

Edinburgh International Book Festival: Mary's Meals – The Shed that Fed a Million Children

'We believe in the goodness of people...Mary's Meals is a series of lots of little acts of love' (Magnus MacFarlane-Barrow)

Many organisations start life at a kitchen table; more than a few have probably started in a shed – but how many are still in that shed twenty-three successful years later? A charity initiated by two Argyll fish farmers began with the aim of making a small difference in Bosnia; today it brings impoverished children across the world into education – and it's still run from the founders' Dad's back garden.



In 1992, **Magnus MacFarlane-Barrow** and his brother were watching television in their local pub when they saw scenes of the **Bosnian** war. Nine years earlier, their family had made a pilgrimage to the Marian shrine at **Medjugorje** – now they saw that very place being ripped apart by conflict. The brothers wanted to do something – but what? They appealed locally for donations and were inundated; the first responders were their family and close friends, but soon people were just turning up at the door with gifts and money.

'From this I learned that it is possible to do something as an ordinary person; me and my brother were just salmon farmers, we had small expectations' says Magnus. They took a week of work, piled everything into a knackered old Land Rover ('It was probably illegal...') and set off for Bosnia on 'a bit of an adventure'. On their return they found so many more donations that the walls of their Dad's shed (they'd asked him if they

could borrow it, just for a while) were bulging. Magnus sold his house, left his job, and decided to take a gap year working for charity. He never went back to the salmon.

In a packed session at the **Edinburgh International Book Festival** on Monday, Magnus discussed with his friend and colleague **Duncan Bannatyne** (yes, that Duncan Bannatyne...) the point at which he decided to dedicate his life to helping others. After that first trip to Bosnia he made several more, thinking that he would just keep going till the donations ran out; they didn't, and he neither did he.



Magnus Macfarlane-Barrow outside the ageing shed in the village of Dalmally, Argyll, where it all began.

Magnus set up a charity, **Scottish International Relief (SIR)** and over the next ten years that charity delivered over £10 million of relief to Bosnia, set up mobile clinics in Liberia and built homes for abandoned HIV-positive children in Romania. It was Romania – which he visited with Duncan (who funded several projects there, including the children's hospice **Casa Bannatyne**) – that really changed him; what SIR achieved there was, says Magnus, 'a big miracle'. Some of the children SIR helped are now married with their own children; he's still in touch with them, as is Duncan – in fact one of the children asked Duncan to be Best Man at her wedding ('he was much more popular than me..I try not to mind').

In 2002 almost the entire African continent suffered famine. Malawi was one of the worst affected countries and SIR was involved in the relief operation; whilst in the country Magnus met a family of six children whose mother was dying; their

father had already passed away. Magnus asked **Edward**, who at 14 was the oldest son, what he hoped for. It wasn't a laptop or a pair of trainers;

'I'd like enough food and to go to school one day'

Many, many children were unable to attend school because they needed to spend all day begging for food; lacking education, they had no way to improve their lives. Magnus realised that there was a way to break the cycle of poverty; if school and food became intrinsically connected, hungry children would go to school. SIR started providing school pupils with one meal a day; soon this work became its main focus, and it changed its name to **Mary's Meals**;

'The whole thing was ignited by the words of a child – that's a wonderful thing'.



Haiti – 6 months on
from earthquake

Mary's Meals (although 'Mary' refers to the Mother of Jesus, the charity helps everyone who needs its help, whatever their faith or lack of it) has a simple but highly effective modus operandi; its projects are based on **partnership with local people**. 'Nice ideas don't always work...I think this one does because it is rooted in local ownership'. After meeting Edward, Magnus explained his idea to local villagers – would they not only support it but also volunteer to work with it? Within hours those villagers were setting up rotas and now Mary's Meals has **75,000** volunteers in Malawi alone; Magnus sees them as the bedrock of the charity.

When Magnus arrived in **Haiti** just after the devastating earthquake, he called in on a tented community of charity and NGO workers and was disappointed to see how little contact they were making with local people; Mary's Meals met with

locals who quickly became the focal point of its aid response because they knew what to do and got on with it. Walls were rebuilt around schools so that they could become safe points to distribute food.

Local people, says Magnus, are *never* waiting passively for aid, 'They do heroic things every time'. Similarly, in **Liberia**, many teachers are government employees but rarely get paid; they still teach (there is an average of 100 children per teacher, few desks, even fewer books) and appreciative families support them by looking after their farms and homes. When Mary's Meals saw that children were coming to school with nothing, it launched the **Backpack Campaign**; UK pupils donate backpacks filled with essential school items like pens, rulers, notebooks, basic clothes, soap and a spoon, and Mary's Meals delivers them on the ground. It's not just for schools either – **Soroptimist International Groups** are running their own collections.

'Please say thank you. They have made these children so happy; they're now proud kids!' (Patrick Masiye, Standard 6 teacher, Malawi)

UK teachers love the project too; lessons can be based round it, with children gaining an understanding of how few possessions their counterparts have and a sense of achievement in being able to help.



Surely, asks Duncan, there were many challenges in setting up such projects? Magnus agrees; the charity faces issues in all of the countries it works in – **lack of infrastructure, corruption, weak and unresourced governments** – but the focus on local ownership solves many problems. It has a robust financial model and local 'monitors' visit each school regularly to check on stocks, but most volunteers are local – mothers, grandparents, aunts and uncles – and they don't take

kindly to people stealing their children's food; there is no 'leakage'.

