

Paul Guest interview with Pam Dawes (53.16)

13/3/2015

(00.00)

PG: Urmston¹ is where it all started. I got involved in the very early stages when a group of men in the pub, in the local, The Britannia, decided to collect aid for the Kosovan refugees that were arriving in Albania.

I was Church Secretary at the time and I was going through the mail when a leaflet came through the letterbox asking for help. I finished my duties there and locked the church up and went across the road to an old Co-op building which was disused and was a hive of activity, which was most unusual as it had been empty for many years. I went inside there and saw a number of people, quite a few church people, but mainly people from the community and at the time, I didn't know, but **Pam**² was there somewhere in the background. I got involved in helping the sorting of the aid and in fact all my family were involved. It transpires that my mum and dad had been down the day before and helped sort something out. So we all got involved, me, my wife and children.

¹ A town in Trafford, Greater Manchester

² Pam Dawes recording included in this archive

As time progressed, it became evident that it was going to be a massive aid convoy³ and some of the organisers from the pub approached me as they knew that I was a paramedic, so they asked me if I would be prepared to go with the crew and just keep an eye on the guys driving the wagons out there. At the time, they were talking about 18-20 articulated wagons but in the end, I think we took about 16-17.

(02.50) So I helped as part of the Medical Team. My brother, who is also an Intensive Care Nurse, he was in the Mountain Rescue at the time, and also he was in the Territorial Army, so he, myself and a local GP from Sale went out as the Medical Team. We were out there about 10 days or so and that in itself is just another story.

The convoy was amazing really because most truckers - I wouldn't say loners, but it's that sort of job where you work on your own. To bring 16 40ft articulated lorries, each with 2 drivers, to bring 30 odd men together that have never worked together was an achievement in itself. And John Falkner, who was from the Rotary Club, was the Team Leader and he did a great job in keeping the guys together. We travelled down the A1/M1 right down to Dover and then we went across on the ferry. And it wasn't until we arrived in Calais, when we regrouped, we realised how big the convoy was.

³ Paul Guest convoy diary <http://makonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/To-Hell-With-Hope.pdf>

We carried on through France, through the toll booths and you could see people looking across the highways and seeing this massive, long convoy. We were told at the time that it was the biggest convoy to cross Europe since the war, a civilian convoy, anyway. So it was quite spectacular and a great experience, really.

We went through the Frejus tunnel, into Italy and the idea was to go to Ancona. We couldn't get all the vehicles on one ferry so another group were going to go down to Bari, I think it was, it might have been Brindisi, so we split the convoy and I went on the ferry from Ancona, which was an overnight ferry. We arrived the next morning in Albania. As we arrived into the port, of the ex communist state/country, it was very drab with lots of ships moored up, rusting away. Nothing was working, the cranes were not working and it was so bleak and at that point, really, most of us looking across looking at the quayside, were wondering what we were letting ourselves in for.

(06.38) We were met by an American Pastor called Bob Johnson⁴ and Bob was a likeable guy, a man's man, I suppose. He would talk about soccer and things like this and, when we first met him, he bought all the guys a beer. Most of the guys didn't know he was a Christian, didn't know he was a Pastor and they were quite amazed when they found out he was a Christian, just because he was a normal guy. (laughs)

⁴ Bob Johnson, Maranatha camp director, email about this delivery is available in this archive

We then went to a number of warehouses that was pre-organised. One of the warehouses, we just didn't feel was right so we actually took all the food over to Bob's refugee camp and it was literally an empty bakery, a disused bakery, and there were mattresses on the floor and families huddles around a single mattress. There were lots of kids and women and old men. But, there was a group of German guys, they'd come over with some aid organisation and they were just knocking up a small room within the large building, a prefabricated room and they had shelved it all out and they were just putting the last shelves on as we arrived with all the food. So that day, the whole room that they'd built with shelving was filled with food. And that pleased us but I'm sure that pleased the guys that were building it as well.

We met Bob a couple of times during the week. He'd been there some time, he was setting up a Bible College and he had some good connections in the area but he also came back to the U.K. afterwards and met up with some of the guys who had been out there. He did keep in contact for a number of months afterwards but I've lost touch now.

(09.20) I think what got to most of the drivers, and it certainly hit home with me, it sounds a bit of a strange thing to say, but these were ordinary people, just like you and I. To see them give up their homes and to actually share a room with another three or four families which might not even be their extended family and to live hand to mouth, sleeping on a shared mattress, I think that's what got to us.

