

Edinburgh student hailed an “inspiration and a true local hero” for voluntary work in Ukraine

An Edinburgh student who put his career and studies on hold to help children and adults in Ukraine has been hailed an “inspiration and a true local hero”

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, 38-year-old Gavin Menzies from Carrick Knowe, has made several trips to the war-torn country.

Within 14 days, he was ferrying supplies into Kyiv and helping people to evacuate.

He returned to Ukraine that same summer to help get supplies into Kharkiv, and perform end-of-life care with elderly people in the remains of Kharkiv University.

Despite the indiscriminate bombing of the city, he continued to bring medicine, food and water to desperate people in the city.

Despite the risks, Gavin was determined to be a force for good, providing supplies, helping refugees flee the country and providing hundreds of orphaned children with Christmas presents.

He didn't hesitate to put his work and education in Scotland

on pause to do what he could to alleviate the suffering of people caught up in the ongoing conflict.

Before travelling to Ukraine, Gavin had dedicated his adult life to running his own support businesses for children in Edinburgh.

However, after lockdown he quickly realised that many of the children that he was working with were dealing with complex challenges.

Having hit a challenging point in his career following the pandemic, he started to look at ways that he could better support the development of young people in his clubs and academy, which led him to study the MSc Play Therapy at Queen Margaret University – a course run in collaboration with the specialist play therapy organisation, With Kids.

Gavin explained: “Through my kids’ basketball academy and holiday camps, we always look to develop links with the communities we are working in, and I was developing a lot of health and wellbeing activities throughout the Covid pandemic.

“I noticed that there were a lot of kids coming into the basketball academy with complex needs – far more complex than the engagement in sport alone could solve, or that I had the skillset to support.”

He continued: “Some children were becoming increasingly withdrawn. Worryingly, they were regressing from where they typically “should be” for their age, and were experiencing quite significant issues around confidence and socialisation.

“I felt I lacked the skills to really tackle these issues affectively, so I decided to upskill by embarking on the MSc Play Therapy in 2021.”

Due to his volunteering in Ukraine, and the continuation of his local children's support businesses, Gavin studied his Master's degree on a part-time basis over three years.

Now he has finally graduated with a Master's degree in Play Therapy from Queen Margaret University.

He said: "It was a challenge to juggle my work, family responsibilities and education. When the full-scale Russian invasion took place,

"I knew the only way I could volunteer and get through the Master's course was to study the course part-time. Fortunately, the academic team at Queen Margaret University were really supportive of that decision."

During both his visits, Gavin formed an extraordinary bond with a group of orphans from Odessa. The 19 refugees were some of the youngest at the Ukrainian orphanage in the city.

Accompanied by a few teachers, the orphans had fled the war, ending up in Poland where Gavin was put in touch with them. Fleeing with only what they could carry, the orphans lacked clothing and vital supplies. With money he raised from donations, Gavin bought and supplied them with as much as he could.

As Christmas approached, Gavin asked for the children's Santa lists and collected donations from Scottish parents.

He flew to Poland to visit them, discovering that the 19 children he knew had been placed into a camp of 650 other orphans from across Ukraine.

Collaborating with toy shops in Poland, and with the help of charitable donations, Gavin managed to secure enough toys for all 650 orphans in the camp!

Despite being in Edinburgh, Gavin continued to provide vital support to the orphaned group of children by maintaining their

extraordinary connection online and offering support. Volunteering with the orphans has allowed Gavin to put the knowledge learned on his course into practice.

Essentially, the last three years studying the MSc Play Therapy and volunteering in Ukraine has helped enhance his skills to better serve more children with complex needs in his Edinburgh community.

As a former player with the Pleasance Basketball Club, Gavin uses sport to give the next generation the same head start in life it gave him. Having established the High Flyers Basketball Academy which helps give children the confidence to succeed outside of the court, as well as on it,

Gavin's development project has grown over the years and now provides coaching to 300 kids at several locations across Edinburgh and the Lothians.

Following the disruption to his studies, Gavin opted to use the last year to really focus on his Master's course to ensure that he was better qualified to support his groups of children across Edinburgh.

This July, he graduated from Queen Margaret University with a MA Play Therapy with merit. However, the ongoing plight of the Ukrainian people weighed heavily on his mind.

Now with his Master's degree firmly under his belt, he has returned to Ukraine and is currently working to rebuild and revamp the orphanage in Odessa and volunteer in Kharkiv, where Russian forces have made gains these last few months.

He has just delivered sterilisation equipment, dressings and other supplies to a medical representative at an outpost in Kharkiv who is tending to an increasing number of patients – the elderly and the sick, as well as soldiers and front-line workers.

In the last few days, he has also been supporting orphans in Kyiv while drone attacks and bombing takes place all around them.

Sir Paul Grice, Principal of Queen Margaret University, said: "Gavin's selfless dedication to supporting the next generation through sport is what ultimately motivated him to come to QMU and study the MSc Play Therapy.

"He is a shining example of how passion and the will to be a force for good, can enable students to excel academically, practically, personally and professionally. Gavin's drive and determination to make a positive impact on people's lives – putting his life in danger whilst gaining a qualification which will enhance his practice with children with complex needs – epitomises the values of QMU.

"He is an inspiration to all our students and staff, and a true local hero."

Gavin received his Master's award at a memorable graduation ceremony in Edinburgh's Usher Hall in July, which was attended by QMU's Chancellor and TV presenter Dame Prue Leith CBE.

He has now secured a position as a play therapist with the children's mental health and play therapy charity, With Kids, and will be continuing to blend this work with the running of his holiday camps for children, basketball clubs and his volunteering in Ukraine.