



PAULA HOWELLS

EBO TOWN COMMUNITY NURSERY SCHOOL



I did not start this journey back in 2014 expecting to become a registered UK charity and help as many families as I have done, yet here I am 7 years later preparing to employ new staff, enrol new children, and open the doors of our newly built second school. It has been quite a journey and I would love to share the highs and lows with you!

So where did it all begin? After receiving treatment for cancer between 2009 and 2012, I had a burning desire to make a difference. Having visited The Gambia before, we knew that our money would go a long way to helping so in 2014, we booked our flights, packed our bags and with an extra £200 set off to find our project. One day whilst at the beach, we started chatting to a local juice bar owner and this conversation would ultimately change our lives forever. His name was Badou and he spoke of a struggling

school called Mandela in the heart of Ebo Town. He asked us to go with him to see it for ourselves and we obliged. We did not know what to expect but when we arrived, we were confronted with a tiny room, mud floors, no furniture, no proper blackboard and a teacher, called Donald who taught over 125 children in those conditions. I knew instantly that this was the place we had been looking for, so we got to work.



“We all looked into the children’s eyes and knew we could not disappoint them”

We obtained quotes to concrete the floor, fit new windows and add a large blackboard which was agreed at £200 and was happily completed before we headed for home.

The Gambian government do not support schooling for children under 7 so nursery school education is private. I knew I had to do something to help children in their early years so when I got home, I started asking for donations of just £8.50 to buy a child a uniform, educational equipment and pay for Donald's wages. This was a great success and we soon raised adequate funds for the school, or so we thought! On our return in 2016, we found that Donald had unfortunately enrolled 175 children and at this point had come to the awful realisation that the school was being

run illegally. Mandela was not registered under the Education of The Gambia guidelines so sadly the school was shut down instantly due to the lack of playground space and sanitation. At this devastating point I was in The Gambia with my Mum and a good friend Rick. We all looked into the children's eyes and knew we could not disappoint them, so the search was on to rent our own classroom, find our own teaching staff and run a school by ourselves.

After walking the dusty streets in over 30 degree heat, eventually we found it! The room was designed to be a kitchen area and was attached to a government school in Tallinding, next to Ebo Town. It was not the

ideal location as the walk was long but both the head and the school committee were very welcoming and could see that I was on a mission to improve children's lives. They handed us the keys and we immediately concreted the floor, got furniture made, found a tailor, designed logos, shipped over many boxes of educational toys, books, pens and pencils galore! Above all else though, we needed to raise more and more money to facilitate all of this extra expense. It was a massive leap of faith but seeing the children smile and reach out their hand to say thank you drove me forward along with the support of my family and good friends.



“The trustees and the children however made me see that children are the future”

We employed a friend of Badou, as he at this point had left The Gambia to seek a better future for himself. Steven had also worked on the beach and was a very educated young man who lived with his wife and child. Steven worked hard to assist us getting everything set up so that we could open the doors of our own rented school in September 2016. I employed another 3 staff to look after 80 children in two classrooms, but none were qualified early learning teachers. As of this moment though, we have put 3 teachers through Teacher training college in The Gambia which is a 3 year course. It is so heart-warming to look at the full picture and see that not only have I personally helped educate many children to date but have also educated 3 adults and improved their prospects.

In 2016, I registered with the charity commission in the UK, and have had some wonderful trustees working alongside me.

At present, we have 8 trustees, each having strong assets in different areas. Only 1 of the 8 trustees have not yet been to The Gambia and witnessed first-hand the heart wrenching conditions and stories of hardship and that is our Chairlady, but we feel this is positive to us all, as she is able to rule with a clear head instead of her heart. We have had many trials and tribulations, and there has been many moments we as trustees could have thrown in the towel and said enough is enough.

Corruption is always trying to sneak its ugly head above the door. A huge turning point of the project was when our ex-head of school Steven, unbeknown to trustees and myself had an affair with someone close to the charity who had visited the school on a number of occasions. I was told that he was leaving his employment to go to Germany only to then find out that he was living 15 miles away from me in the UK with this lady. How could I ever trust anyone again?

The trustees and the children however made me see that children are the future. It was not their fault, and we could pick up the pieces and move on again. One trustee took over the sponsorship programme, and still to date is assisting and supporting me amazingly, and I personally owe her so much gratitude.

