

Episode 32 Make A Difference_transcript

Mike [00:00:00] Hello and welcome to the English Waffle Podcast for advanced English learners looking to improve their listening skills by listening to real spontaneous and unscripted conversation. My name is Mike. And each week, Owain and I do a bit of waffling on a random topic and occasionally like this episode, we invite along an interviewee who we feel has something interesting to share. Before I talk about the guest for Episode 32 of the podcast, I want to begin with a few shout outs of THANK YOUS. A number of you have written in in the past few weeks to say how much they've been enjoying the English waffle during lockdown and the last few guests that we've had on the podcast and I want to say thank you so much to everyone who's taken the trouble to write in. Really, it really motivates us when whenever we receive a message from listeners and it gives us the lift that that that we need to keep going, really, on the podcast, as essentially this is for you that we do it for as we hope it will be useful for your English listening. We've had a number of really good suggestions for future topics, so thank you for that. Will definitely be acting on some of those. So some facts about the guest for this week. Tom Graham is a mutual friend of another Tom. Tom Jones, who appeared on the Waffle a few weeks ago to talk about pubs and English language learning, if you remember. Tom is a published author, Ted Talk speaker and founder of Sustainable Tourism organisation. Make a Difference, which is based in the Philippines. During our conversation, we talk about a range of things and in particular how Make a Difference has had to adapt due to COVID and the fact that nobody can travel at the moment. We talk about the opportunities to educate people online about some of the issues that they deal with around social entrepreneurship and global challenges that face all of us, remember climate change? That was a big conversation before COVID. We talk a little bit about that. Tom explains how he was inspired to set up a tourism company which benefited both the local community and in the Philippines and also tourists who were looking for something a little bit more meaningful than an average beach holiday. About 15 minutes into the interview, I play a clip of one of Tom's social entrepreneurship projects. And you can see more of this talk and Tom's TEDTalk in the links that accompany the show notes and on the website. Worth listening right to the end of this interview, which is about 25 minutes in length as Tom shares an idea of how the Philippines might escape being left behind in the global race towards progress with a very innovative idea. I begin by asking the question, Tom, just how big is Manila? Back at the end with a little wrap up, but for now, enjoy the conversation.

[00:03:18] English waffle where we talk about random stuff. We'll take you on a journey where you'll find out soon enough why listening to the waffle lays an entertaining way of sharing with you foreigners the things that British people say. So join us on the waffle and strap yourself in for ten whole earthly minutes of English listening.

Tom [00:03:51] Good question. Well, Metro Manila is so it's not actually it's not actually just one city. It's, I even thought it was seven or eight cities, but I think I even got corrected on that. I think it's twelve something like that. Twelve cities. It's in double figures of cities all sort of grouped together, and of which the most famous one, but not the biggest is Manila. So I actually live in a city called Makati. So that's why a moment ago instead of I couldn't say I was from Manila, I'm not in Manila, but I am in the greater sort of urban area of Metro Manila. And in one of the cities.

Mike [00:04:34] And how just to give it a handle on how big it is.. My knowledge is very ignorant, to be honest. How big is..are we talking?

Tom [00:04:44] Its huge. Because it's.. It's the most most densely populated city in the world, apparently. Again, I hear that. So it's er...its about twenty twenty or twenty five million, something like that. But it's a very densely sort of packed in.

Mike [00:05:04] So is it some noticed day to day. Is it something that kind of walking down the pavements, is it is it a conscious thing? That you're sort of you're aware of?

Tom [00:05:15] That's why it's so weird now. B'cos I look out of my... I mean, I look out of my window and, you know, I'm used to at this time, it's it's getting into rush hour traffic. And there's just no one on the streets. It's super weird.

Mike [00:05:31] That was where I wanted to begin. This conversation really is just to address the elephant in the room, which is is Corona virus. And I kind of we haven't really been talking about it much on the podcast or even really, really with a lot of people. I think I think conversations have been steered towards other things, really. But it is very much an unprecedented time that we're going through it. I always feel tinged with guilt really when I think about my time, because it's it's been a brilliant time for me to just stop and pause, get off the gravy train that is London. Yeah. Yeah. But then I also feel..... that... I mean, that's my reality, right. And so...