I remember there was one incident, before we arrived with the food, we went into one refugee camp and they'd no food in there apart from bread and there was just a pile of bread on the floor waiting to be distributed.

The main goods were essentials, really, clothing, food, hygiene products. I seem to remember we had a forklift truck as well; somebody had donated a forklift truck which was very useful for offloading and moving some of the palletted aid around. Most of the aid was put onto pallets and then wrapped with cling film wrap so it was really essential that we had something to move the big pallets around.

(11.29) We were getting donations from... it started local in Trafford, Urmston, Flixton, Davyhulme, then it became Greater Manchester. And then people were hearing about it on the local radio stations. We had some donations from as far as Windermere, Lake Windermere. We had some donations even from Cornwall. So the message got out right across the country, really.

I don't think anybody really understood what was really going on. What sticks in my mind are the news reports and the images of families coming across the mountains from Kosovo into Albania, in the snow. I remember one particular shot of a family dragging an old man on a piece of plastic because they couldn't carry him; and just the dire need, the dire situation that these people found themselves in, that's really what played on most

people's heart strings. I don't think they fully understood the politics of the breakdown of Yugoslavia. Well, I certainly didn't at the time. It's only in hindsight, really, and the experiences I've had out in Kosovo, that I've got to understand a little more about what went on.

When we got back, we had the same amount of aid waiting for us to go out again. This convoy had cost thousands of pounds to actually take the vehicles, to hire the vehicles, to fuel them. All the volunteers, obviously, went of their own free will so there were no wages but it did cost lots and lots of money and there was just no way we could do another journey.

Fortunately, the war quite abruptly finished and the refugees started to go home but we were left with a lot of aid and quite a bit of responsibility tidying up the aftermath.

(14.45) That's when Manchester Aid to Kosovo really came to its own.

We had a meeting with the men from the pub, The Britannia, and that's really when I met Pam. At the meeting the guys really didn't want to continue anymore with the project but having been out there myself, I really felt I wanted to go back and perhaps get more involved. So it was decided that we would actually register as a charity and that process took a number of months. We formed a small group and Pam was on the original committee with myself and a few other people.

From there, we started to network with other organisations to get rid of the aid and it was somewhere along those lines when we found out about this family that had been involved in a massacre and they'd been brought by the British Army over to the U.K. for treatment. That's really all I knew at the time and Pam got really involved with that. And then one day, I came to Pam's house and met **Saranda**⁵ and the rest of the family, the cousins and it was quite moving, actually, to hear her story and I'm sure that will be recorded at some point if not already.

So the bond started then, the friendship bonds. And then of course, they asked us as a committee if we could do anything in their home town of Podujeva and that's the start of another story. That's the Peace Park.

PD: So when did you first go to Kosovo?

(17.18) PG: We went in 2002, I think it was. Our then Chairman⁶, Tony Collinson, who has sadly passed away since, and another couple, Pam and myself, we went out and we met with the family, initially. Then, we were introduced to the local Mayor⁷ and we were shown around the town. We talked to people in the street; we explained that the children had said that they would like a park for the kids to play in, somewhere for families to go.

⁵ Saranda Bogujevci recording included in this archive

⁶ <http://www.makonline.org>

⁷ Agim Veliu

And I thought, to be honest, after a war that's probably the last things on your list of priorities, hospitals and schools and housing, all these sorts of things, seemed to me to be more important but we didn't get anyone who said, "No, we don't want to a park." Apart from one man! And it transpires that he lived right near the plot of land that was going to be the park. We didn't know that at the time. [It meant moving his haystack from public land]

So we met with the municipality, we met with the Major and we went and have a walk around the site. We looked at a big field, we had a walk around the woods nearby and Tony and I went out and we measured this field with a tape measure and we did our best to survey the field. A few days later, the Mayor sent his surveyors out and they did a professional plan of the site and it was on the last day, when we were leaving that we were given a large cardboard tube with the maps in and the Mayor said that he would love us to come back and complete the project.

I didn't see the plans until we got on the plane when Tony opened them and it was at that point, we discovered that not only had we been given the land but we had been given the woods, which is some 25 acres. So this small project, straight away became a massive one.

(20.13) When we first arrived, we stayed in a hotel, a house actually, but all the roads were full of pot holes. The main drains at the side of the roads, had concrete flags, sections covering an open ditch and most of them had been

broken where cars had driven on them so we had an open sewer at the side of the road. On the road itself, the rain water, they had the big metal cast iron inspection hatches, cast iron, and most of those were missing. At the time, we didn't realise why, but they were missing. If you were lucky, some kind soul would have put a big stick in it so you could see it in the dark. If you couldn't see it then you had to walk very carefully as it would be so easy to fall down one of these big pot holes, these drain holes.

