

Associations as a resource

For the integration of immigrants

Into Finnish society

What exactly is an immigrant? Well if you look in the English dictionary quite simply it is someone who moves to another country to take up residency.

Me; maybe you; It could be anyone of any creed culture or nationality.

I stand here today with an immense sense of pride and feel grateful to be given the opportunity to speak about how associations can benefit people like myself.

As I have lived through this experience and continue to do so I feel it's my duty to raise awareness and help others whom might not be as fortunate as me.

I came to Finland in the spring of 2011, and as I got off the plane with a bag in one hand and my nearly 3 year old child's hand in the other following my wife's footsteps down the stairs onto the frozen runway I wondered what exactly did life have in store for me here. This wasn't like any other move I had made before, the weather, the language or languages, employment and the culture differences were all things that were rushing through my head like a storm that I hadn't witnessed before.

As it turned out, finding a job was the easy part and it was only a week or so before I had started full-time employment, a job that I continue with to this day, so, I had been able to satisfy the worry of supporting my family financially. With employment arranged it was then that my thoughts moved on to what I can do to fit into the community other than the workplace.

It was upon a coffee break with what has become a very good friend, not only in the workplace but outside too, that a topic I was very fond of was raised. Now if you haven't guessed already I come from a small island called England, or the United Kingdom to some. He asked me who is your favourite football team?. (ask the audience to guess) My eyes lit up about a conversation I could

talk passionately about and I proceeded to tell Mika everything I love about Liverpool FC. As a nation us English folk are often accused, and rightly so, of being passionate about football. I'm victim of this myself, I live and breathe football and it's been the same for me since I was a very small boy. I'm not going to stand here today and talk about how good Liverpool Fc are, because that will probably bore you to death!!!

But I can tell you how I took my first steps into Munsala United and where that has led up until this day.

Mika, my work friend had said that Munsala united had just started preparing for the season ahead of the summers fixture schedule and he offered to go along with me to my first training session as a way of introducing me to the team members. That's a gesture that shouldn't, and I will never forget it, be under estimated. Sports teams are embedded into the community's they are located in and for someone to offer their spare time signalled what close knit communities can do to offer people like me a route into communal activities.

Munsala United are a very unique organisation and I discovered this almost immediately. I didn't speak any of the local language which is still something I struggle with presently.

But football is a language itself in my opinion.

My transition into the team was made much easier because I wasn't treated as an outsider, but an equal. That feeling of being valued gave me such confidence in the early days of making a life in a place that I nowadays call home. I wasn't the only one that was attempting this transition into Munsala united or Munu as I later found out was the more widely used term when someone was speaking about this band of brothers, because that's what we at munu are, a band of brothers, united the munu way.

As I begun the love affair with Munu, a feeling which was reciprocated on many occasions, it became apparent that the doors were open for anyone who wanted to come and enjoy the atmosphere and feeling of being involved in a football team that was playing for the community. As I mentioned earlier I was not the only individual that had chosen to use this route into the wider community and at the end of the spring and beginning of the summer Tomas

Knuts, who has been at the centre of everything munu has done over the last 15 years or so introduced 3 new players into the team. You could see straight away that these guys had not arrived into Finland with the same ease as me.

With the United Kingdom being part of the EU, also being married to a beautiful Finnish woman, all I had to do was sign a permit to work here. But Afghanistan wasn't a part of the EU and you had three young guys here that wanted to integrate into a society that was very different to their own. I could identify with them immediately and even though geographically we wasn't from the same place I thought to myself is there any difference to them and me?

"No Luke" a voice said inside, "we are all the same".

Mehdi, Farid and Abbas were welcomed in the exact same way that I was and were made to feel a part of the group and team with no prejudice or judgement over where they came from or their own personal journey to the land of million lakes.

Just the way It should be.

Sadly, though there were noticeable things that made them different, these were only material and we as a group made sure that Mehdi Farid and Abbas, as did I a few weeks before them, felt equal and part of something that was growing and being enhanced by the culture of being united the munu way.