Tom [00:06:29] I've experienced it in different kind of waves, so initially shock horror, because I had a travel business, right, which travel bans are not great for travel businesses. So we pretty much I mean, over.. almost overnight just lost a hundred percent of our business with virtually no hope of it coming back, right, in the next year. I mean, let's face it, who's going to book a holiday right now, especially all the way to the Philippines? So I went through that. And then I went through, erm.. but I guess I'm just naturally, quite.. probably...you know, for good or for bad. But I just I just tend to always want to see the good in the opportunities in bad situations and...

Mike [00:07:22] Glass half full, yeah,.

Tom [00:07:23] Yeah, I'm a bit like that, I guess. Glass half full. And so we've seen opportunities through it. And you know, we've started a market, an online marketplace and we've started doing a lot of online education. So we already did educate. We were an educational company basically doing.. giving people a chance to learn about sustainable development goals and now through connecting communities and now we're still doing that, right, but doing it online and it's just interesting, you suddenly see there's so many opportunities that didn't exist before, which now do exist. So it's closed one massive door, but it's opened quite a few others. And so you know that's cool.

Mike [00:08:11] That's a really, really positive to hear that. Maybe just by way of introduction, we could go for the.. sort of listeners.. I'm recording now. So we'll just erm, you know..

Tom [00:08:24] Can I very quickly just get a glass of water?

Mike [00:08:27] Yes. Yes. Of course.

Mike [00:08:30] Yeah. Just by by way of introduction, I've watched your TED talk and on Thom's recommendations, so Thom's a mutual friend of us. How did you get to know Thom?

Tom [00:08:44] He used to be my boss. I was teaching at a school in.. where was I ? Cambridge about, well, four years ago. Something like that. Yeah.

Mike [00:08:55] So this is Thom Jones who who was on the podcast a couple of episodes ago I think. And and we both we both know know Thom, who's a very much larger than life character. . But I was I really, really enjoyed watching your very eloquent and humorous account of the foreigner trying to navigate his way through an alien transport system... It brought back memories for me of living in Mozambique, where my brother lives in Mozambique, but to go visit him. And there they take around these little what they call chapas, which are a small mini buses to get from A to B. And it's kind of what you're saying about this idea of how to get how to.. how to pay, how to, you know, how to... just be a human being on these on these things with a completely different culture set. Fascinating.

Tom [00:09:59] Yeah. Yeah. It's.. It's. The thing about the Philippines is that because they speak English and they have a Catholic culture and they're quite Americanized on the surface, sometimes you think you understand more than you actually do. Once you go beneath the surface, you realise that they are actually you know.., it's the other side of the world, it's a complete different climate, completely different you know, history.. and temperaments. And so, yeah, there's so many opportunities when you're abroad to sort of be exposed to that. And sometimes you do end up looking like the proverbial idiot abroad.

Mike [00:10:41] Absolutely. And that's no bad thing. What took you to the Philippines in the first place?

Tom [00:10:48] Journalism. So I was writing reports on different emerging economies around the world. And so I spent some time in South Africa and in Botswana before that. And then I was sent to the Philippines. Yeah, 8 years ago now. Yeah. And I expected just to stay a very short time. Yeah. Eight years ago.

Mike [00:11:10] And you're now, you know, you're co-founder, you're founder originally, right, you are, it's your.. It's your brainchild.

Tom [00:11:17] Sure im the Co-.. myself and a Filipino guy. We we started the social enterprise. Yeah.

[00:11:25] And how did that come to be?

[00:11:28] Well, so I. So the talk that you watched was connect...was basically a talk centred around my experiences living in the communities of one of the biggest NGOs or charities in the Philippines. And so I wrote a book on my experiences living in these communities, which were basically built for a region for the poorest Filipinos. And they were built in a spirit of solidarity and real sort of connectedness. And it was really, really inspiring to be there. So I wrote about these communities. And then I spoke about them in that, you know, in talks like the one you watched. But then from there, one thing I noticed in these communities was the one thing that which seemed to have... the one most important thing which was.. had enabled these communities to transform and to live, you know, to both physically build these communities, these houses, but also to live life with more hope for the future was this sense that they were no longer left behind. ... And we then saw this opportunity through social enterprise or through tourism to build sustainable travel experiences which connect people from around the world that want to have a more authentic experience when they travel with communities which are perhaps in really

beautiful parts of the country but they're sort of left off the, you know, the typical tourist route. Everybody goes to the same resorts and the same beaches. And yet the most beautiful parts of the country are often those that are most deserted. So that's why we saw this opportunity to actually work with some of these communities to develop tourist experiences from home stays and cooking classes and some some kinds of eco tourism kind of activities such as reforestation and stuff. So, yeah, we got the idea and then we set up we set up the company about about five years ago.