In 2018 whilst writing a newsletter to our sponsors, I felt strongly in my heart that I should build a school of our own but, I had so many questions in my head like where will the money coming from? How? Land? At this point, the sponsorship programme was so successful that we were able to support not only the children with a FREE education, but also help their families with rice, mosquito nets, cleaning products etc.

Naively, I thought that £25,000 would be enough to build an adequate school, and with lots of fundraising, promotion and belief in ourselves as trustees we could do it.



“I received a telephone call from Thomas Cook out of the blue, confirming that the full amount applied for had been granted!”

It was on a trip in April 2018, that a piece of land was shown to us in the heart of Ebo Town. A corner spot close to electric and water. The price was higher than we could afford, so there was lots of negotiating but we managed to purchase it! I personally walked through many official departments to get the paperwork completed before I was due to fly home. It was at this point also that Concorde College in Shrewsbury chose us as their nominated charity to receive funds from their students second hand book sales. They generously gave us the resources in those early stages to keep the project moving forward and the faith in believing that we can reach our goals. A heartfelt thank you for that! We employed a builder in 2019 to take the project forward, sending over money in stages as and when we had the finances to do

so. It was to be a 3-classroom school with 6 toilets, 2 showers, staff room, store room and living accommodation for staff. Sadly however, corruption reared its head and the builder ran off with our money and never completed the job.

In March 2020 a trustee and myself were in The Gambia enrolling children for the new school year when we were sadly repatriated back to the UK early due to Covid 19. Everything stopped. Schools in The Gambia were closed and we made the difficult decision to pause the sponsorship programme as people had enough on their minds. Thankfully however, a miracle happened! We had applied for a grant from The Thomas Cook Children's Charity in November 2019, having just 15 minutes spare before the

application deadline closed we submitted and kept all our fingers crossed, however only days later Thomas Cook announced it was sadly going into administration. We assumed our chances had gone too but in the dark days of the first lockdown, I received a telephone call from Thomas Cook out of the blue, confirming that the full amount applied for had been granted! The news bought tears of jubilation to all trustees and sponsors who have supported and believed in us over the years. It meant that we could complete the school build and buy furniture. Thomas Cook - words cannot express what you have done, and one special lady in particular, thank you. After being floored by corruption yet again, we as trustees picked ourselves up, focused on the mission of the children, and drove forward to getting the school complete!



“It seems crazy that a 6 hour flight takes you to a place of hard living conditions and visiting is the most humbling of experiences”

We called in our dearest and most faithful friend - a man of truth and integrity and a member of the initial Ceesey family who started the whole project. He got his whole family on side, plus extra workforce employed from Ebo Town and the build started all over again with new ambition and dedication - everyone wanted this to succeed for their own community. In August 2021 the build is complete, with water connection and soon there will be electricity. The school has been sign written so now looks like a school! A new head of school, a qualified teacher, a trustee consultant and caretaker/security have been employed. We will be enrolling new children who will start at our school in September with their own uniforms. I can proudly say that it will be a school in the heart of the Ebo Town community that also reaches out and makes a difference to those families living in hardship and poverty.

It seems crazy that a 6 hour flight takes you to a place of hard living conditions and visiting is the most humbling of experiences. To educate a child in our school costs £60 per year (£5 per month) which to us is the price of 2 cups of coffee. Children are the future. When a child gets an opportunity to join our school, they will learn English through song, play and storytelling. They learn to write simple sentence structures and learn simple mathematics. They mix and make friendships, learning to interact and gain confidence. To see a small 4-year-old join our school so timid and leave at 7 years of age, speaking English confidently and flourishing in life melts my heart but it is also about their families, meeting them and listening to their stories. Never in our wildest of dreams would we have ever thought that we would own our own school and be able to offer a totally free education. This would never be

possible without the sponsorship programme and kind donations of help and support. We work from our hearts and to date every single penny goes to the children and the school.

A new chapter is about to start! It is becoming a reality as the time approaches to open our doors, but it comes with trepidation as we will have added expenses. Proudly we can say, that after the journey we have been on we are stronger than ever and believe that behind the eyes of those beautiful children is a soul that will flourish into beautiful young adults. Each child has a story, each child is special, and each child is loved.

