

# What Carrying a House in the Jungle Taught Me about Community



By

Dean Russell

**PARLIAMENT STREET**

*partnership in policy*

## Introduction

As a Conservative Party candidate in the 2017 election, I was acutely aware that the sense of a cohesive national community was under attack. The campaign rhetoric, which continues to this day, attempts to actively pit the 'haves' against the 'have-nots', the 'poor' vs 'rich'; setting-up battle lines between groups based on race, religion, class and more.

As the language has become more divisive, there have been real world shifts too. Local Councils are closing community centres and libraries, spaces where traditionally people from all kinds of backgrounds would come together with a common purpose or need. It is now becoming harder for people to meet in person and just chat unless they want to pay through the nose for coffee. In parallel the high street is also in danger, with many prominent brands and smaller shops disappearing while expensive residential flats appear in their place, once again removing the ability for people to rub shoulders, connect in the real world or have a sense of ownership of their community.

I noticed during the election too, that for all the rhetoric of political campaigners that they care about their community, once the voting ends, not many continue to knock on the doors of those they canvassed just to check they are ok. In fact, it was this fact that caused me to give my speech 'Go Knock On The Doors' at the Conservative Party conference in 2017 on the topic of Loneliness, a speech that has sparked more conversations with me than any speech I have given before. In that speech, I talked about people moving from being 'lonely in a crowd to being lonely in the cloud' because the reality of the rise of so-called 'social' media communities we see an unprecedented erosion of true 'social' communities here in the real world.

In the months following the General Election, I had some personally transformative experiences which have informed my thinking about the concept of community. They all connect to work I have been doing with a British-founded Charity - The Greg Secker Foundation (GSF) - who amongst other initiatives have been quietly building a Typhoon-proof village in a remote jungle in Lemery, Iloilo in the Philippines, to support families affected by Typhoon Haiyan in 2013.

My first trip to Lemery was shortly after the 2017 election; so memories of my campaign in Luton were still very fresh in my mind. During the election, I had met people in areas of Luton which were classed as deprived according to the Indices of Multiple Deprivation by Luton Borough Council's 2015 Report<sup>1</sup> - (and I don't wish to take away from their genuine hardship), but that was nothing compared to the depths of deprivation of people I met during this trip. The area I visited was one of those hit hardest by Typhoon Haiyan, aka Super Typhoon Yolanda which was one of the strongest tropical cyclones ever recorded and the deadliest Philippine typhoon on record; killing at least 6,300 people. Four years on, the scars were clear to see everywhere - and not just on the landscape. Those who bore the brunt of its devastation were often those who had very little in the first place. Despite the backdrop, I experienced some genuinely life-affirming moments that showed the enduring power of community and the human spirit.

## A lesson in community cohesion

Across the multiple visits to the village and many incredible moments, one that sticks in my mind involved an ancient Filipino tradition called Bayanihan; the act of carrying an entire house to a new location. The reason for the event was to help a beneficiary, Raymond and his family move into the village. Raymond is blind and, like all of the beneficiaries lost everything during Typhoon Haiyan. In the week before the trip, Raymond's home had been struck again by another smaller Typhoon, which flooded his house and washed away the few remaining possessions they owned. In an ideal world, Raymond would have moved into one of the completed homes in the village, but at this point most of

---

<sup>1</sup><https://www.luton.gov.uk/Environment/Lists/LutonDocuments/PDF/Planning/Observatory/2015%20Indices%20of%20deprivation%20in%20Luton.pdf>

the village was still under construction, so it would have been far too dangerous for Raymond to navigate.