Mary's Meals strives to use **locally-grown food** wherever possible; in Liberia it makes sure that every school has its own farm or garden. The charity can buy the produce to make the meals, and the farming work also teaches children agricultural skills that were lost during the war. Rice mills have been set up; to encourage more rice farming Mary's Meals offers not only to buy farmers' rice but also to mill it for free. In other countries such as **South Sudan**, food still has to be imported; in this most challenging of places to work the need, says Magnus, is huge – few children go to school, but the charity won't give up.



Magnus in a Haitian classroom – image: Catholic Exchange

Mary's Meals works in some of the most dangerous areas in the world; in Haiti it is in partnership with **Father Tom Hagan**, a priest whose **Hands Together** group has built schools in the middle of **Cite Soleil**, a slum based on a rubbish tip. Last year nineteen of Father Tom's staff were killed; there are bullet holes in the schools' blackboards. 'The schools are little oases; children can escape from the relentless violence'. Many children in Haiti are still living on the streets, naked and begging; as well as feeding the children who do attend school, Mary's Meals has set up a project for the street children to attend later in the day. Pupils who have been recipients of Mary's Meals come back to teach these children, and the charity has provided them with school uniforms to wear. It's a way of restoring dignity to people in poverty, 'That one meal a day is changing lives'. Mary's Meals is also feeding 2,000 senior citizens. Despite their appalling living conditions, the children now come to school in pristine

clothes; it is, says Magnus, something he has seen in refugee camps in other countries too; 'It's humbling.'

✘ And Magnus is a very humble man; he harbours no illusions that Mary's Meals' success is solely down to him. His work is rooted in his faith, and he believes that God has guided him from the beginning. The charity has no flashy headquarters – Magnus's Dad never did get his shed back (though there is now an office in Glasgow too) – and only 7p in every donated £1 goes on administration. It's very important to Magnus that Mary's Meals remains low cost; it spends little on fundraising and PR and nothing at all on advertising. So what, asks Duncan, can people do to help?

Money is always needed of course, but spreading the word is almost as important. The charity relies on people to fundraise as they think best, and encourages everyone to tell others about its work. It has a network of trained volunteer speakers; 50% of its income still comes from Scotland, but support is growing in other parts of the UK and North America. Its base will remain north of the border; 'I'm a proud Scot and happy to stay rooted here'.

Magnus's new book, ***The Shed that Fed A Million Children***, ✘ tells the story of Mary's Meals; all proceeds will go to the charity. Magnus was reluctant to write it at first; protecting the charity's core values is his priority, and in the book he tries to safeguard these, and to give glory to God. Although his work is underpinned by his Catholic faith, he hopes that people of all faiths or none will enjoy reading the story of that shed, and what grew from it; 'It's a story of hope'.

Revisiting the children that the charity has helped is to Magnus an enormous privilege; lives have been changed and these young people are now optimistic about the future – for themselves and for their countries. Half of **Malawi's Under-21 football team** would not have attended school without the

charity; **Jimmy**, a slum child who often had to swim across a river to avoid the fighting on his way to school, is now becoming a famous singer-songwriter, a role model who goes into schools to talk to the children, to show them that there is a way out of violence;

'If Mary's Meals can do impossible things then so can I, and so can you'.

Magnus also wanted to find Edward, the boy whose hopes were the inspiration behind the charity. Magnus felt guilty about Edward; he'd been repeating and publishing Edward's words far and wide, but he knew that Mary's Meals had come too late for him. Edward is still living in poverty, now trying to support his wife and young child from what he can grow; when Magnus found him, Edward had just five bags of maize to get the family through a whole year. Edward did know a little about the charity; when Magnus told him that he had initiated a worldwide movement, and that his own child would soon eat Mary Meal's at school, he was delighted. Edward and Magnus are still in touch, as is Duncan with Adela (Duncan: 'we're Facebook friends', Magnus: '*Facebook?!*')

☒ Mary's Meals now feeds over a million children across the world; it's survived earthquakes and even ebola (all of its workers, local and expat, chose to stay in the affected areas throughout the epidemic). In addition to its main programme it's built a residential school for marginalised deaf children in Liberia. Magnus hopes that governments will eventually take over the charity's work, but he knows that even where there's a will to do so, the process will be a slow one. Does he, asks Duncan, ever feel overwhelmed? Never, replies Magnus, though he often feels quite emotional about everything when he gets home. He sometimes quotes Father Tom Hagan;

'What we do here is humility in action, and we need to be realistic about what we can do'.

It costs about £12.20 to provide Mary's Meals to a child for one year (yes, a year) but 18,000 children a day still die of hunger. Magnus knows Mary's Meals can't change everything, but he's prepared to try;

'I haven't yet come across a problem that we can't make better'

Although he didn't mention any of this on Monday, Magnus was named as one of **Time Magazine's Most Influential People 2015** (others include **Barack Obama** and **Pope Francis**); he was awarded an OBE in 2011 and in 2010 Hollywood actor **Gerard Butler** presented him with a **CNN Hero Award**, saying 'Every day Magnus lets children around the world know that they matter, that someone thousands of miles away cares about them'

He's still working out of that lop-sided shed in Dalmally, but I expect his Dad's found somewhere else to keep his mower. And I don't suppose he minds.

The Shed that Fed a Million Children by **Magnus MacFarlane-Burrow** is published by William Collins and available from bookshops and online. For more information about **Mary's Meals** and how you or your school can help, visit the charity's website [here](#).

