



# **KILIMANJARO EVALUATION**

**July 2013**

Ian Mikardo High School, 60 William Guy Gardens, Talwin Street, Bromley by Bow, London E3 3 LF

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## **WHY?**

At Ian Mikardo High School, every day is a challenge as young people who have led tough lives learn to calm down and think positively about their future. The Head Teacher, Claire Lillis, believes that there's nothing like setting the bar high to inspire everyone in the school, and that's why in 2012 she set out with four former students and three fellow mentors to climb Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest mountain.

The trip was breathtakingly audacious – and a success. Five of the team reached the 5986 metre summit, all reached the daunting and treacherous upper slopes, and the message that Ian Mikardo students can get to the top - in spite of their complex social, emotional and behavioural difficulties - had never been more potent. So why do it again?

Claire doesn't like unfinished business. This time she wanted to get all eight of the team to the summit at the same time. "I'd seen the positive effect it had on the people who did it and I wanted to give other people the opportunity to have that experience," she explains.

Of the four unemployed young people who climbed Kilimanjaro in 2012, three are now working. The fourth has become Ian Mikardo's first university student. Claire had proof that the extreme challenge of Kilimanjaro builds confidence and transforms lives, and she was determined to change some more and, by doing that, inspire others. This time she would take the challenge into the grassroots of Tower Hamlets by building her team entirely from the local community.

## **THE TEAM**

Claire knew what she was looking for: people whose commitment to the challenge was greater than their fear of it. She chose five former students.

R, 20, was a risk. "His relationship with the school broke down when he was in Year 10 and the last time I'd seen him he'd kicked off in my office," she recalls. "But I'd heard he'd made progress. I wanted to rebuild that relationship and give him the chance to move his life forward."

C, 23, left the school in 2005 and Claire was aware that he didn't experience it as the successful and forward-thinking environment it has since become. "I wanted him to have a positive connection with the school," she says. "Whilst he's shown a lot of resilience over the years, I knew he still struggled with self-confidence and body image, and I wanted him to have a more positive view of himself."

Claire remembered D, 21, as a frightened boy who struggled to communicate verbally and often hid. He grew into a highly articulate young man and now works in a supermarket. "It's fantastic that he's working but he's got a lot of talent and has the potential to go a long way," she says. "I wanted him to have something special on his CV as well as the emotional boost of knowing he'd succeeded at something extraordinary."

T, 20, is a quiet young man who has succeeded in keeping away from Tower Hamlets gangs and works in a warehouse, but his career prospects are limited. “I felt he could do better,” says Claire. “I was also interested in taking a mother and son so that they could do something positive together.”

T’s family has faced many difficulties and Claire had got to know his mother, Donna, well during the years that three of her sons attended Ian Mikardo. Donna had told Claire about her own childhood and adult struggles, and after her sons left the school Claire offered her voluntary work.

“She has shown absolute commitment and professionalism over the last two years, latterly as a teaching assistant, and I wanted to offer her something that would challenge her mentally and physically. I knew she had the determination to get through this,” Claire says.

Ian, a young man who grew up locally but didn’t have the opportunity to access the positive education that Ian Mikardo now offers, would be another mentor. A former builder, he is now a teaching assistant. “Whilst he is professional, conscientious and has an excellent work ethic, I knew he has built a protective shield around him that he doesn’t need,” Claire explains. “Kili strips you bare. If Ian reached the summit, I was certain he’d benefit immensely.”

The fourth mentor was Jerome, 25, a former student who has struggled throughout his life to overcome the profound neglect and abuse he experienced as a child. Reaching the summit in 2012 was a turning point for him, and after nine months working as a volunteer at Ian Mikardo, he was recently appointed as a teaching assistant – his first job. This time he would prove that he can be a positive role model for disaffected young people.

“I’d seen what he got out of it the first time and I wanted to give him the opportunity to develop his leadership skills with other young people,” Claire explains. “I knew how difficult it was to mentor when you had no idea what was ahead, and how frightening that could be, and I felt the team would benefit from another member who had experienced the mountain.”