Mike [00:13:48] What I.. What I really liked about visiting your Web site and getting a feel for what you guys do was this idea that this is not something you're going to parachute in, you're going to be there for a couple of years and then go away somewhere else and save inverted commas somewhere else. Because I think there's this danger of sort of fetishization is that a word? Fetishize it is now! Sort of, you know, white middle class people predominantly travelling and kind of coming in and being the saviour. For me, what I think others will see on your Web site is this idea that you work very closely with the local community and they're part of, they're embedded in the DNA, of your... Is that right? That's kind of your?.

Tom [00:14:42] Yeah, it's very different to.. so If you develop a normal tourist experience, right, like, let's imagine you're going to send people to a popular island in the Philippines or you're gonna send them to the Costa del Sol or wherever it might be right. All you need to do is basically identify a nice hotel, do a deal with a hotel and say, OK, we're going to send you X number of guests every month right. And that's quite simple. Now with what we're doing, of course, the communities themselves are not in any way when we began, we're not in any way prepared for receiving guests, right. Or for... So. So there was so much relationship building that went into it at the beginning and really convincing the communities that we weren't just there to show up at Christmas time and hand over some like, you know, some some kind of second... (Mike) "Happy Christmas!"

Tom [00:15:41] Yeah. To like to say no, that tourism can, if done in the right way, can become a real opportunity for you to not be left behind anymore, right. And and we had to convince them that this was not just going to be a once-off thing.

Tom [00:15:59] Coming back to tourism, it created this positive loop because we'd run an experience. with the community, the community, of course, earned money from it. But they also gained a lot of confidence in their own culture and social skills and so much else that came as a result. The guests loved it because Filipinos are just naturally warm and friendly and you always leave a community just you know, so many times you need thinking, wow, and you know, you just got that sort of warm feeling. And it's not from.. you don't pity people.. They actually have.. a lot of these communities they have a lot that... they lack a lot which are things they should have. But at the same time, they have something that you don't have, right, as as a visitor. And that's really challenging. And it's so inspiring. So it created this positive loop where, you know, we'd have a good experience, guests would leave and they'd recommend that someone else or someone else would come in. So we were constantly coming back, building that relationship. And, you know, some of our communities now, they really are extensions of, you know, our kind of (I'm talking for our team as a whole), almost an extension of our family. And so, of course, that also now with Corona virus means that we have added responsibility, right to sort of help them a bit..

Mike [00:17:27] Let's talk about that a little bit. How has that shifted from from your travel.. people coming to experience sustainable travel and some sort of program in place...How has that shifted onto an online platform or an educational arm?

Tom [00:17:44] Well, we've got two things. So one thing we're doing is vegetable.. So three things, actually. We've got a crowdfunding campaign where we are basically giving people a chance to buy trees and buy all the goods which are made by one of our partner communities. So they make a lot of stuff out of bamboo. So a lot of sort of zero waste kind of, you know, items. So you've got a fundraising or a crowdfunding campaign. That's one thing we're doing to support them. The second thing we're doing, we've got something called.. so the company I set up is called Mad Travel or Make a Difference, M.A.D. Travel. And now we have mad markets where we're supplying families in Metro Manila with fruits and vegetables. So we're getting, sourcing them directly from the farmers and then bringing them to families in Metro Manila. And then the final thing that we're doing is online education. So we've always worked a lot with schools and universities to say, you know, come and experience the communities yourself and meet the entrepreneurs and meet meet these really wonderful people. And now we're saying, look, as long as these communities have Internet connections and as long as the social entrepreneurs we partner with have Internet connections.

Tom [00:19:12] That's a huge amount you can do. Yeah. And it's quite exciting. So we're now connecting different international schools, universities to our communities and getting them to work on social enterprise projects or simply get inspired by by seeing global challenges, but through a local perspective. So a local lens ... and so we all know what, I don't know, in the U.K. we all know that plastic pollution is an issue. And yet, of course, plastic pollution looks very different in the UK compared to the Philippines. And yet the Philippines is one of the biggest plastic polluters in the world. So through online, you can actually get to connect to somebody who and now show you through a vlog or through video content, through interactions "hey, this is the problem I'm dealing with in my country and this is what I'm doing about it. And it's quite inspiring.

