship in the school. I couldn't be happier.”

A quickly became known as “our lion”, a sign of the affection we felt for this calm and thoughtful young man. The only black trekker we saw on Kilimanjaro, he was a pleasure to be with as he absorbed the environment. As the days passed, he began to bloom, smiling broadly and talking more openly. Having made base camp his personal target, he was adamant that he did not want to experience the sub-zero temperatures that the summit walk involved and, as Claire had predicted, he did not change his mind.

For him the standout memories, delivered with a big smile, were, “The singing, being outside in the tent, the food we had on the mountain, the cold.” The Mikardo team has a great sense of pride in A, and his mother, equally proud, reports that when he walks down the streets

near his home now people stop him to ask about Kilimanjaro. He has a new quiet confidence, an ease, a sense of being able to let his guard down and relax, and for the first time he has asked Claire a question: "Why did you choose us four?" Her answer was that she recognised their resilience. She is to accompany A to an interview for a job as an apprentice carpenter.

L, also known as Simba, was in his element in the mountains. He was friendly and outgoing to people from other groups, and bounded up and down the Barranco Wall. When he reached the bottom he asked, "Can we do that again?" He would do sit-ups at the summit, he declared. "I want to be pushed to my limits," he told Claire the day before the summit walk. "You will be," she replied.

On summit day, he got half way up and turned to Claire with a big smile and said, "Claire, I've reached my limit." He insisted that it was the cold that got to him; it seems likely that he had not appreciated that reaching the summit would draw more on mental than physical reserves. But he regards the trip as "awesome. Everything apart from the cold was amazing. I want to be challenged and I definitely met my challenge."

L is a generous young man who gave away clothes to children living near our first hotel. It was heartening to watch him develop a warm relationship with Caroline, his mentor, and to work through nicknames for her: C-man-innit, Cazzaman. Then Treacle. Claire and Caroline will continue to support him and involve him in Ian Mikardo; Claire is currently supporting him with a job application to East Midlands airport.

B found Kilimanjaro a struggle but we are confident that he has drawn a lot from the experience and is now a more relaxed young man who is able to engage better with other people and is therefore less isolated. Initially he presented himself as an accomplished photographer, and insisted that the bulky and heavy equipment he was carrying was necessary for top quality pictures. This was both impractical and distanced him from the rest of the group, a position he seemed inclined to adopt.

On the first trekking day he wore trainers (rather than walking boots). We pointed out that if he twisted his ankle, this would affect other people: we were a team. Then, as altitude sickness kicked in, it became clear that his heavy camera equipment would have to be carried by porters. This made it inaccessible to B. By the end of the trip he recognised that only a small camera was necessary. Another lesson learned.

B's highlight was reaching Stella Point (5756 metres). "The climb has given me the knowledge that the mind is a lot stronger than your body," he says. "If your brain believes you can do something, you will get it done, no matter how tired you are. I've also learned that I'm not as good at dealing with people who agitate me as I thought I was. I've got more work to do. I've got limitations. I've got to learn to tolerate people that I don't necessarily agree with. The whole experience was harder than I thought it would be but I'm glad I came. I really enjoyed the Barranco Wall because it's not repetitive like walking, you have to work stuff out. I like climbing. It's also given me a Kili portfolio of photographs, which is a great thing to have."

B's mother is delighted by the sustained change she has seen in her son since he returned. "His attitude has changed for the better," she says. "He said it felt like family. It made him appreciate people. He is more appreciative of me, and seems to want to spend time with me and chat now. He's always alienated himself from other people, he likes his own space. In Kilimanjaro he seems to have changed his attitude to group activity. Before he always thought he knew better than other people, he seems to be more flexible now, to be prepared to listen and work with other people, he doesn't feel so threatened."

Towards the end of trek B spoke with Penny about how he how he plans to use his gap year (2012-13) to improve his literacy. Penny offered to support him for an hour a week as a volunteer. She explained that the success of these sessions will depend on his hard work, persistence and reliability; they are due to start in September.

For **Claire**, the Kilimanjaro trip has exceeded her expectations. When she set off, some of the students were anxious that the team would not return. Instead five of the eight participants reached the summit, and all reached the upper slopes, proving that Ian Mikardo students can get to the top.

The metaphor has been enthusiastically embraced by the students who have not only celebrated the success but recognise that it has been achieved by people like them. Individual students are asking when they can do a big challenge and Everest base camp is now on the agenda for Spring 2013. The Head Teacher has also mentioned Jupiter and the moon. We think she's joking but we're not sure.

As Claire notes, "This is about the school not being ordinary, it gives students a sense of possibility, of horizons opening, and reinforces our belief that all of them have the potential to have a fulfilling and constructive future.

"They can see the warm and close relationships that have developed among former students and adults, and the genuine affection, and because they understand that the team's success was about mental attitude, that it's not just the fittest who make it, that's a real source of inspiration for them. It's been very moving to return to the school, the sense of deep warmth, sharing and unity is now even greater, and there is new respect for the successful women in the group."

The trip has also raised close to £9,000 in sponsorship, been reported in the local press and given Ian Mikardo a new theme of "heroes" to celebrate and extend to current students. As the school forges forward with its plans to replicate its model, this is an exciting and apt time to recognise that the future isn't frightening but full of possibility. That is the feeling that Kilimanjaro gave to those of us who were privileged to take part and we are grateful to everyone who has engaged with our aims and supported us.