## **MAKING IT HAPPEN**

The aims of Kilimanjaro 2013 were massive:

- to transform seven lives
- to inspire the community in which the seven live
- to raise awareness of the school
- to raise awareness of the national Time To Change campaign, which supports understanding of mental health issues
- to raise funds to support the school’s welfare work with students and their families

We are indebted to the following sponsors for their generous support of Kilimanjaro 2013. Without their understanding of the climb’s potential to change lives, the challenge would not have happened:

Poplar HARCA  
Tower Hamlets Youth Opportunities Fund  
Citizen M  
The Mayor of Tower Hamlets Community Chest  
Barclays  
FCA  
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Instinet  
Clifford Devlin  
Trek Hire  
Tesco  
Ace Cars  
KO Gym  
ASDA  
Waitrose  
Fit4less  
The Times  
The T-shirt printers

We would also like to thank the individuals who sponsored the team; their contributions raised £8,000 and will support the school's welfare work.

## **THE OUTCOME**

On July 17 2013, at 9.06am local time, all eight of the Ian Mikardo team stood together at Uhuru Peak overlooking the spectacular crater that covers the summit of Kilimanjaro. They had knocked an hour off the expected seven hour summit climb. Claire and Jerome hugged and wept with exhaustion and relief.

Kilimanjaro is a brutal environment that makes extreme demands of those who dare to tackle it. Once altitude sickness kicks in – as it invariably does, bringing sickness, headaches and exhaustion of a magnitude that is hard to imagine back home – there are many dark moments when you think that the mountain is going to beat you. The Machame route is steep and lifts you swiftly out of the rain forest and into a barren landscape where there is no vegetation and nowhere to hide. The most testing exposure is emotional: can you continue to climb over frozen rocks for hours on end when the effort of putting one foot in front of the other is colossal and all you want to do is lie down and sleep?

Let's hear about the experience in the team's own words:

R recognised that Kilimanjaro was a potentially life-changing opportunity but admits that he hadn't envisaged just how tough it would be to reach the summit.

"Once I got to Stella Point (5756 metres) I wanted to lie there and stop," he says. "Keeping going was daunting. Two of the guides had to help me up. I'm glad I made it. Now I know that if I set my mind to something, I can do anything, and that will help me to be able to be positive about things. PMA – positive mental attitude, that's what Andy our guide kept saying, and it works.

“When I left school I was getting into trouble, hanging around with the wrong crowd. I’ve had jobs - I’m a chef and I’ve worked in retail – but I lost the last one before the school contacted me. Now I know that I don’t need negative people around me, and that if you work hard, you get something back. I’ve got to keep on knocking on doors – it’s all in the mind, isn’t it? Keep a positive attitude and positive things happen.”

For T the toughest time was summit night when he was being sick, felt exhausted and faced a seven hour walk in sub-zero temperatures. “I felt like a zombie,” he recalls. “I wanted to stop, but everyone carried on, we were pushing each other. Getting to the top was like winning the lottery, an amazing feeling, hard to believe. I felt very proud of myself. To have that on my CV it makes me feel a lot better about myself. It shows you can do anything if you put your mind to it.”

T, a talented artist, will begin voluntary work in the My Self department of Ian Mikardo in September 2013.

C had also underestimated the nature of the challenge. “Half way up, I didn’t think I’d be able to do it,” he says. “You feel really free up there. It’s unbelievable how ten days can change how you think. I feel a lot different. I can stand away from people that I shouldn’t be around. I can do what I want now, and no-one’s going to stop me.

“I’ve worked on and off on building sites but the aim now is to get a decent job. I’ve got the confidence to go knocking on doors. I want to live a good life, stay away from trouble. I’ve lost 20 pounds in weight and I feel fresher, cleaner, healthier, happier. One African man kept saying, ‘Don’t give up.’ He was so nice to me. I’m not going to forget him.”

On his return from Tanzania, Claire invited C to tender for decorating the interior of Ian Mikardo during the summer break. C was successful and the premises manager described his work as “faultless.”

D Is a fit young man and thought he’d cope. “I didn’t count on the terrain being so rough or the climbing involved,” he says. “The altitude was a big factor. Take two sips of water and you’re out of breath, your upper legs and lower back are hurting. You’re tired, you’re hungry, your head’s pounding, there’s a dry heat, people in front of you are kicking up sand and it’s going up your nose, you feel dirty because you can’t wash. All these factors put you under stress and how you cope with it is to do with how you are mentally.