Mike [00:20:07] So positive. So positive. And, you know, particularly through this idea of experiential learning, you know, and getting away from being very text, very heady, very, very in your own head and kind of books. And more into just people because people work with people and learn from people. And so I really like that idea.

Tom [00:20:30] Yeah, I'm a I'm a massive believer in experiential learning. I think that we don't lack in the world theoretical knowledge. Right. We lack empathy. Right. And we lack a sense of really, really caring that I kind of say we can. But then how much do we really care? Push. Yeah.. And I I've I've been in that, I've been in that boat and I still am sometimes! I forget to care when I'm when I when I become disconnected again, I also kind of get into my own head in my own world. And I. I forget to really prioritise what, you know, caring and being there, you just can't avoid it. And you're like, wow, I really do care. Like these people are amazing or this person has such potential and he's being held back by, you know, so many factors. And I want to help him. I want to be part of this. So, yeah..

Rafa - MAD travel [00:21:26] I'm going to take you on a journey to discover my life as a social entrepreneur. You're ready for a hike? Let's go this way. Hi. Hello. So this valley wasn't always the way it looks today when the volcano erupted, it burned everything here which basically hit the reset button in society. And that really resulted in the community here being left behind technologically, food security wise, and even forgetting parts of their culture. All right! And so after seeing the poverty of the environment here and seeing how poor some of the people work, no jobs in the area and ability to farm, really challenged us like what could we do? How do we give something to the community while giving

something to the environment and help them realise that it's also in their best interest to invest with us for their future?

Mike [00:22:37] What's the outlook look for rural Philippines, what do people, how do people earn a living and how do people, how do people get by? This is pre Corona. B'cos one thing I do know is that you're at the centre of like.. the Philippines is kind of a nexus for typhoons and hurricanes and climate change. And that adds to the whole mix, right?

Tom [00:23:05] Yeah. So. Hmmm. Something that's happened... the Philippines over the last few years has become the call centre capital of the world. I think it's overtaken India. They have softer accents. And so a lot of people that can are getting jobs in.. it's Called the BPO industry, Business Process Outsourcing, but it's basically call centres. Right. So that's a massive industry. So a lot of people are looking to escape the countryside because they see it as, you know, just poverty, basically. And apparently the average age of a Filipino farmer is fifty seven years old. And if you think that life expectancy is not that old here right, that means that they're really very old and there's no one young doing farming. So if you're young, you want to get out of the countryside and you want to head to the city, you want to get a job in a call centre or even failing that as a taxi driver or a tricycle driver. And yeah, this is your aspiration now, of course. The reality is that there aren't enough jobs to go around, right and that leads to like an incredibly congested city that I live in, Metro Manila. And, you know, it doesn't work out for everyone. And of course, also working in a call centre means that you need to speak pretty good English. It's actually a job for graduates really. So a lot of people are excluded from the good quality jobs in the city, but it doesn't stop them coming here and, you know, living in in squalor. And, doing their best to survive basically...

Mike [00:25:00] Trying their luck, yeah. So where do you go from there? Where do you what's the sort of outlook for city dwellers

Tom [00:25:11] I mean. OK, so here's his picture.

Mike [00:25:16] Give us the positive Tom!

Tom [00:25:17] I've got it guys, don't worry!

Tom [00:25:19] Then so let's take an example, right? Something like chocolate, right. So Europeans love chocolate. Everyone loves chocolate. Yes. Now we have in the U.K., a very famous world, you know brand. I can go downstairs from where my apartment is now and I can buy myself a bar of Cadbury's chocolate, right. Or any other kind of international brand now. So we love our chocolate. And yet in the U.K., the last time I checked, we don't produce any Cacao, right. So we have to import that as a raw material from from a country like the Philippines. I'm not saying I don't know where Cadburys get their Cacao from.. but they could potentially get it from the Philippines, right. Philippines can produce it its a tropical country. And anything you plant in the Philippines will grow, right. It's a really rich. It has sun. It has rain. And it has a lot of land like like millions of hectares of land, which is not being used. But even if we could grow Cacao in the UK, I think the average person would be like, well, where am I going to grow Cacao, right?. Where do I? I don't have any.. you know, where's my farm, right? Only a few people have farms. We have limited space. Yeah. So the Philippines has a lot of land that's that's basically not productive at the moment because everybody associates it with poverty. And the Philippines has got used to importing chocolate bars to give just one example, right. So I can't get a Filipino chocolate bar, I'll get a European chocolate bar when I'm here in Manila. So..so this is the