The infrastructure was terrible; the schools were in a mess. A lot of the schools, the sanitation in the schools was dreadful and it was in a sad state of affairs. Over the last few years, a lot has been done, lots of building going on, lots of new schools. It's really nice to go back. I used to go two or three times a year, in recent years, I've just been the once but every time you go back, there is something new going on. It's so encouraging to see life getting back to normal.

When we first talked about it, we thought we can knock a few swings up, a round-a-bout, bit of a slide, that sort of thing for the children, that won't take too long but when we realised the scale of the plot, the size of the plot, we thought, well we've got to do a bit more than that. So this little garden became a big garden and the natural woods needed to be opened up so that people could get access to it. It became a very big project.

So what we did was we got in touch with the Eden Project which is down in Cornwall. We met a lovely lady there, Jane Knight, who is a landscape architect. We went down and met her and we had a chat and explained what we wanted to do and asked if they could advise us, that's all we were asking for, at first. But then Jane said she'd come out and have a look so the next trip to Kosovo, we took Jane and she came back full of enthusiasm, did some great drawings and designs for the park⁸. We ran with that particular design, I don't think we have altered the design much at all. Year after year, a little bit was added to it. It's almost finished now in that sense, I think we have put on everything that was on the map. It's almost done, I think.

(24.20) We wanted a garden, not a memorial garden in the sense, that we didn't want it to be like walking around a crematorium or something like that, we wanted it to be a place where people could go and just sit and ponder and remember people. So rather than having big stone images and things like this, we decided that what we would do is dedicate trees and plants and things to people 'in memory'. And now we've got some concrete benches around the garden where people can actually go and sit down next to their tree or in front of their rose bush and just remember the good times of the past when they've had their loved ones with them. So that's the main feature in the garden on the field.

⁸ <http://makonline.org/home/peace-park/>
<https://www.edenproject.com/sites/default/files/documents/eden-project-peace-park-kosovo.pdf>

Just on the other side of the garden, the garden is enclosed by a beech hedgerow and on the other side is a large playing area. There is a football pitch, climbing frames, swings, things like that for the children. Then, just up the embankment there is a staircase that we put in - in the early years - up the embankment to the woods. We did quite a lot of work in the woods in the early days.

What I think was good about the early days, was that we were working with other organisations other than the local council and we got in touch with the Development Fund, the United Nations Development Fund, and from that we were able to employ people to come and spend three months working in the woods. So these guys would get paid for three months and they would help clear all the footpaths. The original footpaths were single track and we've opened them out to possibly two or three metres wide. So that actually created jobs for people, only short term, but it helped them through that period.

We then applied for other funding. We needed some pathways doing on the park down on the field and we got funding for that so that more work for the local contractors which helps the local economy. And then a couple of years ago the council managed to get another grant for some work in the woods and now the footpaths through the woods are now all block paved which is fantastic if you're in a wheelchair or a parent pushing a trolley.

So it has made access much better.

I'm very proud of the park. I'm proud of the guys, really, who are there every day, Jakup and Rexhep, and there've been one or two others in the past. But, I think Jakup and Rexhep are the key guys really, they are the gardeners. They look after the place; they get it ready for the summer when MaK goes out with the Summer School. They make sure all the flags are flying and that sort of thing.

I'm proud of what MaK does in that sense, in that it employs these two guys which is a massive commitment for such a small charity.

The park, as I see it, is a catalyst for loads of things now that's going on in Podujeva. When we first started getting involved in Podujeva, I said to Pam that I wanted just to concentrate on the park and I know, Pam being Pam, wanted to get involved with the community and lots of other things. And over the years, there are all sorts of things going on in the community. So Art in the Park was one of them, one of the earliest ventures where we got a group of young men together and they told us about their art and what they were doing. On one of the very early visits, we actually helped them do an art exhibition in one of the local buildings and it was opened to the public on evening and the Mayor came and that really, was the start of that.

From seeing some of the work that these local artists, young lads, had done, it was obvious that we needed to put something in the park. We worked with a

guy from Manchester, Mike Anit, who was a mechanic by trade but he was an artist and he worked with metal and Mike came out and got involved. And then, we saw a piece of work, which was a small clay 'Thinking Man' type person so Mike said that if we could get it back to the U.K. he would scale it up to full size⁹ [the Kosovar sculpture was already life] and cast it at a foundry, which he did and this guy is now sitting in the park.