“Some people talk about a metaphorical mountain. I’ve climbed an actual mountain, I’ve overcome this massive challenge. I hope it will make people who might open doors to me take an interest and that will lead to better jobs. It’s showed me just how strong I am. If I can climb Kilimanjaro, I don’t think there’s much I can’t do.”

As a young man who has faced the same challenges as the school’s students, Ian was motivated by wanting to prove that he was a worthwhile role model. “I wanted to prove a point to myself and to everyone who said I couldn’t do it because I was too fat or just not good enough,” he says. “I wanted to raise awareness about mental health and show that people aren’t just labels, people are shaped by circumstances in their life and it doesn’t

make them different, it just means they need support. There was some male bravado in there as well.

“It was the toughest thing I’ve ever done. The hardest thing was knowing you couldn’t give up, and mentally there was no reason to give up. On day 2 it was 45-50 degrees up, climbing up rocks for six and a half hours. When I got to camp I lost my torch and cried my eyes out – it was silly things that got to you.

“I’ve found out a lot about myself on this trip. I tend to use comedy as a front and portray myself as a confident person. By playing the clown I was hiding something, I was worried about what people think. I realised I’ve got low self esteem and that’s got to change. All I need to do is be myself. The climb has changed my outlook on everything. No matter how hard it was, the people living in Africa have got it way harder than we have in Western society in terms of health and hard jobs – everything.

“It’s broadened my horizons. If I can climb a mountain then giving extra time in school is no hardship because the boys in the school are the future.”

Six weeks after the climb, Donna continues to feel transformed by her achievement. She’s kept off the half stone she lost, looks sleek and happy, and has taken on the responsibility of becoming a staff governor. “For a lot of my life people have looked down on me and thought I was useless,” she says. “Kilimanjaro was the biggest physical and mental challenge I could imagine, and I wanted to prove that after a lifetime of struggling, and bringing up five children, I could do something for myself.

“It was really hard and there were many times I thought I couldn’t do it. I always knew I couldn’t give up, I had to get right to the end and I owe a lot to Moses, the guide who held my hand all the time. He kept telling me I was a strong woman and that I had to stop crying because it used up too much energy!

“I was the first to get to the top and now I’ve done it a whole new world has opened up. On the last day I was sitting on the edge of a canyon watching the eagles flying and I couldn’t believe I was there. I’ve amazed myself, I feel as though I could do anything.”

Jerome found his second climb harder than the first – because this time he knew what was in store and had the additional responsibility of being a mentor. “It’s hard enough when you’ve got to look out for yourself, let alone someone else,” he says. “That sense of responsibility was really difficult. When we got to Stella Point I had the worst headache ever, it felt like I’d been hit by a sledge hammer. R lay down and said he wasn’t going any further. I screamed at him because it was so important for him.

“Last year was about finding out who I am, and showing that having taken some wrong turns was no barrier to proving what I can do. This year was about moving on further, taking responsibility for someone else and understanding that being a role model can be really difficult.” Jerome is now a volunteer trustee of the school’s charity.

By the afternoon before summit night Claire had an immobilising infection and was on a high dose of medication. Reluctantly she decided not to attempt the summit but when the team were woken at 11pm she felt a little better and changed her mind.

“I wanted to do things differently this year,” she says. “Last year I was petrified of what was going to happen and kept myself in my head. This year I was in the present and connected to what was going on even though I felt worse because of altitude sickness. I love the simplicity of mountain life, that there is just one goal, to get to the top of the mountain, and that you use your mind to get there.”

To anyone who wonders about the cost-effectiveness of such a venture, Claire reminds them of the enormity of the school’s motto: Come with a past, leave with a future.

“Kilimanjaro is a great equaliser and I’m astounded by the impact it has on people who have led really challenging lives. It makes them feel good. C said it has changed his life – what an amazing thing to be able to give somebody. After 11 years of headship, if I was asked to define two pieces of work that very clearly impacted on people’s lives in a short time, it would be the two Kilimanjaro expeditions.

“For people with such disadvantaged, and in some cases, abusive backgrounds to have this experience of being nurtured by a team of people supporting their core needs, and to achieve the summit, is incredible, and it reinforces the work we do every day, giving young people the skills they need to return to mainstream society and flourish.”

