

GIBRALTAR CHRONICLE



BY EYLEEN GOMEZ

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Polar explorer Mike Laird is in Gibraltar to share a lifetime of adventure and military experiences in Afghanistan with schoolchildren through a series of lectures about bullying, resilience and climate change.



Mr Laird's regular visits to The Rock are due to family and friends living here as well as his ability to carry out some scuba instructor work on Gibraltar's shipwrecks. He has taken this particular trip to see students at Prior Park School.

"I have spoken to them before and it went very well," said Mr Laird.

"There are a variety of talks that I do tailored to schools around things like building resilience in youngsters, about turning failure into opportunity and to understanding what you can learn from a failure."

"Anti-bullying and climate change talks like these, and other talks that I deliver to schools are very different to the talks I would deliver to groups on cruise liners or groups of travel enthusiasts or people preparing to go to a polar environment."

When asked “How did the children at Prior Park respond to your talks and stories?” he said they held him for an hour-long question and answer session afterwards.

“I have never had that before. Normally student groups can be reticent, they are shy, they don’t put their hands up. But, it was me, me, me, me, me, tell me this, tell me that,” he said.

“I was like ‘Oh my goodness’, because I rarely get such interaction.”

The talk was open to school children, trustees, parents, and teachers and was very well attended. After the session it was rapidly decided that Mr Laird needed to return to give more talks to the students.

This time at Prior Park he did two one-hour sessions.

Typically, he shows a slide show but with children there is often not the same reaction and engagement as there would be from adults, he explained. As a result, he makes the session flexible for the children and they are the ones who dictate the session.

“It might only be a 45 minute slide show with a ten minute Q and A. But, if you get a really engaged group it is so lovely and you can stay there forever and a day. I just park my backside on a table or a desk. I’m not overly formal, standing beside a lectern. I like to walk the stage or get in with the crowd especially if they are youngsters.” he said.

“There was some very mature questions that came from the audience the last time. One young boy probably about 11 or 12 years old actually asked ‘Mike how do you afford to go on these trips’ and I didn’t expect that.”

He does it by doing contract consultancy work in the UK on risk management.





Mr Laird speaks to the children about bullying, drawing on his own experiences as an adopted child who was bullied in school and from the experiences of his family members who have been bullied because they too are different. In addition, his partner Maria, who was in Gibraltar on her first visit, was a special needs teacher who has encountered a lot of bullying of children in her professional life.

“Whilst I am not a trained psychologist, I have mentored youngsters on a professional basis, and I have a true understanding of what the impacts of bullying are for them” he said. “And how they can build coping mechanisms to deal with it.”

He said these sessions go down well with the students but it can be harder for questions to come from them. As, often by asking a question, a child could be admitting they are being bullied and this admission would be in front of their class or even their entire school.

He also speaks to the children on climate change and he tries to help them make sense of the various conferences such as COP26, and the statements and pacts that various countries are taking part in. Many of the details of these things are not easy for youngsters to grasp. Mr Laird bridges the gap for them.

“They might be going off to do something with water or wind energy setting up a little wind mill in the playground, or talking about recycling or car usage or electric power. It is about tying it together and taking three or four of those threads, coming in and suggesting things that they can take home with them,” he said.

“What I always try to do is tie in the travelling aspect. So when I am talking about climate change I am not going to put up a picture of a windfarm because for them that is just not exciting or relevant. But if you put up a picture of a polar bear or a penguin all of a sudden the children are there saying ‘I love animals’ and it is something that engages them.”

“You might ask them where does the polar bear live, what does it live on, what is happening to the ice, and what is causing that? And it is connecting these dots, going back to turning on a car engine - that helps them to understand.”

Resilience is slightly different from bullying and this is a topic he also addresses with the children. It is about how they address challenges in life.

“Now those challenges can come from all sorts of things. For example I was always in the shadow of a big brother who excelled in sports, excelled academically and then there was podgy Mike who bumbled his way through school and could have put in a lot more effort,” he said.

He now often returns to his former school in Edinburgh, writes for their magazine and he leads reunions.

“It might very well be that a youngster is not first, they didn’t win a prize, and they didn’t win at sports day,” he said. “But, only one person can be that prize winner. Only one person stands number one. For the others, it is about making the best effort that they can make and possibly even undertaking a journey of self-improvement.”

“So, it is about building them, building their self-confidence and telling them that actually their best effort is good enough. They can’t always be number one.”





The lecture around resilience offers building blocks, looking at different things such as activities outside school, perhaps in Scouts, or attaining their cycling proficiency exam or whatever suits their own abilities and attributes.

To find out more about Mr Laird or read about his various adventures and challenges over the years visit: <http://www.jockandthebeanstalk.com/>