(31.09) PD: Has it made a difference having the art flags and the sculpture, do you think local people like them?

PG: I think like any cultural change, I think when we first started doing things like this, some of the older people weren't quite sure and a lot of the young people would follow it. It's not all wacky stuff, some of it; most of it's quite tasteful. I think I'm not sure how to answer that one.

PD: There's been a lot of work in education; you've been quite involved in the creation of I.T. suites in the schools.

PG: I can't really take credit for that but we were asked, at one point, if we could help with computers. The schools didn't have anything at all. You were lucky if each Headmaster had a computer. So we did look into that and initially we started to do it on our own as Manchester Aid to Kosovo, we

⁹ The Kosovar sculpture by Agron Blakcori was already life size, <http://makonline.org/home/art/thinking-man/>. 'Thinking Man' was stolen for its scrap metal value in 2011. Much missed by the community, it was re-cast in resin and safely re-installed.

collected second hand computers and accessories and we went out. In fact, my daughter and son-in-law helped set up an I.T. team and they actually drove out to Kosovo with a van and started the I.T. project.

And then, a year or so later, we met up with a guy called Simon from a charity called Computers for Charities¹⁰ and he started to help in finding computers and

getting stuff and over the last few years now, I think nearly every school in Podujeve has a computer suite, mainly provided by Manchester Aid to Kosovo.

The beauty about what we've been doing is that we're not just going in and setting up I.T. suites and then coming away, we've transferred those skills so one or two of the volunteers have been going out there and showing the young people there what to do. And young people, being young people, they only need to be shown once and they they're probably better at it than we are now.

The last computer suite was completely fitted out by the local people. We provided all the gear and the young lads just got on with it. That's really encouraging.¹¹

¹⁰ <http://www.computersforcharities.org/>

¹¹ MaK's IT programme in Kosovo is led by student Liridon Islami. <http://makonline.org/home/education/it-projects/>

(34.26) I'm not a linguist at all but I do try and what I do tend to do is just find one or two little phrases that I can use over and over again.

So I have a little book, an address book and on each page, A, B, C. If I want 'apple' then I look in my book under 'A' and so on, so I found that I can get by. As long as I have this little book in my pocket, I can get by.

I think in most languages, you use body language and a smile will get you anywhere really. (laughs)

You can't go down to the local bookshop and get a book on Albanian, well you can get one on the Albanian language, but it doesn't tell you what a nail is or a hammer or the technical terms for things. They literally are tourists' books. So, yeah, your vocab's focused on different areas than most people's.

I think the main issues, apart from funding, if you could throw money at any project, you can usually get something done but education - that's money. Facilities - that's money, equipment - again that's money. So if you could throw money at it, you could solve the problem.

But they don't live in a world where they have access to money so what I noticed is that they were using stuff, perhaps, in the hospitals, like re-using oxygen masks which we used to do that in the 1960s: they would wash

something out and re-use it. So it was quite distressing for me to see them doing this sort of thing but when you've not got anything you can understand why they do it.

(37.50) I remember getting a message from Pam, one day, asking me to come over to the hospital and talk to the Medical Director and I remember sitting in his office and he was taking about the state of their A & E Department and the state of the ambulance. They don't have an ambulance service there, they provide an ambulance from the hospital and I said, well, you've got six ambulances outside and he shook his head and said, "None of them work and there's nothing in them." He took me down and we looked inside the backs of these ambulances and there was literally nothing in them. An old stretcher and I think one had a large cylinder of oxygen but that was it. No equipment, no blankets or anything.

And that hit me, really. And he asked me about my job and my ambulance and my ambulance at home and what equipment I had in my ambulance and he said, "Your ambulance," as though I owned it. So I listed some of the equipment and he was just gobsmacked and he just kept shaking his head and he said, "You've got more equipment in your ambulance, than I have in my casualty department." And that still gets me.

Pam has spent a lot of time with people in contact with the hospital, like with the midwives, the midwifery and the mental health side of things. It's not

really an area that I've got much experience in but what I have noticed is, a young man who used to come out to us in a wheel chair, who would always say, "Hello" and he no English at all but we could communicate and still do, as we still see him. And what I've notice with - his name is Lili - what I've noticed is that he has an electric wheelchair now. You know, ten years ago, that would not have happened so I don't know if he's had to buy that himself or whether that is provided by the state or not but obviously that's helped him with his access and accessibility so that's good, I suppose.