Instead, we had to go to plan B: Move Raymond's existing home into a safe area of the village. The challenge was that Raymond currently lived an hour's walk away from the village via a dirt track in the middle of the jungle. I can still recall the heat, humidity and buckets of rain pouring down on us all as we collected together to dismantle Raymond's house; a ramshackle single room hut. In the horrid conditions, we all joined together to carry Raymond's home, including a very heavy corrugated metal roof, up a steep muddy hill several kilometres away (until we could get some additional help from a vehicle). When we finally reached the village the community rebuilt Raymond's house on safe ground with incredible care and love. The feeling of togetherness during the Bayanihan was palpable, and what I learnt from this and subsequent trips was that the community bonds that have been forged in the village (and beyond) had been born out of a sense of collective responsibility for each other. What I also found from conversations with many of the beneficiaries - especially during the official opening in January 2018 - was that the strength of the community also comes from the fact there is a sense of ownership over the future they are building together in the village.

Now, everyone has moved into their homes and the community are actively working together to improve their day-to-day circumstances. Many are learning new skills and setting up new businesses (selling local produce such as Pickled Papaya) and taking part in education programmes. None of this has happened by chance, the Foundation has worked hard to encourage everyone in the village to come together, and purposely built community spaces for families to come together for meetings, dancing and to sell their wares. Ultimately, giving people both a say and stake in their local community is in-turn bringing them ever closer together.



*Photo: Carrying Raymond's roof with Greg Secker into the village as part of the Bayanihan*



*Photo: Proud to be British at the Greg Secker Foundation village launch - 100 homes were officially handed over to beneficiaries. The event was attended by over a thousand people including Philippine government officials, dignitaries and celebrities.*

### **The power of personal communication**

The next personal lesson was during my second visit to the Philippines in November 2017. During this visit, I was fortunate enough to take part in a joint GSF mission with the Starkey Hearing Foundation. The Foundation, led by two inspirational figures, Bill and Tani Austin, has a clear purpose to 'give the gift of hearing to those in need, empowering them to achieve their potential'. In 2010, Bill Austin committed to Former US President Bill Clinton that he would provide 1 million hearing aids to people in need over the next decade, and to date have given the gift of hearing in more than 100 countries. The mission I joined in Manila was a life-changing experience. Over an intensive, non-stop day, I had the incredible fortune of fitting hearing aids to countless young children - literally giving the gift of hearing to vulnerable kids who would never have been able to afford to do so. To say it was an emotional experience wouldn't even come close to describe the intensity of it all. Even now, as I write this piece, I can vividly recall the memories of children's eyes lighting up as they heard their parents voices for the first time.

While there is an incredibly strong deaf community in the UK, with sign language an essential first language for many, for the families I met in the Philippines, this was not the case. Many of these children were ostracised, isolated and sadly bullied because of their hearing impairment. So fitting the hearing aids to these children went much further than just hearing, it meant it would change their future for the better. Perhaps the most important benefit was that of communication: because now they could now learn to speak too. Especially at this young age, the lack of auditory feedback means children struggle to form sounds which severely impairs their speech and makes it very difficult to communicate. Perhaps that's why the most magical moment of the fitting process turned out to be teaching children to form sounds for the first time. To do this, children are repeatedly asked to say

phrases like 'Bah Bah', 'Ah Ah' etc. To my surprise it took just a few moments for the kids to go from making unformed sounds to accurate pronunciation. However for one girl, Rosamie, who was just 4 or 5 years old, she really struggled. Despite my best efforts, she just couldn't form the sounds. I didn't want to give up on Rosamie but also didn't want to upset her by pushing too hard for her to succeed. So while she sat on the chair, I reassured her and then paused the session so she could take some time for herself and try on her own. I pretended to organise some paperwork for the fitting as she tried over and over, then as I watched, Rosamie stood up and walked over to her mother. At first, I was worried she had given up. Then, as she approached her mother she held her hand gently and stared deep into her eyes, Rosamie looked up and spoke clearly and lovingly - 'Mama Mama'. Her mother's face transformed, and both she and I cried as Rosamie smiled from ear-to-ear repeating this magical phrase.

I continue to feel blessed to have seen the power of communication so up close and personal across the course of the mission that day, and it brought home to me the importance of interpersonal communication. Yes, we are connected more than ever thanks to technology, but the ability to look into another person's eyes and communicate personally is so much more powerful than typing behind a screen.