These material differences were things like not having football boots or any training clothes and whilst there is something very funny about seeing young men skid and slide and eventually fall on to wet grass, it became apparent there were things that I, or we could do to help. I don't know how but I had 2 pairs of football boots, but I only had one pair of feet!!! I didn't need two pairs of football boots so the decision to give a pair of away was an easy one. Others in the munu team gave away training clothes and all of a sudden Mehdi Farid and Abbas had the same feeling as I did a few weeks before of being of one for all and all for one. It didn't matter to them where the clothes or boots were from and who gave them away, the only thing that mattered to them was the feeling of inclusion.

The power that football has as a resource for integration should not be underestimated. Millions upon millions around the world play the beautiful game and within each region, zone or district of any nation it can facilitate a transition into the neighbourhood's they are located in.

Munsala united had helped 4 young men that summer of 2011 find a passage into life in a foreign country and I personally was becoming more and more engrained into the society around me.

The Munu doors didn't close that summer, very much the opposite infact and moving on into the second and third years I had teammates from Albania, Iraq, more lads from Afghanistan to add to Mehdi Farid and Abbas and later on even Somalin and Syrian. We all had different things going on privately, some studying and some working but we all had the same thing in common.

Sharing a love for a universal game which to me is more a way of life.

Football.

During my involvement with munsala united I grew to be an important part of the football club itself on a sporting and social level and as such grew in stature throughout the community making many new friends along the way, with each New Year presenting new challenges.

I was able to confidently express any ideas I had because I was trusted amongst the friendships that were made . Some of these ideas turned into more than that, like The munu soccer six, a six team tournament that was held one Saturday in the middle of winter and indoors, with six local teams all battling it out for the pride of being the very first Munu soccer six champions.

I had help organising this of course but it was because of my idea and involvement in the organization process that I was asked in the autumn of 2015 what I thought about the idea of four local rivals playing as one in a mini tournament against a large group of refugees that had arrived in Nykarleby.

It was during this tournament for the refugees, which came off the back of the migration crisis in 2015, in which suddenly Nykarleby and surrounding places had an influx of young men women and children seeking asylum, that I first met a young boy that would later become not only a team mate but a friend.

The tournament itself was huge success story and proved that the people of Nykarleby could see past the big numbers presented in the media and look at the individuals themselves, needing to feel part of the community even if in some cases there stay might be a short one.

Sadly it sometimes doesn't matter what kind of power that sport has as a resource for integration when immigrants are involved as Munsala united found out during the summer of 2016. One of our very own was potentially being taken away from us and threatened with deportation.

#savejabril or save jabril

Has anyone here today heard of this?

To us, Jabril was no different to anyone else within Munsala united aside from the fact he had a lot more talent than any of us at football!

He was one of us and therefore we judged him purely on the person he is and could see him in his own right. Wearing an infectious smile that most likely disguised the trauma of growing up in Somalia, where for many young men it's a case of fight or die.

Outside of playing football with us he was involved in other municipal activities including berry picking with his friends and more importantly taking part in educational and language benefits offered by the local school, making a concerted effort to "fit in" to the society around him.

But suddenly it came to our attention that Jabril was under threat of being sent back to a country that simply wasn't safe to go back too. We wasn't going to let that happen we were united the munu way, one for all and all for one.

It was at this point that Munsala United decided to stand up against the asylum system and to show there was something wrong with it and that's how the save jabril campaign was born. I can stand here today and tell you all that this campaign for Jabril made him feel incredibly honoured to have this band of brother's fight for him.

We removed our team from the commitment of our fixture schedule and didn't play any more football that summer other than team training.

The save jabril campaign was gathering comments from far and wide.

The stance was talked about in various media outlets both locally and as far as Helsinki and even Sweden. Newspapers and radio stations were talking about the save jabril campaign and creating discussion and debate.

Our Facebook site was generating traffic and nearly overnight went from around 500 views to around 70k and because of the way Munsala united handled this whole situation we received awards such team of the year from the town of Nykarleby.

Unfortunately I don't think the campaign will influence Jabrils case and still to this day he waits for the final decision from the court.

The feedback we received as a club was amazing and so many people were pleased that we gave their thoughts a voice and appreciated the fact we did something.

The circumstances for immigrants vary from each individual and in some cases like mine, integration into Finnish society has been uncomplicated.

The resources made available to me in Finland have forged friendships that will last a lifetime and I have taken great pleasure in the power that sport has offered me, not only to imbed into a community, but I have used those experience's to help others that have needed help.

I've been Luke Williams and I thank you for your time. For those that have any questions just raise your hand.