We've had a number of trips over to Manchester. I think the earliest one was the Mayor himself, who came across with his interpreter, Bekim. We try not to get involved in politics, and we weren't involved in politics in that sense but I think what we were trying to do was give them an experience of local government and we arranged for them to meet with our Mayor at Trafford¹² and a few Councillors and a trip around the Town Hall and things like that, just to have a chat with people in those positions and get a feel for how the system worked here in the U.K. So, that was one of the first visits.

Then, we had, I'm not sure if chronologically this is the right order but we did have a group of artists, older, mature artists, established artists from Kosovo. They came over and exhibited in Stockport and that was a fantastic opportunity for Manchester to see, really, what was going on in Kosovo.

¹² Visits were arranged to Trafford MBC and Manchester MBC.

We've had a number of fundraising events, the Manchester Run, run by BUPA and we've been involved in that for quite some years now and we've brought young people over to run in the race. I remember one occasion, one young lady who was the best in her field - I suppose you would say - came over to represent Kosovo and ran with the elite runners, so that was quite good.

(43.27) It's been part of my life for the last fifteen years and as I get older and as I am less active, I would see myself perhaps going out there maybe more as a tourist and meeting old friends rather than going out at the Project Manager or having a lot of responsibility to look after people.

We used to take groups of people out there working on the Park, so that's quite a responsibility, people who've never been before. In the early days, we used to take them to a mines awareness training in Prishtina and the British Army were there. These poor guys get off the plane, thinking they're going to build a park and suddenly they're being told about land mines and things like that. So there was quite a responsibility in the early days: taking people out there.

And to some extent, there still is as in the summer when Pam goes out with the other ladies and the other guys, they're taking young people out there¹³. I think I'd like to go as a tourist and just put my feet up.

You hear these people and they talk about immigrants coming over here and claiming this and claiming that, you know: they're totally ignorant. These people are people in need. Our friends from Kosovo came as refugees, asylum seekers, and we as a city, Manchester, have been able to put them up, look after them, heal, them. That is amazing, the injuries that these children came over with, and to see them now, young men and women, some getting married even. That's just amazing.

It's defined me in some way, I think. People like to put labels on people and they say and so I get 'Paul the Paramedic' or 'Paul who does Kosovo' and it's nice in that sense to be acknowledged for what you are and what you do. I don't know if it's changed my life, it's certainly helped form my life and who I am, I think.

In the early days when we went to Kosovo, we used to sit and have a meal with whoever had invited us. We might be in a bar or somebody's home. And, in the early years, part of the healing process was they wanted to share their story. And we heard some horrendous stories of people being murdered and abused and it's just unspeakable some of the things that went on. And I

¹³ <http://makonline.org/home/education/childrens-summer-club/>

would sit there, a grown man, face to face with quite often, other grown men, and I would just cry: my eyes just streaming.

I remember one guy, I said to one chap, "I'm sorry, I'm crying," and he said, "Don't be sorry." He said, "All our tears have dried up."

So yeah, they've been through hard times but it's such a privilege to actually share those experiences, for them to be open to sharing, you know. You only share things like that with friends and I think most of us consider ourselves as their friends now.

I think there's huge problems. I think their huge problems are not ones of buildings, it's not infrastructure, it's not even political in that sense, but I think the biggest problem is corruption. If they could get a grip with the corruption - and I know that's a very big one - I think all the services would be much better: the police service, the health service, the schools. Because, if you can get rid of the corruption within those organisations, then those organisations will, I won't say 'flourish', but can work within the budgets.

The beauty about Manchester Aid to Kosovo is that when we get funding from the public or whether it's grants or whatever, it comes to us and we actually are there and we know 100% of that is going on the project. Whereas big organisations when there's corruption involved, you know, they take the cream off the top before it get passed on. So that's my only sad

thought about Kosovo is corruption but that goes on in most countries, even here in Britain, only it's less obvious.

I just look at the Bogujevci family and the healing that's taken place in their bodies. I know that sometimes people struggle emotionally and that can continue through life, unfortunately, but I think Manchester Aid to Kosovo has helped certainly two families and many more to a lesser scale. We have helped other families: the Bogujevcis are the headliners, if you like. Their story is probably not much different to others but they - particularly Saranda - wanted to share that story and talk about it

I think, now I'm thinking of Saranda, when they went to Serbia¹⁴ to give evidence that was a big step for her and the family. But to actually get the truth out, in the open, I think was a really good thing for MaK and MaK's credibility.

¹⁴ 'Podujevo 1999- Beyond Reasonable Doubt' published in English and Serbian References an Law Centre, Belgrade, Documents Series; <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/jul/10/warcrimes.balkans>