LIFE IN EBO TOWN COMMUNITY

Ebo Town is located along the Brikama – Banjul highway, dividing the communities of Tallinding and Jeshwang. It has a population of 70,000 people and is known to be one of the poorest communities in The Gambia. During the monsoon months, it is prone to bad flooding which brings with it many diseases such as cholera and malaria. Families tend to live together on a compound, which comprises of many rooms. Each small room can sleep between 5 to 10 people and toilet facilities are generally a hole in the floor surrounded by corrugated iron, no roof. A shower comes in the form of a large plastic bucket and a plastic mug and for the poorest of families a walk to the nearest tap or well point. A kitchen is made from corrugated iron sides and roof, where large tin pots are used to cook the staple food of rice. For those families that have a little extra money, vegetables, fish or chicken may be cooked in to a stew like dish named Yassa, benechin, or domada.



A wealthier family may own chickens and goats, and enjoy the benefits that owning one of these animals brings. On sunrise each morning the call to prayer can be heard bellowing from the mosques, chickens are

cock a doodling and the noise and hustle and bustle is immense. There is a distinct odour in the air and the heat and humidity hits as you step outside. Women sit outside their compound walls on the street side trying to sell food to passers-by for breakfast and throughout the day. Streets in Ebo Town all look the same and are all unnamed.

There is an area in the heart of Ebo Town that has a daily market and connected to that you find tailors, hairdressers and general stores. As you walk the streets children run barefoot, playing with old car tyres and sticks, some very young children run around totally naked and have large rounded bellies showing signs of malnutrition. Children run up to you and greet you with a handshake and you could end up with up to 4 children holding one hand. In the distance you here little voices shouting tumba, tumba, tumba which means white person. I personally tell them my name is Paula and encourage each child to call me by my name.

Stagnant water from the monsoon season makes walking and getting around Ebo Town tricky to navigate. Donkeys are used as vehicles and have wooden carts attached to them. The poor animals are so neglected and abused as the weight you see loaded onto these carts is immense and whips are used to make them work. It is so sad to witness but many can be seen navigating the streets. Goats and chickens roam freely it is so surreal as it's a far shout from the civilisation we live in just a 6 hour flight away.

After walking the streets and witnessing first-hand the hardship and dire living conditions, we decided that we had to help the community, which was a turning point. We appealed to our sponsors to see if they wished to help further by donating either a 25kg rice bag at £12.50 or a 50kg rice bag at £22.50 with the larger bag feeding a family for one month. Mosquito nets are handmade and cost £5.00. Approximately five people would sleep under one, protecting them from catching



malaria. Cleaning packs which contain soap, bleach, and washing powder cost £2.00 per pack. These appeals were done twice a year April and November when team trips over to The Gambia went out, as this enabled us to meet families and build a relationship with them. The support to our appeals grew and we could happily help families that did not have children connected to our school. I should maybe explain that since 2015, teams of between two and six people would buy their own flight tickets to The Gambia and work with love from their hearts for two weeks helping at the school in the mornings then to walk up to 7 miles in the midday sun looking for families that needed support and help. Suitcases were loaded with clothing, bedding, and gifts off the children's sponsors in place of our own clothing and toiletries. Extra baggage was sometimes given free by the airlines or paid for by the charity to ensure that we could get as much over to help as many people as we possibly could. We too sent over donated clothing, bedding and school equipment on a container to allow teams to reach out further. Life was crazy busy planning, collating and shipping in preparation for the team trips over but it was all worth it for stories like these...

FATOU

We could tell by the amount of stagnant water at the entrance of this particular compound that any family living here would be living in tough and difficult conditions. On the right was a well and on the left sat a young girl sitting on a broken wooden seat in the shade. She was obviously disabled with twisted hands and so much dribble down her face.

Flies swarmed around her, the clothes on her body were ripped, dirty and wet from saliva. The whole team focused to find out who her mummy was and what her situation was. Her mother was sleeping but was awoken by the noise and excitement that had arisen since our arrival, she could not speak English so we had someone interpret for us.



Fatou was eight years old and was born a normal healthy child. At the age of two she developed severe pains all over her body, she lost the use of her legs, her hands became twisted and her brain ceased to work as it previously did. Due to the lack of medical facilities and finances, Fatou found herself severely disabled. Disability in The Gambia is frowned upon as Gambians believe the family to be cursed. As a team we became emotional and emptied our ruck sacks to give her as much as we had. We asked her mummy to visit the school and promised

a large 50kg rice bag, mosquito net and cleaning pack. Fatou's mummy hugged and thanked us and we left the compound in silence. Outside we had a team group hug as many team members were in tears and emotions were high. What more could we do to ease Fatou's young precious life? This was a Friday so we had a weekend to gather our thoughts and find a way to help.