problem, right? Is that there's a reliance on international brands. There's a lack of kind of real pride in local brands. It's considered cheap, considered poor quality all of these things. But this is where the opportunity lies because that is changing. And in the future right, the.. you know, there's going to be a Cacao shortage, apparently.

Mike [00:27:28] I did hear about that. Yeah.

Tom [00:27:30] Yeah. So the Philippines has millions of hectares of land. Why not use that not only to plant Cacao, but why not to create finished products in the Philippines, right? Which are high quality. I mean, why can't it be done? It's just a case of perception, right?

Mike [00:27:49] Totally perception, right? It's this perception of, you know we don't know how to do it. And, you know, the Developed world does.

Tom [00:27:58] Yeah. And I think the interesting thing, again, I was reading on the impacts of Corona virus moving forward is how it's going to affect supply chains as well. So, you know, we don't want is this concept called just in time, right? Where we get stuff, we source stuff from all around the world. And because it's slightly cheaper, even though it is a massive carbon footprint and we're not creating jobs locally, we're creating jobs somewhere else. All of those things, right. So maybe there's an opportunity here if people are losing faith in just-in-time because they realise how Coronavirus showed how fragile that is. Then you say, OK, why not produce more locally, but don't just produce it and then sell it on as a raw material. Create the goods locally. Then you can cut down on all of the carbon footprint. You can create jobs. You can create wealth in the Philippines. The Philippines can, can make high quality chocolate bars. And you never know why not.. maybe the U.K. will import Filipino chocolate bars in the future, right? It's not impossible. I mean ... (Mike - absolutely!)

Tom [00:29:05] Like 20 years ago, we probably weren't buying, you know, Korean smartphones or whatever, right so, times change and in the sense of countries and brands can change. So there they go.. that's it.

Mike [00:29:17] You've totally redeemed yourself!... from being like... yeah. I don't know what you've redeemed yourself from, but there was there was a point at which I was like it's all helpless, its all hopeless..

Tom [00:29:26] No, no ,no, it's not hopeless, i'm always optimistic. But you've got to be. Well, at least I benefit from being you know, you've got to start from a position of.. you know reality, right? And an understanding like it is a massive challenge, but, you know, that's how the world changes and it hopefully it changes for the better. And I think it will for sure.. certainly in some ways.

Mike [00:29:56] I'm going to include links of in the notes to this to your Web site and to your TED talk as well, because I thought I really enjoyed that and I think other people will as well. Is there anything else? I don't have anything else my side that i wanted to

Tom [00:30:17] No, but. yeah. Come and well.. Come and visit the Philippines one day, I guess. It's an amazing country. It's English speaking. It's actually a great place to even learn English, right? Because there's a lot of very, you know, very educated, very, very, very pleasant, very smart Filipinos who are in this great place to come to practise your English. And also if you want a practise partner or whatever. It's a great place to connect

to people and to say don't just hear it from me as a Brit living in the Philippines, but yeah. connect, reach out to Filipinos in this country.

Mike [00:31:06] And I mean, we get in Britain, there's a lot of Filipinos living in London. There's a lot of Filipinos working in the NHS, actually.

Tom [00:31:15] Yeah there are huge amounts. Yeah. Yeah, it is.

Mike [00:31:21] It's a tough time. Tough time for them, yeah.

Tom [00:31:25] Yeah. I think a lot of them have been.. I've read reports that quite a lot of them got sick on the frontline.

Mike [00:31:36] Well we wish them. We wish them well. Tom, it's been a pleasure to connect! And I wish you all the best with your.. I mean, we'll keep in touch. I hope to keep in touch.

Tom [00:31:51] Thank you. It's been a pleasure to talk to you and having me on.

Mike [00:31:57] And stay safe. Stay well.