*Photo: Group photo with Bill Austin after fitting hearing aids to two members of the same family*

### **Isolation and loneliness**

The third personal lesson was closer to home. It stemmed from my participation in another GSF event here in London before Christmas 2017. The event was a Basket Brigade, a partnership between the Foundation and the Salvation Army, where we purchase, pack and deliver 100 'baskets' of food, wrapped gifts and essential items for struggling families and older individuals across London. It is an annual event which has got bigger each year and is a real feat of logistics and passion by all involved. Perhaps the most powerful part of the delivery is not the 'basket' itself but the message we deliver on

the doorstep. When asked who the 'basket' is from, myself and other volunteers simply stated "It's a gift from a friend, someone who cares about you." Those words, almost without fail, transform the faces of recipients with smiles and tears from all. In most cases, the recipients don't even know what is in the basket, but the fact someone cared enough to do something for them was intensely powerful.

This initiative highlighted the isolation so many individuals in our communities face, hidden behind closed doors despite living on busy streets. So often the older people we delivered to were widows, with no-one to speak to or listen to them and caught out on the wrong side of the digital divide. It wouldn't take much to make a difference in their lives, perhaps just a knock on the door for a chat, or a companion to join them on a trip to the shops.

These lessons have emphasised to me that while we race towards an evermore technologically advanced future, we should pause to consider what this means for *all* of us who will continue to live in the real world.

### **Lessons for the UK**

From my learnings this past year, I would argue we need to have a real debate about the decisions we make around our community spaces, taking into account support for the vulnerable in society.

- **Ownership and accountability;** the lessons from the village in the Philippines taught me the importance of ownership and responsibility, and that having a stake in the future is a vital part of a thriving community. Yes, we need to protect the green belt but we also need to balance that with giving opportunities for people across all sections of society to have a physical stake in the community they live in, i.e. we need to have a clear long-term plan around home ownership, so we don't create a generation with no permanent ties to their community.
- **Saving the High Street;** Across the UK shop owners are being hit by high rates and increasingly pricey rentals causing a dangerous domino effect where shops are effectively being forced to close down, with property developers then moving in and converting the sites to over-priced residential flats in place. We need to look at how we can put better systems in place to protect small businesses and make sure local Councils are taking into account community needs as part of planning applications.
- **Giving People A Voice;** I saw first-hand that it is a universal human need to know your voice is being heard. This includes being listened to in your local community and knowing that decisions are not made in isolation from those who are affected by them (in other words – localism), through to interpersonal communication and the need to craft spaces for people to come together and just speak - one-on-one. While technology can be a dominant force for enabling localism, we must avoid focusing solely on technology advancements without taking into account the need to create spaces in the real world to bring people (from all backgrounds) together in person. Public bodies shouldn't be replacing face-to-face appointments with technology only solutions for efficiency alone. Instead, they should be using the time saved for those who want to engage only online to provide more time for those who are on the wrong side of the digital divide to spend more time face-to-face.

In conclusion, it is a cruel irony that the world seems to be better connected than ever, with an increasing obsession with social media and smartphones, yet we probably communicate less than ever in the real world. From my many experiences over the last few months, I have learned that the human spirit is universal, that when we work together, we can accomplish miracles, but when divided and

isolated, we breed doubt and limitation. The United Kingdom is not just great because of the ground we walk on; it is because of the interpersonal bonds that tie us together. We must continue to fight against the current political rhetoric of division, and at the same time ensure we are making decisions that encourage people to rub shoulders, to connect on a human level and have a stake in what happens around them. Otherwise, I fear, we risk sleepwalking into a future where we blindly create fault-lines between individuals which cause isolation and segregation across the UK and unintentionally tear apart the community that makes this Country great.

*Dean Russell is the founder of [Epifny Consulting](#) and [Win That Pitch](#). He is also a former Parliamentary candidate, entrepreneur and business strategist.*