With a furniture maker and an all round DIYer on our team, after long chats we all decided that we would make Fatou a chair that would support her body and line it so that it was waterproof. On the Saturday morning the two men went off to find materials that could be adapted to suit. The men spent hours in the heat going shack to shack and returned with beaming faces to show us what they had found. Incredibly they had found a wheelchair which was very untidy and dirty. It was overpriced as wheelchairs are like gold dust, but having shared Fatou's story, the kind shop keeper agreed that we could have it on our budget. On the Sunday both men went to collect the chair and bring it back to for the team to wash it and make it fit for Fatou to enjoy. The team went through all the clothing and shoes that had been shipped over and in storage to find this beautiful girl quality outfit!

On the Monday morning the team left for the school, ready and eager armed with a spotlessly clean wheelchair and top notch clothes and shoes. After school the team had a little lunch together to gather energy and thoughts before commencing on a long hot walk through the dusty streets of Ebo Town to find Fatou's compound. We were greeted by many children smiling, singing and dancing as they saw the gifts that we had bought for this precious girl. Fatou got carried out

by her mother and the smiles from her face and her mum's gratitude brought tears once again but this time they were tears of happiness. The mother and children wheeled Fatou around the compound, the singing and noise of jubilation was immense. Fatou was taken outside into the street where other children ran up to her and wanted to wheel her around, scenes never to be forgotten.

We only had one day left as we were due to fly home so we asked mum if she would bring Fatou to school and join in with the singing and lessons. We as a team were hoping above hope that her mum would take us up on the offer and waited in wonder if she would push Fatou through the community and to our amazement, a site each team member will never forget in the distance comes Fatou and her dad proudly pushing her to school, dressed so beautifully in the donated clothes with shoes on her feet and ribbons in her hair. Fatou's smile and the look in her eyes melted our hearts, this is what makes all the hard work worthwhile. Seeing an innocent child have the freedom to explore a total life changing experience.

On our return trip over we visited Fatou and her family, to find her wheelchair had a flat tyre and had been out of action as the family did not have the finance to get it repaired. We took the chair to a bike repair shack and got the puncture fixed for five pounds. Fatou's father had disappeared and to date her mother is still struggling on. We think that we have things tough here in the United Kingdom, but really we don't. This precious sweet girl is treated as an outcast in The Gambia and has no prospects, but hopefully in the tiniest of ways we have made little difference.

BUBACARR

We met Bubacarr in April 2017 when his mother had queued for hours to enrol but by the time Bubacarr and his mummy had got to us, we had filled all the allocated spaces and were sadly and heartbreakingly turning children away. I vividly remember this little four year old boy and his mother. Thanks to an interpreter the mother shared her story of how her husband had sadly passed away and how she struggled to cope to feed her family and herself. As a team she pulled our heart strings as it was clearly obvious that this mum needed a break and an offer of help to educate her son free of charge.

We explained that we would write her details down on a reserve list and wished her the best for the future. When school opened in September 2017, we opened at full capacity of eighty children. The head of school at that time contacted us explaining a grandmother of a four year old boy was appealing to join our school. The grandmother described me perfectly and was told by her daughter on her deathbed to go to the school and Paula will help Bubacarr. The grandmother explained that Bubacarr's mother had contracted malaria in the monsoon season and had sadly passed away so we knew we had to help. Bubacarr was

enrolled into Rainbow class but sadly soon after, we learnt that Bubacarr's grandmother had lost her life too and an uncle had taken him in.



This poor child looked downtrodden and beaten. We noticed that he came to school with no ruck sack, food or drink. We purposefully sat next to him in lessons which he battled to participate in. One day we walked him home to meet his uncle and extended family. We gave them a ruck sack and water container and asked if they would kindly ensure Bubacarr had a little food and water for school. We brought him a new pair of trainers and gave the family a large bag of 50kg rice and a mosquito net, which they kindly accepted.

This was the start of us building a relationship with the family and this young boy. We kept Bubacarr on at our school one year longer than required as the free education helped the family greatly and being the oldest child in our school, Bubacarr grew in confidence. He left our school to go to Grade one in July 2021. We pride ourselves in nurturing him and giving him stability with an education. He is one little boy that we will always remember.

We will continue to work hard to help improve the lives of the people in Ebo Town and if you would like to help us, please visit our website and get in touch

Thank you for taking the time to read our story.